



**Constructing a European Culture of Gender Equality on Social Media:  
European and National (mis)Alignments**

**(Wytwarzanie europejskiej kultury równości płci w mediach społecznościowych: Europejskie i krajowe (nie)zgodności)**

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Murubutu. (2016). *La bella creola. L'uomo che viaggiava nel vento e altri racconti di brezze e correnti*. Bologna, Italy: Irma Records/Mandibola Records.

## **Abstract**

In this project, I analyze the narratives of gender equality circulated on the social media platform Twitter by a sample of gender equality institutions, women's rights activists, LGBTI rights activists, and private users. I drew a theoretical sample of user and a convenience sample of keyword-based discussions (so-called 'hashtags'). Data was gathered for a year-long timespan (1 September 2016 – 31 August 2017). My aim is to analyze 'gender equality' as an object of knowledge constructed in the sampled discourses. The data is sampled across the supranational-national divide, with part of the sample referring to the supranational level of 'Europe' and part of the sample referring to a national case study on Italy. The purpose of this selection is to investigate the extent to which discourses of gender equality travel across the supranational-national divide, potentially contributing to the discursive consolidation of 'gender equality' as one of the defining elements of 'Europe'. My theoretical framework takes inspiration from different (de)constructivist approaches across the social sciences. Methodologically, I adopt the framework of Social Media – Critical Discourse Studies. Findings are as follows. Twitter seems to be a space where the potential for political engagement is limited by an unequal distribution of visibility based on material and discursive inequalities. Bottom-up participation on behalf of diverse publics is indeed possible, but it remains small, sporadic, and stratified. I interpret Twitter users as subjects of discourses and practices that take place beyond Twitter as a platform and shape the narratives they are able to voice and their subject position therein. This notwithstanding, they do retain some agency in using the discourses that are available to them for the achievement of their objectives. Gender equality emerges as an object of knowledge in the discursive contestation between their narratives. 'Women' tend to be the privileged subject of gender equality discourses. LGBTI people seem to be marginal subjects that mostly make reference to the adjacent discourse of 'minority rights', while men remain unaddressed subjects. Gender equality is often defined in 'neoliberalized' terms that make it a non-political goal that is instrumental for the achievement of economic growth. This vision is resisted by a more progressive counter-narrative that defines gender equality through a set of value-based arguments for its achievement. In this contexts, 'Europe' is constructed as a socio-political space characterized by a commitment to gender equality that is, however, grounded in market-based justifications. By comparison, gender equality seems to be far more politicized at the Italian national level, with a more balanced interplay between neoliberalized and progressive visions of gender equality.

# Contents

Abstract.....	3
List of tables.....	11
List of figures.....	12
List of abbreviations .....	13
Introduction.....	15
Introduction.....	15
Selection of the case studies .....	15
Defining social media in general and ‘Twitter’ as a social media platform .....	17
State of the art on internet uptake and social media penetration in Europe and Italy.....	19
Overview of the key theoretical perspectives adopted .....	20
Gender and gender equality .....	20
Europe.....	21
Social media.....	22
Overview of key methodological concerns.....	23
Methodology.....	23
Methods.....	24
The sample .....	24
Objectives .....	25
Summary of findings.....	25
Dissertation plan .....	26
PART I.....	28
1. A brief history of gender equality policy in Europe and in Italy .....	29
Introduction.....	29
Gender equality in the European Union since the Treaty of Rome .....	29

Gender equality in Italy since the 1946 Referendum.....	37
Conclusion .....	44
2. Theory.....	47
Introduction.....	47
Constructing ‘Europe’.....	48
Europe in international relations: A quick overview .....	48
Constructivism: A late-comer to the study of Europe .....	50
Diez’s brand of postmodern constructivism .....	52
Section summary.....	54
Feminist political analysis: Some key tenets .....	55
Feminist political analysis.....	56
‘Doing gender’ and gender performativity .....	60
Feminist solutions to the problem of ‘gender equality’ .....	63
Feminism as a progressive political project and its neoliberal adversaries .....	65
Section summary.....	68
Social media as a space of political performativity .....	68
Public figures and institutional performances of the self.....	68
Performing assemblies: Institutional brokerage, collective performativity, affect.....	71
Section summary.....	78
Conclusion .....	78
3. Methodology.....	81
Introduction.....	81
Social media and critical discourse studies: A roadmap.....	81
Danny Miller and digital anthropology.....	82
Androutsopoulos’ Discourse-centered online ethnography.....	84

Herring’s computer-mediated discourse analysis .....	85
KhosraviniK’s Social media – critical discourse studies.....	86
Section summary.....	88
The field: Twitter in Europe, Twitter in Italy, and everything between.....	88
Selecting the sample: Accounting for a political economy of visibility.....	89
Sampling users .....	91
Sampling hashtags .....	93
From methodology to methods: Research development in practice.....	95
Profile of the data.....	95
General characterization of the discursive location under scrutiny .....	97
Fine analysis of discourse fragments .....	98
Conclusions.....	106
PART II.....	107
4. Gender equality institutions and feminist politicians.....	108
Introduction.....	108
The voice of the EU gender equality machinery .....	110
Presenting the sub-sample.....	110
Practices of production .....	111
Word frequency analysis.....	114
Discourse analysis.....	116
Section summary.....	125
Italy’s feminist MPs: Domesticating EU narrative, responding to the territory .....	126
Presenting the sub-sample.....	127
Practices of production .....	128
Word frequency analysis.....	130

Discourse analysis.....	131
Section summary.....	140
Comparative discussion .....	141
Conclusions.....	143
5. Women’s rights groups.....	146
Introduction.....	146
Brussels-based women’s rights advocacy.....	147
Presenting the sub-sample.....	147
Practices of production .....	149
Word frequency analysis.....	151
Discourse analysis.....	153
Section summary.....	162
Italian Women’s rights advocacy.....	163
Presenting the sub-sample.....	164
Practices of production .....	165
Word frequency analysis.....	168
Discourse analysis.....	170
Section summary.....	180
Comparative discussion .....	181
Conclusions.....	182
6. LGBTI rights groups.....	184
Introduction.....	184
Brussels-based LGBTI rights advocacy.....	185
Presenting the sub-sample.....	185
Practices of production .....	187

Word frequency analysis.....	188
Discourse analysis.....	190
Section summary.....	201
Italian LGBTI advocacy .....	202
Presenting the sub-sample.....	203
Practices of production .....	204
Word frequency analysis.....	207
Discourse analysis.....	209
Section summary.....	219
Comparative discussion .....	220
Conclusions.....	222
7. Pro-equality Men’s groups.....	224
Introduction.....	224
Subjectivation in the equality discourse: Foregrounding women, backgrounding men .....	224
Foregrounding women, backgrounding men: What is gained and what is lost? .....	226
Unspoken subjects of feminism: The voice of pro-equality men’s groups .....	228
Bottom-up convergences across the supranational-national divide.....	230
Accountability to the women’s rights movement .....	230
Introspection as the starting point .....	233
Addressing men to prevent violence.....	236
Conclusions.....	238
Part III.....	240
8. Anti-violence hashtag campaigns .....	241
Introduction.....	241
Say No! Stop violence against women! .....	241

Presenting the sub-sample.....	241
Word frequency analysis.....	244
Critical discourse analysis.....	245
Section summary.....	251
Non una di meno!.....	251
Presenting the sub-sample.....	251
Word frequency analysis.....	254
Critical Discourse analysis.....	256
Section Summary .....	264
Comparative discussion .....	264
Conclusions.....	266
9. LGBTI rights discussions for IDAHOTB.....	268
Introduction.....	268
EU for LGBTI.....	268
Presenting the sub-sample.....	268
Word frequency analysis.....	270
Critical discourse analysis.....	271
Section summary.....	279
#Omofobia .....	279
Presenting the sub-sample.....	279
Word frequency analysis.....	282
Critical discourse analysis.....	283
Comparative discussion .....	289
Conclusions.....	291
10. Tweeted synoptic resistance .....	292

Introduction.....	292
ECJ ruling over Case C-157/15: A ban on Muslim women? .....	293
Presenting the sub-sample.....	293
Word frequency analysis.....	296
Critical discourse analysis.....	299
Section summary.....	306
Parliamone sabato, Parliamone subito .....	306
Word frequency analysis.....	310
Critical discourse analysis.....	312
Section summary.....	320
Comparative discussion .....	321
Conclusions.....	323
Conclusions.....	325
Introduction.....	325
Twitter and social media as spaces for individual and collective political performances .....	325
Users: Hegemonic, resistant, plural .....	326
Hashtag networks: Institutional brokerage, affect, resistance .....	328
Subjects of ‘gender equality’: Women, allied subjectivities, men.....	331
‘Gender equality’: Neoliberalized, repoliticized, queered .....	334
Limitations .....	338
Avenues for future research .....	339
Conclusion .....	340
References cited.....	342

## List of tables

Table 1 - User-based sample.....	92
Table 2 - Hashtag-based part of the sample.....	95
Table 3 - Summary of interview data .....	97
Table 4 - #saynostopvaw, number of tweets over time (weeks).....	243
Table 5 - #saynostopvaw, users producing the most retweeted tweets.....	244
Table 6 - #nonunadimeno, number of tweets over time (weeks).....	253
Table 7 - #nonunadimeno, users producing the most retweeted tweets .....	254
Table 8 - #EU4LGBTI, number of tweets over time (days).....	269
Table 9 - #EU4LGBTI, users producing the most retweeted tweets .....	270
Table 10 - #omofobia, number of tweets over time (days).....	280
Table 11 - #omofobia, users producing the most retweeted tweets .....	281
Table 12 - #Muslimwomenban, number of tweets over time (days) .....	295
Table 13 - #Hijabban, number of tweets over time (days) .....	295
Table 14 - #Headscarfban, number of tweets over time (days).....	295
Table 15 - Combined, number of tweets over time (days) .....	295
Table 16 - Combined, users producing the most retweeted tweets.....	296
Table 17 - Combined, # of tweets over time.....	308
Table 18 - #Parliamonesabato, number of tweets over time (days).....	308
Table 19 - #Parliamonesubito, number of tweets over time (days).....	308
Table 20 - Combined, number of tweets over time (days) .....	308
Table 21 - Combined, users producing the most retweeted tweets.....	309

## List of figures

Figure 1 - Screen-based and User-Based data in CMC research (Androutsopoulos, 2013).....	82
Figure 2 - The dynamic of text, society, and social media institution (KhosraviNik, 2017).....	87
Figure 3 - Social actor network (Van Leeuwen, 2008).....	100
Figure 4 - Social action network (Van Leeuwen, 2008).....	103
Figure 5 - picture embedded in the tweet above .....	118
Figure 6 - picture embedded in the tweet above .....	120
Figure 7 - picture embedded in the tweet above .....	154
Figure 8 - picture embedded in the tweet above .....	155
Figure 9 - picture embedded in the tweet above .....	158
Figure 10 - picture embedded in the retweeted tweet described above .....	159
Figure 11 - picture embedded in the tweet above .....	160
Figure 13 - picture embedded in the tweet above .....	171
Figure 14 - picture embedded in the tweet above .....	172
Figure 15 - picture embedded in the tweet above .....	174
Figure 17 - picture embedded in the tweet above .....	196
Figure 18 - picture embedded in the tweet above .....	225
Figure 19 - picture embedded in the tweet above .....	247
Figure 20 - picture by Cagne Sciolte, embedded in several tweets in the corpus.....	260
Figure 21 - picture embedded in the tweet above .....	275
Figure 22 - picture embedded in the tweet above .....	278
Figure 23 - picture embedded in the tweet above .....	287
Figure 24 - picture embedded in the tweet above .....	305
Figure 25 - The infographic aired by Parliamone... Sabato .....	307
Figure 26 - picture embedded in the tweet above .....	313
Figure 27 - picture embedded in the tweet above .....	316

## List of abbreviations

API	Application programming interface
CDA	Critical discourse analysis
CDS	Critical discourse studies
CMC	Computer mediate communication
CoE	Council of Europe
D.i.Re	Donne in Rete Contro la Violenza (Networked women against violence, Italy)
DC	Democrazia Cristiana (Christian Democracy, Italy)
DCOE	Discourse Centred Online Ethnography
DG	Directorate General
DHA	Discours Historical Approach
DNP	Discursive nodal point
DPO	Dipartimento Pari Opportunità (Department for equal opportunity, Italy)
EES	European Employment Strategy
EIGE	European Institute for Gender Equality
ENAR	European Network against Racism
EP	European Parliament
EPP	European People's Party
EU	European Union
EWL	European Women's Lobby
Femm Committee	European Parliament Committee for Women's Rights and Gender Equality
FRA	Fundamental Rights Agency
GBV	Gender-based violence
IDAHO(T)(B)	International day against homophobia, (transphobia) (and biphobia)
IDEVAW	International day for the eradication of violence against women
IGO	Intergovernmental organization
ILGA	International Lesbian and Gay Association
IWD	International women's day
LGBTI(Q)	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, (queer)

MEP	Member of the European Parliament
MP	Member of Parliament
NGO	Non-governmental organization
ODIHR	Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PCI	Partito Comunista Italiano (Italian Communist Party, Italy)
PD	Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, Italy)
PES	Party of European Socialists
RAI	Radio Televisione Italiana (Italian Radio and Television, public service broadcasting, Italy)
RT	Re-tweet
S&D	Group of the Socialists and Democrats at the European Parliament
SM-CDS	Social Media – Critical Discourse Studies
UDI	Unione Donne Italiane (Italian Women’s Union, Italy)
UN	United Nations
US	United States [of America]
USA	United States of America
VAW	Violence against women
WWI	World War I
WWII	World War II

# Introduction

## Introduction

This project is about Twitter. More specifically, this project is about the social media platform ‘Twitter’ as a site for the discursive production of objects of knowledge. This project is also about ‘gender equality’. More specifically, this project is about how ‘gender equality’ acquires its meaning as an object of knowledge through the discourses that are circulated via a wide array of platforms, including Twitter. Finally, this project is about ‘Europe’. More specifically, this project is about what it means to be ‘European’ and about the role that ‘gender equality’ has in the discursive construction of European-ness. In light of the simultaneously supra-national and multi-national character of ‘Europe’, this project also explores convergence and divergence in discourses of ‘gender equality’ across the supranational-national by comparing the ‘European level’ with a ‘national level’ case study on Italy. In this introductory chapter, I present some preliminary insights on all of the above topics, laying the ground for the historical, theoretical, methodological, and empirical analysis to be carried out in this dissertation.

## Selection of the case studies

The research outlined in this work is set in the wider framework of the project ‘GRACE – Gender and Cultures of Equality in Europe’. GRACE has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 675378. When hired as ‘Early Stage Researcher #2’ in GRACE, I was charged with developing a doctoral project that would investigate ‘the impact of “polymedia” digital platforms on the production of cultures of equality’ as part of Working Package #1: ‘Mediated cultures of gender equality’. The decision to adopt a discursive approach to gender equality is coherent with this focus on the production of cultures of equality through mediated practices.

I narrowed down the umbrella category of ‘polymedia’ platforms (Madianou & Miller, 2013) to the social media platform Twitter because of a combination of factors. Firstly, social media platforms do not exist in isolation but form part of a wider media ecology (Slater & Tacchi, 2004). Twitter is no exception, as proven by its constant interconnection with other social media as well as mainstream media outlets (Chadwick, 2013). Therefore, a narrow focus on the single

social media platform Twitter would not betray the original mandate of addressing ‘polymedia’ platforms in their plurality.

Secondly, Twitter is known as a platform particularly apt for political communication and political commentary (Wattal, Schuff, Mandviwalla, & Williams, 2010). Given the focus of this project on a crucially political issue like gender equality, Twitter was therefore considered a salient site of inquiry. In particular, Twitter offers a direct avenue to the press offices of prominent political figures and institutions in a way that other platforms can’t afford. Thirdly and finally, Twitter data is particularly easy to retrieve and navigate, avoiding a host of thorny ethical issues connected but not limited to privacy (for broad discussion of the study of Twitter in the social sciences, see Murthy (2013)).

The regional focus on broadly defined ‘Europe’ was embedded in the set of directions that I encountered when entering the GRACE project. Arguably, ‘Europe’ as concept has a supranational character as well as a multinational character (Schmidt, 2008; Risse, 2009; Sicakkan, 2013). Indeed, ‘Europe’ is made of institutions and concepts that exist at an order that is larger than the sum of all European nation-states. Nonetheless, European nation-states undoubtedly form part of what ‘Europe’ is commonly understood to be. In light of the above, I operationalized the regional scope of this research in a dual focus that spans across the national-supranational divide.

I selected the case study of Italy as a particularly salient one for the purposes of this project. When compared to other European member states, Italy lags behind in internet usage and ICT literacy (Vaccari, 2013; DESI, 2018). The Italian public still relies heavily on mainstream media for news and entertainment. Italian politicians and journalists only recently adopted ICT. This notwithstanding, the successful polymedia campaign of Movimento 5 Stelle in the 2013 general elections (Bordignon & Ceccarini, 2013) made of Italy a particularly interesting case to study the use of social media for political communication. In particular, the Italian mediascape is interesting because of its ‘hybrid’ character (Chadwick, 2013), with mainstream and new media constantly interacting with each other (Marchetti & Checcobelli, 2015).

It is in this context that struggles over the meaning of gender equality as a political concept takes place. On the one hand, progressive forces appeal to the process of Europeanization to legitimize their gender equality advocacy (Donà, 2011). On the other hand, conservatives appeal to Catholic values and of the place of ‘traditional family’ in Italian culture to stalemate policy

progress (Lombardo & Bustelo, 2011). Simultaneously, conservatives also project patriarchy onto a racialized ‘other’ in an effort to discursively uphold Italian-ness as a culture of gender equality regardless of a deeply masculinist reality on the ground (Salih, 2009; Mancini, 2012).

In summary, Italy was deemed to be an interesting case study encapsulating many of the tensions that are productive of ‘Europe’ and of ‘gender equality’ as objects of knowledge. Italy also represents an interesting case where the interplay between social media and traditional media is clearly visible. Finally, my personal familiarity with the Italian context also constituted an important element in making the final selection.

### **Defining social media in general and ‘Twitter’ as a social media platform**

Mindful of the above, this section offers the broad definition of ‘social media’ adopted in this study and outlines some key figures necessary to understand their socio-political relevance. ‘Social media’ is an umbrella term that encompasses social networking sites and instant messaging platforms. A canonical definition of social networking sites can be found in a seminal paper by boyd and Ellison (2007), in which they are defined as web based services on which individual users can construct a public or semi-public profile, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and browse their list of connections as well as those made by others within the same system.

A popular definition of instant messaging was provided by Nardi, Whittaker, and Bradner (2000), in terms of a ‘near-synchronous computer-based one-on-one communication’. The key feature is a dyadic mode of communication in which the message producer expects to communicate with a single recipient. Resembling communication via phone calls, the intended recipient may or may not answer the message. Since Nardi’s and al.’s work, most instant messaging platforms have expanded to allow multi-party chat functions, thus moving towards resembling more closely social networking sites.

Based on the above, I adopt a definition of social media as environment of practices that are fully integrated with offline reality and where people can be said to spend part of their daily lives (Miller et al., 2016). In light of the focus of this social media discourses, I endorse the definition of ‘social media communication’ offered by KhosraviNik (2017) in terms of ‘an

electronically mediated communicative paradigm across any electronic platforms, spaces, sites, and technologies' in which people can:

- work together in producing and compiling content;
- perform interpersonal communication and mass communication simultaneously or separately, including mass performance of interpersonal communication; and
- have access and respond to institutionally-generated or user-generated content.

This definition encompasses both social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram, micro blogging platforms such as Tumblr and Twitter, and instant messaging platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram. Crucially, this definition stresses the fact that content is co-produced through the discursive performances of social media users, be they traditional elites or private individuals.

As mentioned above, I do not aim at exploring all social media communication. Rather, my focus is on the social media platform known as 'Twitter'. Launched in 2006, the social media platform Twitter is owned and run by Twitter Inc., a for-profit corporation headquartered in San Francisco, California. Twitter is a text-based microblogging platform that allows some 330 million users worldwide (We are social, 2018) to share short messages, known as 'tweets' via their public or semi-public individual profiles. Tweets mostly contain text, but can embed pictures, videos, or hyperlinks to other sources. Tweets are displayed on a 'feed' page in an order that is somewhat reverse-chronological, but that is also altered by a set of algorithmically determined preferences.

One of the key features of Twitter is the possibility of marking keywords within one's own tweets with the hash (#) symbol in order to make them retrievable by other users. Known as 'hashtags', keyword based conversation have become one of the most popular features of Twitter as a platform. Hashtags have been said to perform several different functions. They can be interpreted as a form of 'searchable language' (Zappavigna, 2015), a way to link together pieces of text that are seemingly unrelated to one another (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015), a set of tools for the construction of issue-based publics (Bruns & Burgess, 2011), or instruments for self-branding (Page, 2012). More generally, hashtags are places where the voices of all those speaking on a given topic gather, regardless of their stance. In light of the above, hashtag can be privileged sites where to witness multiple discourses in competition with one another.

## **State of the art on internet uptake and social media penetration in Europe and Italy**

According to the latest measurements in the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI, 2018), access to broadband internet is potentially universal across the European Union (97% of households). On this specific indicator, Italy is even more virtuous than the EU average, with access to broadband internet connection potentially available to 99% of its households. However, enthusiasm regarding the digitalization of society should not be overstated. In fact, only 75% of EU households do take advantage of broadband internet connection. The number for Italy is even lower: 57% of the households, the worse performing country in the Union. Uptake of mobile internet is somewhat more convergent: 90 subscriptions every 100 people across the Union and 86 subscriptions every 100 people in Italy. However, internet uptake remains far from universal in both contexts. Only 81% of EU residents are active internet users. Italy is 25<sup>th</sup> in the EU ranking with only 69% of the population regularly using the internet. Furthermore, only 57% of EU residents were found to have what the DESI measurements defines as ‘basic digital skills’. Italy figures again in the lowest tier of the EU ranking (25<sup>th</sup>) with only 44% of its residents possessing basic digital skills.

Social media penetration rate in the two contexts shows similar trends. According to the same DESI measurements, around 65% of the EU internet users regularly access social media. The figure for Italy is 61% (23<sup>rd</sup> among EU member states). Accessing information regarding the penetration rate of specific social media platforms such as Twitter is somewhat more complicated. There seems to be no EU-wide measures of Twitter’s penetration rate. According to the website portal for internet statistics [statista.com](https://www.statista.com), around 22% of the 330 million Twitter users reside in broadly defined Western Europe or Central and Eastern Europe (Statista, 2018). While it is unclear whether this measure encompasses also those European states that are not EU members, it might still be relevant to compare this population of around 72.5 million people to the roughly 500+ million living in the EU in order to have a measure of its relative narrowness. Twitter’s penetration rate in Italy was assessed by the We are social foundation at around 23% of all active internet users in the country (We are social, 2018).

To reiterate, one EU resident every five does not use the internet, nor do three every ten Italian residents. Among this restricted population of internet users, more than one every three EU residents does not use social media, nor do four every ten Italians. Only one every five Twitter

users live in broadly defined ‘Europe’ (around 72 million people), and less than one in four Italian internet users is active on Twitter (around eight million people). It is important to keep in mind these figures when making broad statements regarding the relevance of social media communication for society and for the political process. The above measurements are important to contextualize the role of digital divides in shaping who accesses the internet, who accesses social media, and who has the skills to navigate these spaces with proficiency (Hargittai, 2007, 2011, 2018; Hargittai & Litt, 2012; Hargittai & Jennrich, 2016).

## **Overview of the key theoretical perspectives adopted**

### *Gender and gender equality*

I will now turn to a basic overview of the key concepts adopted in this study; all of which will be discussed at length in Chapter 2. These are, namely, ‘gender’ and ‘gender equality’, ‘Europe’ and ‘social media’. ‘Gender’ is here understood as a process rather than as an attribute of personhood (Connell, 1987). That is to say, gender is something people *do* rather than something that people *are*. I outline gender performativity in the terms proposed in the ethnomethodology of West and Zimmerman (1987) and in the seminal work of Butler (1990). Gender is therefore presented as the stylized repetition of those embodied and discursive practices that produce the illusion of a natural order composed of ‘men’ and ‘women’, in turn producing individual men and women as gendered subjects. In light of the omnirelevance of gendered differentiation in the European socio-political context, gendered performances are to be understood as crucially political in character.

Gender is not a stock concept but rather a liquid one that is shaped by material and discursive performances (Butler, 1990). It follows necessarily that the meaning of ‘gender equality’ is equally liquid and subject to contestation and change. By circulating different narratives on ‘gender equality’ (on Twitter and elsewhere), individuals and collectivities contribute to shape the way in which gender equality is pursued in policy and in practice. In turn this contributes to define the meaning of ‘gender’ as a concept and of ‘men’ and ‘women’ as subject positions. In other words, individuals, institutions, and collectivities jointly participate in the process of *gendering* ‘men’ and ‘women’ as social subjects.

Gender equality is here understood as an inherently *political* concept that is subject to agonistic contestation (Mouffe, 2013). Therefore, I attempt to sketch an overview of the challenges that feminist political theory faces in its attempt to theorize ‘gender equality’ (Kantola & Lombardo, 2017; Kantola & Verloo, 2018). In particular, I draw from recent literature to argue for a theorization of gender equality that sets it in a broader conceptual ecology that takes into consideration some of the forces that are stuck up against it. These include but are not limited to neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism (Prügl, 2015; Cavaghan, 2017; Elomäki & Kantola, 2018).

### *Europe*

As mentioned above, this project is also about ‘Europe’. For the purposes of this project, Europe is not a geographically bounded mass of land, nor the ensemble of the nation-states existing on its territory, nor the set of inter-governmental arrangement that came to be known as ‘European institutions’. In this project, ‘Europe’ is what people make of it. This perspective is grounded in the constructivist tradition in international relations, and more precisely post-modern constructivism (Diez, 1999, 2001). Chapter 2 makes the case for the adoption of this strand of theory after a survey of other approaches to the study of Europe (neofunctionalism, intergovernmentalism, institutionalism) as well as other strands within the constructivist tradition.

Coherently with this perspective, Europe is interpreted as an object of knowledge that is constructed in practices and discourses at different levels. At the micro-level, private individuals reproduce or contest common sense knowledges about ‘Europe’ via their performances of the self. At the meso-level, subjects that are better positioned (e.g. politicians, collectivities) compete to assert the primacy of their preferred understanding of ‘Europe’. At the macro-level, overarching discourses over the characteristics of ‘Europe’ constrain micro- and meso-level subject positions, but are also open to be reshaped through action at lower level.

Gender equality is arguably one of the concepts that contributes to the discursive production of ‘Europe’. Indeed, gender equality is time and again mentioned as ‘a fundamental European value’ by most EU institutions. Furthermore, European nation-states as well as European institutions have been examples of so called ‘state feminism’ (Outshoorn & Kantola, 2007) over the last several decades, establishing a wide number of policy measures for gender equality and setting up bodies for their implementation and monitoring.

This notwithstanding, European ‘state feminism’ has been crumbling under the above mentioned neoliberalizing pressures (Kantola & Squires, 2012; Cavaghan & O’Dwyer, 2018). Among other things, these pressures are emptying gender equality of its political salience (Elomäki, 2015, 2018). Thus, I reflect on the contradiction of a discursive construction of ‘Europe’ in which gender equality is named as a fundamental value but simultaneously emptied of its political salience.

### *Social media*

Starting from the broad definition in the previous section, I theorize social media as spaces for individual and collective performances that have political implications. The idea that media and politics depend on each other is obviously not new. Politicians and institutions depend on the media for the broadcasting of their decisions and activities. In turn, the media depends on access to information that is politically relevant to sustain its activities. The advent of social media has arguably increased the level of this interdependence, blurring the line between politics and entertainment in a process defined as ‘fictionalization of politics’ (Wodak, 2009). Furthermore, social media have provided the public with the possibility to instantly participate in the political spectacle and at least in theory have a space of visibility for their claims.

In light of the above and through key theories in individual performativity (Goffman, 1959; Foucault, 1988; Butler, 1990), I contend that private users and public figures jointly participate in political commentary on social media as part of their daily performances, and that by doing so they participate in the production of meaning around key political concepts, including ‘Europe’ and ‘gender equality’. While this is clearly the case for politicians and political institutions, it also applies to those performances enacted by private individuals and that might not explicitly appear to be political in character (Papacharissi, 2015). Via their individual performances of the self, social subjects reproduce or reverse socially accepted responses to a wide range of socio-political issues, thus expressing the political potential of their everyday lives.

My analysis of political performativity goes beyond the individual dimension and encompasses collective performances. Drawing from a long-standing tradition of scholarship on social movements (Benford & Snow, 2000) and their role within processes of Europeanization (Della Porta & Caiani, 2009), a growing corpus of studies has attempted to theorize new forms of social mobilization that include widespread use of social media (most famously, Bennett &

Sageberg, 2012). Mindful of the above literature and through the lenses of performative theories of assembly (Gerbaudo, 2012; Butler, 2015), I argue that collective performances on behalf of networks of individuals can produce spaces of political visibility on social media that can be occupied to perform collective political claims (Ertem, 2017).

## **Overview of key methodological concerns**

### *Methodology*

Based on the Social Media - Critical Discourse Studies framework by KhosraviNik (2017), I approach the study of social media as spaces where power *of* discourse and power *in* discourse coexist. On the one hand, discursive practices are processes that produce social media users as subjects as well as the knowledges available to them. These are likely to take place outside of the narrowly defined ‘text’ circulated in social media (or any other platform, for that matters). Therefore, a critically engaged analysis of social media discourses needs account for ‘vertical’ contextualization, approaching discourses as practices in order to understand the processes that shape what social media users are permitted to say. On the other hand, social media discourses obviously do have a textual component. By (re)circulating text on social media, subjects reproduce, contest, and recombine the discourses available to them, potentially reshaping their meaning. Therefore, it is just as necessary to account for ‘horizontal’ context, studying discourses as text and exploring what subjects actually do with what they are permitted to say (see also Bacchi (2005) and Cavaghan (2017)).

While seemingly abstract, the dual focus on what subjects are able to say and what subjects are permitted to say is especially relevant to make sense of the data sampled for this study. As the empirical component of this study will show, the social media personae of politicians, institutions, activist networks, and collectivities are far from being individual agents that wield discourses to achieve their goals. Rather, these voices are the outcome of a highly complex set of negotiations and procedures that happen behind the scenes, involve a wide array of individuals, and eventually result in the narratives these social media personae happen to speak on Twitter. Nonetheless, these users do have some strategic preferences within the order of discourse in which they are set. Coherently, they do exert agency in recombining the discourses available to them in order to achieve these preferences.

## *Methods*

The methods for this project are also inspired to KhosraviNik (2017; see also Unger, Wodak, & KhosraviNik, (2016)) *Social Media - Critical Discourse Studies*, in turn infused with suggestions drawn from Androutsopoulos (2008, 2013) and Herring (2004, 2007). While the main object of inquiry is multimodal text circulated via Twitter, the research includes an ethnographic component for the purposes of vertical contextualization. The primary method of investigation is a Foucault-infused critical discourse analysis that draws from a wide range of sources in feminist theory (Bacchi, 1999, 2009, 2015; Verloo, 2007; Lombardo Meier, & Verloo, 2009; Lombardo & Forest, 2012; Lombardo & Meier, 2016).

The more strictly sociolinguistic part of the analysis follows the guidelines laid out by Wodak (e.g. Wodak, 2009) and Van Leeuwen (2008). I complement analysis of tweeted text with contextual elements drawn from interviews with seventeen key informants across the supranational-national divide. For further contextual information, I also draw from online direct observation at both levels and offline participant-observation in two events making reference to the Italian case study.

## *The sample*

The empirical component of this study takes into consideration data gathered over the time span of a year (1 September 2016 – 31 August 2017). The sample comprises 15 key institutional profiles plus one ‘absent’ profile (8 for the European-level and 8 for the Italian-level) and 6 hashtag case studies (3 for each level). The dual focus on institutional profiles and aggregated conversation via ‘hashtags’ was determined by an understanding of social media as stratified spaces where access to visibility is shaped by a wide range of inequalities (Fuchs, 2013b). That is to say, subjects that have a vantage position in the analog realm tend to retain it in the virtual realm. Conversely, private individuals dwell in relative invisibility unless they aggregate their voices in a collective effort to reclaim the right to speak in the political (Gerbaudo, 2012; Butler, 2015).

I selected a theoretical sample of Twitter profiles that was designed to encompass different emanation of ‘state feminism’ (executive, legislative, progressive political formations) as well as ‘activist politics’ (women’s movement, LGBTI movement, pro-equality men’s movement). I also selected a sample of hashtags through convenience sampling on the basis of relevance to this study

and comparability across the national-supranational divide. The final sample included for each of the two levels one anti-violence campaign, one anti-homophobia campaign, and one bottom-up reaction to current events. The sampling strategy to some extent borrows from the realm of comparative politics, insofar as it attempts to interpret ‘Europe’ as a political space that in parts resembles a national polity (Hix, 1998; see also Cavaghan and O’Dwyer, 2018). While recognizing the theoretical shortcomings of this approach, the comparative character of this project made such a choice a pragmatic necessity.

## **Objectives**

The primary objective of this project is the identification of the most prominent narratives on gender equality at the European level and at the Italian national-level as circulated by key institutions via their Twitter profiles and crowd-sourced by private users via Twitter hashtags. Once identified, these narratives are compared to assess the extent to which European level and national-level narratives match each other. More specifically, I aim at answering the following research questions:

- What are the main narratives of gender equality circulating at the European level and at the Italian national level on the social media platform Twitter?
- How do narratives circulated at the two level relate to each other?
- How do ‘gender equality’ and ‘European-ness’ influence each other as objects of knowledge?

By publicly speaking of gender issues, individuals, institutions, and collectivities contribute to defining ‘gender equality’ as a political problem that demands political solutions. In turn, institutional and public attention to gender issues contributes to the definition of ‘Europe’ as a political space where gender equality matters and of ‘European-ness’ as a socio-political identity that includes ‘gender equality’ among its values. Arguably, the study of narratives of gender equality is central to the study of broader political processes of Europeanization and European integration.

## **Summary of findings**

My most basic argument in this work is that social media discourses contribute to the production of ‘gender equality’ as an object of knowledge and of a set of subjects therein. In the

discourses sampled for this study, I found that ‘gender equality’ is an object of knowledge mostly defined in light of its relation to the labor market and the formal economy. Discussions of violence against women were found to be the only notable exception to this trend, although not in all cases. I also found that ‘women’ are undoubtedly the main subject of the gender equality discourse. Men were interpreted to be unspoken and unaddressed subjects of the same gender equality discourses, while sexual and bodily minorities were found to be marginal subjects that mostly make reference to the adjacent discourse of ‘minority rights’.

I also argue that discourses of gender equality at the two levels contribute to the discursive production of ‘Europe’. From the discourses sampled for this study, Europe emerges as a socio-political space in which gender equality can be said to be important, but not a fundamental value. Rather, gender equality seems to be relevant as an instrumental goal for the achievement of the superior goal of economic prosperity. This narrative, however, was by no means universal. Indeed, it was contested across the divide between institutions and civil society organizations as well as across the supranational-national divide. In other words, European institutions for gender equality were the ones keenest to advance this narrative. Italian institutional users also endorsed it, but more sporadically and in conjunction with value-based arguments. Women’s rights advocates and LGBTI rights advocates occasionally adopt similar narratives, possibly for strategic reason, but tend to prefer value-based arguments in support of gender equality.

For what concerns Twitter as a space for political engagement, I found that its potential is largely restrained by an unequal distribution of visibility based on material inequalities. Entertainment tends to drive more material resources than politics, and therefore enjoys more visibility. Within the niche of political commentary, other topics are more visible than gender equality. Within gender equality debates, market-based discourses tend to be dominant. Therein, those users who can purchase visibility from Twitter Inc. or have access to a pressroom tend to occupy the center of the discussion. Bottom-up participation is obviously possible, but it is also infrequent and ultimately stratified along the same lines.

## **Dissertation plan**

This dissertation is organized as follows. Part I sets this study in its socio-historical context and outlines its main theoretical and methodological premises. Chapter 1 sketches a brief history of gender equality policy and politics in the EU and in Italy respectively, laying the ground for

complete discussion of current issues in both settings. Chapter 2 outlines the key theoretical discussion on which this study is based, therefore delineating the ontology and epistemology adopted. Chapter 3 sketches the features of a methodology coherent with the premises laid out in chapter 3. Part II (Chapters 4 through 7) is devoted to the narratives of the user-based part of the sample. Part III (Chapters 8 through 10) deals with the hashtag case studies, comparing two long-lasting anti-violence campaigns, two campaigns for the International day against homophobia and transphobia, and two instances of so-called synoptic resistance. A final chapter draws conclusions and suggests avenues for further inquiry.

## **PART I**

# **1. A brief history of gender equality policy in Europe and in Italy**

## **Introduction**

In this chapter, I give a broad outline of the evolution of gender equality policy and discourse at the European supranational level as well as at the Italian national level since the signing of the 1957 *Treaty Establishing the European Economic Community* (henceforth, Treaty of Rome) and the 1946 Italian Constitutional Referendum, respectively. I provide more details as discussion approaches the present days. The main purpose of this chapter is to offer a summary of salient provisions by the EU and by the Italian state in order to better understand how they reflect on the discourses that are presented in further chapters of this dissertation.

## **Gender equality in the European Union since the Treaty of Rome**

The Treaty of Rome (1957) is rightly considered to be the first milestone in the construction of the so-called European project. Among its various provisions, the Treaty is often remembered for its groundbreaking provisions against sex-based discrimination. The Treaty of Rome famously included in its text the iconic ‘principle of equal pay for male and female workers for equal work or work of equal value’ (Article 141, ex 119), and a paragraph (141.3) suggesting that the Council of Ministers should ‘adopt measures to ensure the application of the principle of equal opportunities and equal treatment of men and women in matters of employment and occupation’. The development of such provision is usually understood as the outcome of economically motivated pressures by the French government (that already had equal pay legislation) to ensure fair competition among member states (Hoskyns, 1996; Kantola, 2010; Elomäki, 2015). Be as it may, the equal pay provision in the Treaty of Rome exerted remarkable influence on how ‘equality’ would be understood in the European context in the decades to follow, all the way to the present days. The concept of ‘equal opportunities’, understood as the removal of obstacle to the full participation of women in productive labor, became the legal ground for the following decades of feminist struggle.

In the wake of labor mobilization investing Western Europe in the 60s and 70s, the predecessors of the EU passed further anti-discrimination directives (Fraser, 2009; Elomäki, 2015; Eisenstein, 2017). These include provisions that expand the concept of non-discrimination based on sex to processes of employment and wage bargaining (Directive 75/117/EEC of 1975), but also

have ramification for other related fields such as redress against employers (Directive 76/207/EEC of 1976), maternity leave for married and unmarried women alike (Directive 86/613/EEC of 1986), and access to training, promotions, and social security (Directives 79/7/EEC of 1979 and 86/378/EEC of 1986).

In 1984, the structure of the European Parliament got amended to include among its standing committees the Committee for Women's Rights (Femm Committee), later to be renamed as Committee for Women's Rights and Gender Equality. Like the other standing committees of the European Parliament, the Femm Committee has the role of offering advice on legislative initiatives of the Commission (at the time, the Council) through the production of reports, the proposal of amendments, and the drafting of legislative resolutions. Thus, the predecessors of the EU started incorporating policy machineries that at least in theory are meant to be responsive to the demands of the women's movements; a process taking place across the supranational-national divide and broadly known as 'state feminism' (Kantola & Outshoorn, 2007).

In 1992, the European Community morphed into the European Union with the Treaty of Maastricht. The newly established EU acquired wider jurisdiction than its predecessors. The 1990s were partially consistent with previously established trends. Further non-discrimination directives were passed in the fields of health and safety for pregnant workers (Directive 92/85/EEC of 1992), parental and caretaker leave (Directive 96/34/EC of 1996), employer-employee relationships (Directive 97/80/EC of 1997), and social security for part-time work (Directive 97/81/EC of 1997).

However, the 1990s also featured some shifts in the way the newly funded EU understood equality. Partially, these included the incorporation of so-called 'gender mainstreaming' in the vocabulary of the EU. The concept was already floating across EU policy circles via the Third Action Programme on Equal Opportunities (1991–96; COM(90) 449 final). The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995 gave further momentum to the adoption of gender mainstreaming, exemplified in the EC Communication *Incorporating Equal Opportunities for Women and Men in All Community Policies and Activities* (COM(96) 67 Final), where gender mainstreaming was defined as

The systematic integration of the respective situations, priorities and needs of women and men in all policies and with a view to promoting equality between

women and men and mobilizing all general policies and measures specifically for the purpose of achieving equality by actively and openly taking into account, at the planning stage, their effects on the respective situations of women and men in implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

These transitions also included an increased focus on so-called ‘positive action’, mostly understood as measures to actively foster women’s participation in the labor market. For example, the *Kalancke* (C-450/93) and *Marschall* (C-409/95) cases of 1995 and 1997 saw the European Court of Justice uphold preferential treatment of female candidates for employment in case of equal qualification and female under-representation. And indeed, the Commission was in the meantime issuing what came to be known as the 1996 Communication on positive action (COM (96) 88 final), containing proposals to amend equal treatment directives to include positive action measures.

Both gender mainstreaming and positive action got enshrined in EU law with the entry into force of the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1997. For what concerns the former, articles 2 and 3.2 of the Treaty open the way to action in areas other than non-discrimination by stating that ‘the Community shall aim to eliminate inequalities, and to promote equality, between men and women’. For what concerns the latter, article 141.4 of the Treaty encourages member states to take measures to foster women’s participation in the productive labor force. Simultaneously, however, the entry into force of the Treaty of Amsterdam was accompanied by the launch of the European Employment Strategy (EES) at the Luxemburg Jobs Summit in November 1997. This event produced momentous change in European narratives of equality and the policies emanating from them. Crucially, the launch of the EES marked a shift from women’s rights measures that were characterized as political to the adoption of a vocabulary that refers to women’s participation in the labor market as instrumental to the achievement of full employment and economic growth. A burgeoning scholarship argues that feminist concepts were ‘shrunk’ (Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo, 2009) and depoliticized (Rönblom, 2009) into a lower tier priority that is only worth pursuing insofar as it contributes to economic prosperity (Stratigaki, 2004; Elomäki 2015).

If equal opportunities, positive action, and gender mainstreaming were present alongside each other in the 90s, the early 2000s saw gender mainstreaming coming to the fore as the main strategy for the achievement of gender equality pursued by the EU. After decades of binding legal

instruments in the form of Directives (albeit limited to equality at work), the new course of action seemed to be mostly focused on the production of a set of ‘soft’ measures to achieve gender equality. The shift received mixed support in the literature. For example, post-Amsterdam gender equality policy and discourses have been fiercely criticized for not carrying the same weight of previous measures. Lombardo and Meier (2007) have famously pointed out that

the broadening of the policy area beyond the labour market in which the EU could intervene, through gender mainstreaming, and the deepening of focus in order to tackle the structural conditions of gender inequality and to challenge the gender dimension of political power, through positive actions, have been inversely proportional to the binding nature of the measures adopted. (p. 56)

That is to say, in the shift towards soft measures, the Commission surrendered its claim to binding power in order to gain agenda setting power over issues that previously laid outside of its jurisdiction and over which member states still contest its competence. Lombardo and Meier further argue that the simultaneous inception of positive action and gender mainstreaming de facto diluted the former before it even got to produce any of the promised positive effects. The post-Amsterdam EU action programmes for gender equality have been fiercely criticized for being de facto empty proclamations that offer no concrete objectives, no allocation resources (Stratigaki, 2004; 2005), no timeline for action, and no executive mechanisms to sanction incompliant member states (Behning & Serrano Pascual, 2001; Walby, 2005; Lombardo, 2005).

However valid, such fierce criticism of gender mainstreaming seems to neglect a few key points. Firstly and crucially, soft measures have always been present in some form. Beveridge (2012), for example, argues that all the above mentioned directives emerged as binding legislation only after a long phase of dialogue initiated through soft measures. Therefore, dismissing soft measures *tout court* would significantly undermine our ability to understand how the overall equality architecture actually came (and could come) into being. Secondly, preferring hard measures over soft measures assumes that the former are actually more efficient than the latter in securing equality. A closer look at the effectiveness of hard measures, however, would immediately reveal that their development requires long negotiations and significant curtailing before becoming politically viable (Prügl, 2009). Furthermore, transposition at the national level and implementation on the ground further dilutes whatever binding measure is passed by the

Commission, as outlined by Liebert (2003) in her typology of approaches to national reception of gender equality policy.

Through soft measures, the European Commission partially reframed gender equality as a *European* issue rather than as an issue of national competence (Beveridge, 2012, p. 32). Already in 2004, Jacobson argued that soft instruments were contributing to the construction of a ‘Eurodiscourse’ potentially working to temporally ‘fix’ a shared vision of what the problem is and what solutions to the problem should be pursued. With the creation of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) in 2007, it became increasingly clear that these efforts would take the form of a ‘technicalization’ of gender equality. This is to say, gender equality was increasingly framed as a technical issue through centrally produced expert knowledges that aim at defining the problem at stake and measure it in order to solve it once and for all.

The creation of EIGE as ‘the EU knowledge centre on gender equality issues’ coincided with a rapid proliferation of toolkits and guidelines to support the technical implementation of gender mainstreaming. For example, EIGE’s most widely marketed product is its ‘gender equality index’: a set of sex-disaggregated statistics and indicators presented as strictly necessary to understand what the ‘problem’ of gender equality entails (Padovani, 2016, p. 409). Arguably, the vision outlined in the EES can be defined in terms of a neoliberalized feminism that aims at achieving equality through tools of governmentality such as guidelines, peer review, and benchmarking (Prügl, 2015). EIGE’s effort to become the repository of all EU related knowledge on gender equality can be said to be the natural continuation of this process.

For the purposes of this project, it is important to mention that The Treaty of Maastricht also opened some window of opportunity for LGBTI rights advocates based in the territory of the newly-established European Union. The European Community never explicitly issued directives in support of the rights of sexual minorities, despite the heated debates on this topic at the time of the so-called ‘Sgarcialupi report’, adopted by the European Parliament in 1984. However, the expansion of the competencies of the Commission after Maastricht made of the EU an institution potentially interested in producing formal policy in support of LGBTI rights (Swiebel, 2009). Already in 1994, a second report on the rights of sexual minorities is adopted by the European Parliament, paving the way for the inclusion of non-discrimination based on sexual orientation in the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1997 (Art. 13).

The turning point came soon thereafter with the adoption of two crucial EU directives that addressed racial discrimination (Directive 2000/42/EC) and discrimination on the basis of religion or belief, disability, age and sexual orientation (Directive 2000/78/EC) respectively. It is important to notice, however, that these new directives only offer protection from discrimination in the narrow context of the labor market. As outlined above, by the time these directives were passed, the EU had already expanded protection against sex-based discrimination well beyond that area. Paradoxically, EU anti-discrimination policies were creating a hierarchy of discriminations in which ‘sex’ enjoyed more protections than other identity categories (Swiebel, 2004). In the same year, the European Council pushed for the adoption of the so-called Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. Article 21 of the Charter includes a general anti-discrimination clause that encompasses discrimination based on sexual orientation (among other grounds). The Union soon proved to be serious about LGBTI rights during the accession procedures of the ten countries that joined in the early 2000s: six of them were compelled into changing their legal codes and removing discriminatory legal provisions in order to conform to the EU *acquis* (Swiebel, 2009).

The early 2000s also saw negotiations surrounding the mobility rights of LGBTI families in the Union. In principle, EU citizens enjoy a right to live and work in the same country as their legally recognized partners. However, the EU also presents a patchwork of different legal regimes in which non-heterosexual families enjoy different levels of recognition. Political consensus was eventually achieved for a directive mandating that there is a right to family reunification for LGBTI citizens only if their partnership has a legal equivalent in the destination country (Directive 2004/58/EC). Issues of family reunification remain to this date one of the main fields of LGBTI advocacy at the European level (see further discussion in Chapters 6 and 9).

Meanwhile, non-discrimination against sexual minorities started being mentioned in discourse as a key European value and a fundamental right for the citizens of the Union. The shift towards a language representing LGBTI issues as ‘human rights’ issues also had the side-effect of involving in the conversation other organizations operating in the European continent that pre-existed the EU, that specifically deal with human rights, and that count all of the EU member states among their members. These are, namely, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) as well as the Council of Europe (CoE) and its European Court of Human Rights (ECHR, upholding the

European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedom). By adopting this language, the EU became one further reference point for LGBTI advocacy organizations that previously found a more suitable interlocutor in the OSCE or the CoE.

The shift was cemented with the ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009. The Treaty gave binding force to the provisions of the above mentioned Charter of Fundamental Rights. Contextually, the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) was established in 2007 with headquarters in Vienna, Austria, and charged with conducting large scale surveys on fundamental rights across the Union, engage in comparative legal or social research, and produce handbooks for legal practitioners. Support for the work of the Fundamental Rights Agency is rather mixed. On the one hand, it can be argued that it offers a window of opportunity for civil society organizations that want to lobby the EU over human rights issues, including LGBTI rights (Thiel, 2014). On the other hand, it can be argued that recognition by FRA ‘governmentalizes’ its civil society partners, undermining their progressive potential as brokers of ‘human rights from below’ (Spini, 2008).

More generally, the EU policies and discourse on LGBTI rights is somewhat more ambiguous than that on equality between women and men. On the one hand, EU policies in favor of the rights of sexual minorities can hardly be emptied of their political salience in light of their link to the language of ‘rights’. In this sense, EU interventions in this area can be said to be positively progressive (Paternotte & Ayoub, 2012), despite a general approach that favors ‘soft’ and non-binding measures that resembles that of post-Amsterdam gender equality policies (Kantola, 2010). On the other hand, the progressive potential of any EU action on LGBTI equality is necessarily limited by its commitment to the liberalization of the market. While there might still be room for expansion of LGBT rights within a neoliberal framework (Wilson, 2009), the two will eventually run into contradiction (Scharpf, 2002; Thiel 2015). A glimpse of this is already detectable in the relative technicalization of LGBTI rights discourses. However, Chapters 6 and 9 will point out that this technicalization is in the direction of a legalistic rather than economic set of justification for the pursuit of LGBTI equality.

During the timespan of this research, two formal policy tools were adopted by the European Union in the broadly defined field of gender equality. The first one is the accession of the European Union to the *Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence* (henceforth, Istanbul Convention). Accession of the European Union as a

single bloc to the Istanbul Convention has been in the pipelines throughout the timespan under scrutiny for this study, and was eventually achieved with the signing of the Convention on behalf of the EU representatives on the June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2017. The Istanbul Convention has the remarkable merit of acknowledging that violence against women originates in unequal power relations between women and men in the existing gender order. Consequently, it also acknowledges that its eradication would demand structural adjustments on several different levels. While extensively celebrated, it is too early to assess whether accession to the Istanbul Convention will in fact change the way the EU approaches the issue of violence against women. For what was possible to detect in this research, much of the celebrations for EU accession to the Istanbul Convention substantially mimic the market-based vision of gender equality that became dominant since the adoption of the EES in 1997.

The second development that took place during the time of this research is the adoption of the European Pillar of Social Rights, a 20-points policy plan including large sections devoted to work-life balance proposed in April 2017 and eventually endorsed by the European Parliament, Council, and Commission on November 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017. Broadly speaking, the work-life balance component of the European Pillar of Social Rights involves EU regulations over paternity leave, parental leave, rights towards the request of flexible work arrangements, carers' leave to support seriously ill dependents, and protection against discrimination for those who exert these rights. The Social Pillar is indeed promising insofar as it explicitly aims at transcending the labor market focus of most EU equality policy and have an impact on how people do equality in their private lives. As for the Istanbul Convention, however, it is too early to assess the extent to which the Social Pillar will introduce substantial change in the way in which the EU conducts equality policy. Once again, the data collected for this research suggests continuity with a market-based approach to equality rather than a re-politicization of equality issues (see also Cavaghan & O'Dwyer, 2018).

As the above outline should have highlighted, some red threads run throughout the history of gender equality policies in the EU. To begin with, it is important to acknowledge that the European Commission was somewhat successful in reframing gender equality as a *European* issue rather than a strictly domestic one. Gender equality is time and again presented as a core European value that all member states share and to some extent champion, regardless of actual implementation on the ground. Connectedly, the Europeanization of gender equality as an issue

was also accompanied with a shift away from value based arguments for equality and towards a market-based rationale for its pursuit. To put it differently, the late-1990s saw EU gender equality policy shift from a value-based ‘state feminism’ towards a market-based ‘neoliberal feminism’ (Kantola & Squires, 2012; see also Prügl, 2015; Eisenstein, 2009). Equality was increasingly presented as instrumental to economic growth. Feminist concepts such as ‘empowerment’ were increasingly presented through market-based logics such as that of individual responsibility and self-entrepreneurship. Inequality was increasingly technicalized into a policy problem that must be measured and can be solved once and for all through targeted policy intervention.

Chapters 2 and 3 further expand on these points in discussions of gender equality and Europe as key concepts for this work. Closer discussion of specific measures is included in Part II and III of the dissertation in connection with data analysis.

### **Gender equality in Italy since the 1946 Referendum**

The history of gender equality policies in Italy follows a path that is similar to that of European institutions for at least three main reasons. Firstly, Italy was one of the founding members of the European Community. Ever since 1957, speaking of Italy without accounting for the European dimension is reductive, at best. Secondly, feminist mobilizations took place more or less around the same time across Europe, influencing politics and policy with relatively similar albeit context-specific demands across the continent. Thirdly, progressive forces in Italy have historically appealed to the process of Europeanization in order to draw strength and justify their claims for the promotion of gender equality policies.

Post-World War II history of gender equality in Italy began very early with an historical ‘first time’. On June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1946, all women older than 18 years of age gained the right to vote in a nationwide referendum to decide on the post-fascist legal order of the country (monarchy or republic) and to elect representatives to a constitutional assembly charged with drafting the post-fascist constitution. Suffrage for women was mostly the product of advocacy by women’s group within the re-founded Partito Comunista Italiano (Italian Communist Party, PCI), in particular through the newly-established Unione delle Donne Italiane (Union of Italian Women, UDI). Indeed, women’s group had substantial prestige and leverage in political negotiations during the transition phase in light of their active role in the communist-lead resistance to the fascist regime and Nazi invasion of northern Italy in the last acts of the war. At the same time, women’s suffrage

was also supported by the leadership of Democrazia Cristiana (Christian Democracy, DC), destined to govern Italy from the late 1940s until the end of the Cold War (Galeotti, 2006).

Be as it may, the Constitution of the Italian Republic became the supreme law of the land in 1948 and is still in force to this date. Throughout its text, the Constitution contains very progressive elements as well as rather conservative ones as the product of the negotiations between PCI and DC during the *travaux préparatoires*. Provisions concerning gender equality are no exception to this trend. On the one hand, the influence of PCI in early post-war Italy granted women a wide range of rights as ‘workers’. For example, Article 3 of the Constitution specifically commits to the elimination of discrimination based on sex, race, language, religion, political opinion, and personal and social conditions. On the other hand, the dominant DC supported a Catholic social order grounded in the so-called traditional family and based on fixed gender roles of male breadwinner/female care-taker. Hence, women were also crystalized in their roles as wives and mothers of the nation, de facto creating obstacles to their full inclusion. For example, Article 29 of the Constitution features a rather conservative description of family and marriage, and of women’s position therein. Advocacy for women’s rights in Italy has ever since struggled with this duality (Guadagnini & Donà, 2007; Lombardo & del Giorgio, 2013).

In this context, feminist resistance was mostly placed within the framework of labor mobilization and acted against the constraints imposed by Catholic conservatism. The heydays of feminism in Italy were undoubtedly the late 1960s and 1970s. After years of particularly heated political debate, Law 898 of 1970 introduced divorce for the first time in the country. Catholic Conservative forces attempted to repeal the law through a nationwide referendum, in which they emerged defeated by a surprisingly large pro-divorce majority (just below 60% of the voters). The success of the referendum paved the way for a substantial reform of family law in 1975 (Law 151), putting an end to the male-headed family unit as the only family formation to be explicitly recognized by the law. The progressive wave stayed strong throughout the second half of the decade. Abortion was legalized in the country with Law 194 of 1978, later to be confirmed in a referendum that followed a pattern similar to the one described above for the divorce law. The concluding act of this progressive season came in 1981, when parliament repealed those legal provisions offering substantial reduction of penalties in case of so-called ‘crimes of honor’ (e.g. the murder of an ‘adulterous’ wife).

At this point, it is worth noticing that, despite close ties between Italian feminism and the labor movement, the most remarkable developments in favor of gender equality at the Italian national level were tied to family law and reproductive rights. That is to say, they were mostly taking place in fields that span beyond strictly defined labor issues. Furthermore, family law and labor rights to this date remain beyond the competencies of European policymaking. Indeed, it is from the late 1970s onwards that European Directives start being transcribed into Italian law, influencing the way in which gender equality is understood and implemented in the country and moving the debate away from a vision of women as wives and mothers (Donà, 2006).

Major political turmoil invested Italy in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The end of the Cold War brought about the collapse of Cold War party structures, Christian democrats and communists alike. Large scale corruption scandals invested pretty much the totality of the political class who ruled Italy for almost five decades, climaxing with the *Mani Pulite* ('clean hands') investigations in the early-1990s and the end of the so-called First Republic. It is in this generalized chaos that TV-entrepreneur Silvio Berlusconi managed to enter the political scene with a new party formation and with a new way of doing politics that was destined to influence the following two decades. Coming as a successful businessman and presenting himself as 'an outsider' that had nothing to share with the previous political class, Berlusconi's party formation *Forza Italia* (literally 'Go Italy!' as you would read on a banner in a football stadium) won a majority of seats in the general election of 1994, emanating the first Berlusconi government and sanctioning the beginning of the so-called Second Republic. Despite alternate fortunes, Berlusconi managed to be the head of four governments (1994-95; 2001-05; 2005-06, and 2008-11).

Berlusconi's impact on Italian culture through his TV networks and broader media empire is perhaps more remarkable than his political history. Most crucially for this writing, the Berlusconi era was characterized by the promotion of a certain kind of masculinity styled after Berlusconi himself and the systematic presentation of women as objects that derived their worth exclusively from their heterosexual desirability. In Berlusconi's Italy, beauty became the only way for women to achieve some sort of visibility. Those women who achieved it, however, were stigmatized as either bad, stupid, or whores. And potentially all three of them (Hipkins, 2011, p. 419). Those forces opposing this social trend attempted to discredit Berlusconi by defining his government as a *mignottocrazia* ('whoreocracy'), but ultimately failed in formulating an

alternative discourse to replace the dominant one (Hipkins, 2011, p. 414). Counter-hegemonic discourses in this area seemed to lack cultural vocabulary to talk about women in any other terms (Hipkins, 2011, p. 425), as the continued relevance of bodily features in the media description of female politicians in post-Berlusconi's Italy seems to suggest.

Progress in the field of gender equality followed the alternate fortunes of Berlusconi's center-right governing coalitions. In the intervals between the four Berlusconi governments, different center-left coalitions seized the opportunity to develop new equality legislation as well as an institutional machinery for gender equality (Guadagnini, 1995, 2001, 2005). During the 1995-2001 timespan, for example, the crime of rape was eventually redefined from a crime against public morality to a crime against the bodily integrity of the individual with Law 66 of 1996. Furthermore, the 'Department for Equal Opportunities' (DPO) was brought into existence in 1996 within the context of the Prime Minister's office (the DPO is usually entrusted to a female member of the cabinet alongside other duties).

It is worth pausing to notice that Italy developed a formal gender equality infrastructure relatively late in comparison to other EU member states. This notwithstanding, Italian 'state feminist' institutions achieved a good level of competence not only in absorbing gender equality norms coming from the European Commission, but also in pushing the interest of some Italian women's rights groups in the EU arena (Donà, 2004). Furthermore, a community of policymakers with an expertise in European issues and equality issues consolidated in the country. Despite the skepticism of more radical fringes of the feminist movement, the Italian gender equality machinery seemed to be able to work in cooperation with some feminist groups, articulate their demands, and voice them in national as well as European fora (Calloni, 2002). Given the progressive orientation of most feminist groups in Italy and their historical partnership with labor movements, cooperation was more intense with center-left governing coalitions (Guadagnini & Donà, 2007).

The second Berlusconi government in the early 2000s was characterized by a rather conservative stance on gender equality and broader recognition of sexual and reproductive rights. The most relevant backlash in the field was probably infamous Law 40 of 2004, regulating all matters related to reproductive technologies. Law 40 of 2004 considers the protection of the embryo as the top priority in all matters under its jurisdiction. The Italian Constitutional Court as well as the European Court of Human Rights have frequently sentenced that the law poses serious

threats to the life of women seeking assisted reproduction. However, Law 40 of 2004 stands to this date. Among other provisions, the law also prohibits performing and accessing surrogacy on the Italian territory and de facto imposes a blanket ban of medical research on embryo cells.

Also in 2004, the broad left-wing coalition acting as opposition to the second Berlusconi government made the first concrete attempt to pass legislation regulating same sex unions. For the sake of acknowledgment, very early proposals can be found in two 1986 bills introduced in both chambers by a group of feminist deputies of the PCI. However, proper parliamentary discussion of the issue did not take place until 2004, when the so-called Decreto Rivola<sup>1</sup> and Decreto Grillini were introduced to parliament (Donà, 2009). Notably, both bills adopted language that steered clear of the concept of ‘family’ because of the special protection it enjoys under the Constitution. Rather, the two proposals attempted to build an alternative language to address consensual relationships between adults. Despite this strategic move, discussion almost immediately stalemated because of the direct intervention of the Catholic Church, that entered the debate with a full-fledged defense of the ‘traditional family’ and amidst the silence of the main party formations (Ceccarini, 2008).

Again involved in a mix of legal and sexual scandals, Berlusconi lost the confidence of parliament in 2006. It is during this window that a new center-left coalition seized the opportunity to unify existing pieces of ‘equal opportunities’ legislation in what is now known as ‘National Code of Equal Opportunities between Women and Men’ (Law 198 of 2006). The governing coalition also attempted to capitalize on its electoral success to pass at least some legislation on same sex-civil unions. The center-right opposition, however, sought and obtained the support of the Catholic Church in stalemating legislation on same-sex partnerships. Pope Benedict XVI directly addressed the issue in several of his speeches, arguing in defense of the ‘traditional family’, supposedly under siege. Practicing Catholics also answered the call, and joined their representatives in the first edition of the ‘Family Day’ in 2007, a public gathering allegedly in favour of ‘the family’ but actually promoting not-so-subtle homophobic messages against same-sex unions (Lavizzari & Prearo, 2018). The center-left government eventually fell, opening the

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<sup>1</sup> In Italy, Parliamentary bills/acts (Decreti Legge) are commonly referred to with the name of the member of parliament sponsoring them.

way to a fourth Berlusconi government (2008-2011) that shortly presented its own proposal for same-sex unions before killing the bill and the discussion with it for the following six years.

The end of the latest Berlusconi government brought some hope for a new season of gender equality norms. After a transition period under the so-called ‘technocratic’ government led by Mario Monti (2011-2013), a newly elected parliament produced a centrist governing coalition led by the center-left Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, PD), first under the guide of Enrico Letta (2013-2014) then under Matteo Renzi (2014-2017) and finally under Paolo Gentiloni (2017-2018). The new coalition mostly kept a gender balanced cabinet and swiftly took action against gender based violence with a law on ‘femicide’ (Law 119 of 2013). Its primary achievement, however, has undoubtedly been the adoption of a law regulating same-sex unions, known as Decreto Cirinnà (Law 76 of 2016). While historical in its own right, the law has been heavily criticized because it affords a limited set of rights to same-sex couples as compared to those that marriage affords to heterosexual couples. This is because the text was curtailed during parliamentary discussions in order to achieve a parliamentary majority in the context of a coalition government led by the center-left but reaching across the aisle into the moderate right.

Furthermore, the Cirinnà bill was object of a particularly toxic political discussion on pretty much all platforms, including social media. Even a cursory look at the discussion would reveal that those opposing the bill were mobilizing people appealing to fear of widespread moral depravity and subversion of the existing social order through clearly homophobic messages. The wider context was that of a full-fledged media crusade against what was termed ‘the ideology of gender’: an umbrella term invented by the Catholic right to oppose any proposition questioning traditional gender roles, including gender-sensitive education in schools (Lavizzari & Prearo, 2018). Overt attacks against equality were also paired with subtler ones initiated by members of the governing coalition leaning towards the so-called ‘moderate’ right. Most famously, the at the time Minister of Health Beatrice Lorenzin (Ala Democratica, center-right) promoted a pro-natalist campaign known as ‘Fertility day’ that framed fertility issues in particularly sexist and ageist terms. In the context of this campaign, procreation was presented as a duty that Italian women are failing to perform. The campaign conveniently avoided acknowledging the abysmal precarization of living conditions that young Italians are currently experiencing (Trillò, 2018b).

The fortunes of the governing coalitions came to an end when Matteo Renzi left office after a failed attempt to reform the Constitution with a referendum in November 2016. The left-leaning coalition stayed in power throughout the following year and until the end of the electoral cycle, but the general elections in early 2018 were an utter defeat for progressive forces. The big winners were the right-leaning anti-system party ‘Movimento 5 stelle’ in the south and the xenophobic right-wing party Lega Nord in the north of the country. Moviment 5 Stelle and Lega Nord eventually formed a governing coalition formally headed by university professor Giuseppe Conte, now Prime Minister. While it is hard to tell what will happen next, equality legislation is unlikely to advance. Actually, a rolling back of equality measures wouldn’t come as a surprise.

At present, Italy is ranked remarkably low in virtually all gender equality indexes, including EIGE’s one. While noticing change, EIGE reports that the Italian labour market is still particularly gender segregated, with female participation in the workforce remarkably smaller and more volatile than that of their male counterparts. Pay gap and other forms of inequality between sexes have shown improvement but are not necessarily positive overall. Educational segregation (especially in universities) is still very high and far below EU average, and is considered by EIGE as the key factor leading to occupational segregation. The unequal distribution of care work is astonishing, with less than 12% of men performing any form of care work for more than one hour a day. The gender gap in positions of power (political and corporate) has shown improvement, but still falls short of the mark, with women representing only 11% of the board members of publicly listed companies.

‘Health’ is the only field where Italy ranks above EU average, probably due to high life expectancy of Italian women. However, EIGE voices concerns about the health conditions of elderly women. Furthermore, EIGE’s criticisms seems to be somewhat oblivious of the poor performance of Italy in granting access to reproductive rights in healthcare facilities, made de facto impossible by the priority of protecting the embryo as enshrined in Law 40 of 2004. The most vocal opposition to this law comes from those arguing against the provision allowing medical doctors to exert a right to so-called ‘conscientious objection’ in order not to perform abortion; a practice that has caused several preventable deaths in the conservative regions of the South where it is virtually impossible to find a non-objecting doctor.

Going beyond EIGE's understanding of what constitutes 'gender equality', Italy lags particularly behind other Western European states for what concerns the rights of sexual minorities. Italy has consistently failed in producing a law against homophobia/transphobia. At present, the only form of legal protection for the rights of sexual minorities lays in Executive Decree 213 of 2003, transposing an EU directive on non-discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (Directive 2000/78EC). As outlined above, same-sex unions recently entered the realm of family law, but with a limited set of rights in comparison to those afforded by marriage.

## **Conclusion**

My purpose in this chapter was to outline a basic history of gender equality politics and policy at the European level and Italian national level, pointing out the links between the latter and the former. I argued that 'equal opportunity' was the main approach to gender equality at the European level until the 1990s, leading to the adoption of a wide range of anti-discrimination measures that eventually crystallized into a European gender equality policy machinery. These measures were mostly tied to non-discrimination in the labor market because of the 'economic' character of the European Community. Despite their limited scope, these policies represented women as agentic subjects whose rights are worth upholding because of their inherent value.

I argued that the 1990s featured a shift away from equal opportunities towards positive action first and gender mainstreaming soon thereafter. The shift was marked by a transition from 'hard' policy measures towards 'soft' policies for equality, including a strong turn towards a technicalization of gender equality as a policy problem. This was accompanied by the development of a complex set of apparati that in their ensemble form a highly professionalized gender equality machinery that de facto drives the way in which equality issues are discussed at the European level. The policy shift was also paired with a discursive shift from value-based arguments to market-based arguments for gender equality. In other words, gender equality stopped being pursued because of its inherent value and started being presented as an instrumental goal for the achievement of economic prosperity.

The 1990s also featured first European level discussions of the rights of sexual minorities, with some early non-discrimination measures being established around the turn of the millennium. At the same time, the LGBTI issues started being debated in terms of 'human rights', bringing overlaps with other organizations operating on the European continent (OSCE, CoE) and a new

set of discourses to address them. EU discourses of LGBTI equality were said to be less clearly technicalized and neoliberalized than those concerning equality between women and men. This might be because of their clearer link with the inherently political language of ‘rights’ and/or because European norms in this field are somewhat less developed. This notwithstanding, technicalization and neoliberalization are present also in this area, although their paradoxes might be not as evident as in the case of the ‘gender equality’ discourse.

Discussions of gender equality at the Italian national level followed a similar timeline but also diverge for a range of issues. The Italian Constitution, approved in 1948, was quite progressive in terms of women’s rights as workers’ rights in light of the crucial role of the PCI in the early years of the Italian republic. In light of this, the heydays of Italian feminism in the 1970s were characterized by struggles for reforms in the fields of family law and sexual and reproductive rights. In particular, two referenda on divorce and abortion are to this date celebrated as some of the most successful examples of feminist mobilization in Italy. More broadly, however, the adoption of progressive gender equality legislation has been slow during the first forty years of the Italian Republic because of the political dominance of Christian Democratic party and their advocacy for conservative Catholic values.

Structural transformation in the 1990s and the advent of the Berlusconi proved to be just as challenging for gender equality advocacy. Nonetheless, the alternate fortunes of Berlusconi’s governing coalitions opened windows of opportunity for feminist interventions. Perhaps counterintuitively, these are the years in which Italy eventually established its own national gender equality institutions. These institutions seem to have developed relatively quickly a good level of expertise despite their marginal role within the Office of the Prime Minister. Depending on the color of the government, Italian feminists did take the opportunity to work with them in order to achieve their policy goals. At the same time, Italian state feminist institutions seem to have taken advantage of EU structures to provide their inputs for EU-wide equality norms.

After a short technocratic parenthesis, the left-leaning centrist coalition that governed from 2013 to 2018 delivered on some key promises, especially in the fields of violence against women and LGBTI rights. The 2014 law on femicide and the 2016 law on same-sex civil unions were celebrated as landmark pieces of gender equality and civil rights legislation. This notwithstanding, the need to reach across the aisle in order to stay in power limited their progressive potential. After

political turmoil in the wake of the failed constitutional reform of late 2016 and the electoral success of populist and nativist right-leaning coalition, Italy is unlikely to promote any progressive equality legislation in the near future.

The above outline of policy and discourses at the European supra-national and the Italian national level can in no way be considered exhaustive. The objective was to offer a review of key pieces of legislation and the debates surrounding them over a relatively long times span in order to set the stage and provide the reader with the necessary contextual elements to interpret the data that will be presented in the upcoming chapters of this writing.

## 2. Theory

### Introduction

As pointed out in the introduction, the theoretical framework that I adopt for this dissertation revolves around three main areas of interest, namely ‘Europe’, ‘gender equality’, and ‘social media’. In the literature surveyed for this study, theoretical explorations in the three areas run substantially in parallel without much overlap. This is not to say, however, that they cannot be brought into fruitful conversation with each other. Despite disciplinary divisions, it is possible to find a strand of literature that ultimately makes reference to shared ontological and epistemological premises for each of the three areas.

The elements of the theoretical framework that are outlined below are bound together by a shared background provided by the concept of political performativity. The understanding of performativity advanced in this study is developed at the interface of Goffman’s theatrical performances in everyday life and Butler’s performativity as applied to both individual conduct and to collective acts of political contestation. In what follows, I argue that social media in general and Twitter in particular happen to be spaces for acts of individual and collective performativity on a par with those in the analog realm. Consequently, individually produced and collectively crowd-sourced narratives on social media can represent acts of political performativity that contribute to the contestation and consolidation of meaning around key social concepts, including ‘Europe’ and ‘gender equality’.

Discussion in this chapter is organized as follows. A first section is devoted to ‘Europe’ and its discursive construction. Drawing from the work of constructivist scholars in international relations, this section argues that ‘Europe’ de facto is an empty signifier, the meaning of which is constantly reshaped in discursive negotiations among different actors and at different levels. I argue that the European Union and its member states retain substantial hegemony in shaping ‘Europe’ as an object of knowledge and as a socio-political space. That is to say, the discursive performances of the European Union, its member states, their respective emanations, and their civil society actors collectively contribute to the consolidation of a shared understanding of ‘Europe’.

A second section moves on to discuss ‘gender equality’. Gender is here understood through the lens of Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, according to which ‘gender’ is constructed in the collective reiteration of discourses and bodily practices that produce ‘men’ and ‘women’ as gendered subjects and simultaneously works to abject other gendered identities. Institutions and their discourses, including EU institutions and their discourses on social media platforms, play a crucial role in producing gendered individuals. In light of this, I discuss thereafter different approaches to gender as a political issue and of gender scholarship in political sciences. The section is concluded with a theorization of gender equality and feminism as projects that belong in the political family of ‘the left’ and that nowadays stands in opposition to a ‘neoliberal’ project.

Finally, a third section offers a survey of how the above theories can be used to interpret social media discourses. I understand individual social media personae in terms of Butlerian subjects that are produced in performances and discourses. While true for all subjects, my emphasis is on the ways in which this applies to ‘traditional elites’ such as politicians and political institutions. The role of private users is not neglected in this section, but rather recovered in its collective dimension when discussing acts of collective performativity.

### **Constructing ‘Europe’**

In this section, I position this project within the existing literature on ‘Europe’ in international relations. After a review of other approaches to the study of Europe, this section outlines the key tenets of so-called postmodern constructivism in international relations as the broad guidelines for this study. In particular, I present the approach developed by Diez (1999; 2001) as the most suitable for the purposes of analysis in the chapters to follow.

#### *Europe in international relations: A quick overview*

Starting in the early post-WWII years, studying ‘Europe’ became essentially synonymous with the study of European integration. Until the early 1990s, two key traditions dominated the field: neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism. Neofunctionalist approaches are usually traced back to the seminal work of Haas (1958; 1961) and his theory of regional integration. According to Haas, the initial decision to create new institutions with power over certain policy areas (in the case of Europe, steel and coal) inevitably produce a pressure to extend the authority of these institutions in neighboring policy areas (e.g. fair competition and wages). In other words, an initial

transfer of power to European institutions would unintentionally but inevitably have spillover effects, promoting further centralization of power and, in time, expand to all policy areas.

Neofunctionalists predicted that the functional spillover would also bring about a bottom-up process of political spillover. Given the transfer of policymaking power in certain areas to new institutions, sub-national and national actors in said areas would have to shift their frame of reference from the national level to the newly created supranational level. Initially driven by practical concerns, local actors would, over time, also shift their political allegiances towards supranational political apparatus. In turn, this would make the process self-sustaining and grant legitimacy to newly developed institutions (Pollack, 2005, p. 359; Risse, 2009, p. 147). Repeated crisis in the history of European integration (e.g. the so-called Luxembourg crisis, recession in the 1970s, the post-Maastricht backlash, and more recently the Eurozone crisis) proved the neofunctionalist perspective to be too optimistic, opening the way to other approaches.

Intergovernmentalism came to the fore in the wake of the Gaullist challenge to European integration and reaffirmation of nation-state sovereignty in the 1960s. In what became a manifesto of intergovernmentalism, Hoffmann (1966) famously defined nation-states as 'obstinate' in their resistance to the transfer of power towards a central European government. Not long thereafter, Haas (1973) himself conceded that the neofunctionalist model happened to be too simplistic and that nation-states were far from obsolete. At its essence, intergovernmentalism aims to reaffirm that Europe is no different from other geopolitical locations, where utility-maximizing rational actors (i.e. nation-states) conduct negotiations on the basis of mostly fixed preferences.

Intergovernmentalism was substantially reshaped in the 1990s thanks to the 'liberal' current within its ranks. Outlined in the seminal work of Moravcsik (1993, 1998), liberal intergovernmentalism offered a three-step model of European integration. At the first step, national governments develop their preferences based on the interests of their constituencies and the political actors influencing them. At the second step, national governments bargain over their preferences at the European level, with negotiations being directed by the relative power of each actor with hardly any influence on behalf of supranational institutions such as the European Commission. At the final step, liberal intergovernmentalism advances a rational choice framework to argue that European nation-states create shared institutions in order to partially escape the prisoner's dilemma and be ensured of their mutual credibility.

Challenges to liberal intergovernmentalism arrived in the 1990s with the advent of scholarship in so-called ‘new’ institutionalism, that developed in the three strands of rational-choice, historical, and sociological institutionalism. Originating in North American, rational-choice institutionalism did not depart from the epistemology of intergovernmentalism and attempted to explain the relevance of European institutional rules and cooperation procedures in terms of rational-choice. Historical institutionalism shifted the attention to the role of institutions over time, and in particular their ability to constrain and influence the behavior of the actors that originally created them. Finally, sociological constructivism further shifted the attention to the supranational level, with a specific focus on the processes of norms production that are shaped by and in turn shape the preferences of the actors involved (Jupille & Caporaso, 1999; Pollack, 2004).

*Constructivism: A late-comer to the study of Europe*

Constructivism differs from all of the above traditions. What marks it as crucially different is ‘a social ontology which insists that human agents do not exist independently from their social environment and its collectively shared systems of meanings’ (Risse, 2009, p. 145). For intergovernmentalism and neofunctionalism, norms and actors exist as two separate entities with the former constraining the options available to the latter. Conversely, constructivists understand norms and actors as mutually constitutive (Risse, 2009, p. 148). It should be noted that some strands of institutionalism (especially sociological institutionalism) might share parts of this view (e.g. Schmidt, 2008; Schmidt & Radaelli, 2004). Nonetheless, institutionalism’s focus on the ontological separation between discourses and institutions (with the latter wielding the former) marks their position as incompatible with constructivism despite the overlaps.

Constructivism centers its research enterprise around the performative and discursive process of norm contestation taking place in ‘everyday’ political business as well as in the daily interaction of different actors at multiple levels. Constructivist perspectives interpret European integration as a set of social processes that contributed to the shaping of European norms. These, in turn, triggered new social processes at the national and local level. In other words, constructivism sees the development of norms as constant process of contestation, crystallization, and new change through further contestation at the supranational, national, and local level.

The constructivist tradition in international relations is usually presented as having developed in different branches. Ruggie (1998, pp. 35–6) argued for the existence of three different

constructivisms: classical (based on canonical texts in sociology, most prominently those of Durkheim and Weber); postmodernist (grounded primarily in the work of Foucault and Derrida); and ‘naturalistic’ (based on the scientific realism of Bhaskar). Similarly, Adler (1997, pp. 335–6) categorized constructivism in four key strands, and namely: modernist, rule-based, narrative knowing, and postmodernist.

Katzenstein, Keohane, and Krasner (1998, pp. 675–8) distinguished between conventional, critical, and postmodern constructivism. Christiansen, Jorgensen, and Wiener (1999) operate a broader distinction between sociological constructivism (based on the sociology of institutions) and Wittgensteinian constructivism (making therefore reference to discourse-based approaches). Checkel (2006) presented a vision of constructivism as divided into three branches, namely conventional, interpretative, and critical/ radical. Within this latter category, he also singles out ‘argumentative’ currents (drawing mostly from the work of Habermas).

Broadly speaking, classical constructivism is associated with US-based scholars of international relations who adopt a post-positivist epistemology and who devote part of their efforts to bridging the divide with intergovernmentalism and neofunctionalism (see for example Barnett & Finnemore, 1999; Trondal, 2001). The defining characteristic of classical constructivism is an orientation towards the investigation of mechanisms of cause/effect via qualitative process tracing (Checkel, 2006, p. 3). In the European context, the most famous project attempting to produce such epistemological bridges is probably that of Jupille and Caporaso (1999) in their study of EU institutions and their functioning. Lewis’ (2005) study of the EU COREPER (Committee of Permanent Representatives) through the lens of persuasion and game theory is another remarkable attempt in this sense.

Interpretive constructivism differs from the above insofar as it frames social processes in international relations through the lens of ‘how possible’ questions rather than through causal reasoning (Checkel, 2006, p. 2). That is to say, interpretive constructivists are interested in exploring the circumstances that make change possible rather than focusing on how a given process of change occurred. Unsurprisingly therefore, interpretive constructivists have a strong preference for inductive methodologies that deploy a wide array of methods in discourse analysis.

Postmodern constructivism keeps the focus on discursive processes, but usually complements it with a more or less explicitly normative dimension (Checkel, 2006, p. 3). Its main

focus is on the social processes of norm production and contestation. Furthermore, this approach stresses that the research enterprise is not neutral, but rather part and parcel of the process through which norms are created and contested.

Postmodern constructivism is rather fragmented within its own ranks. The Governance School aims at theorizing the European Union as a *sui generis* political space (Hix, 1998), as a postmodern polity (Ruggie, 1993), or as a system of governance without government (Pollack, 2005, p. 380) in which decisions are made following multilevel deliberation processes and despite the absence of an identifiable center for decisionmaking (e.g. Friis & Murphy, 1999). The Copenhagen School rests on speech act theory to explore the array of meanings that emerge when ‘Europe’ is unpacked as a multilayered concept (Wæver, 1998a, 1998b).

The Essex School looks at discourses as social practices with a particular eye to the ‘social clashes’ that take place between ‘coalitions’ representing different understandings of a given object of knowledge, such as, for example, Europe (Rogers, 2009; Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000). Finally, popular strand of postmodern constructivism adopts an ‘argumentative’ approach that is mostly based on Habermasian theories of communicative action and on the public sphere (Risse, 2000), often applied to the European case study (e.g. Sicakkan, 2013). What brings together different approaches therein is a marked shift away from the intergovernmentalist-neofunctionalist debate and towards an approach to international relationships that looks at multilevel decisionmaking processes and the role of discourse within it.

#### *Diez's brand of postmodern constructivism*

While acknowledging and in part borrowing from all of the above currents in postmodern constructivism, I position my study close to the model outlined in the work of Thomas Diez (1999, 2001, 2013, 2014). In a seminal essay titled ‘Speaking Europe’, Diez (1999) pioneered the study of European integration through a post-structuralist lens, arguing that it would bring the following advantages. Firstly, it would complement the focus on ideas and institutions adopted by other constructivist currents, showing that neither of them can de facto exist outside of discourse. Secondly, it would highlight the contested nature of most norms and processes, opening the way to alternative scenarios for European integration. Thirdly, it would prioritize the analysis of those processes in which norms are created and contested, updating and complementing the vision of

‘power’ based on material resources that constructivism inherited from neo-functionalism. Finally, it would include self-reflexivity as a key element in the research enterprise.

Diez (1999) proposes a threefold approach to the study of Europe as a discursive field that borrows from Austin, Foucault, and Derrida. Based on Austin’s speech act theory (1962), Diez stresses the role of language in unlocking the potential for individual agency. In what he terms ‘Austinian move’, Diez argues for the inclusion of discursive performances as sites where individuals and collectivities exert an agentic role in the process of producing and contesting norms. In other words, Diez draws on Austin to escape a framework that could otherwise be too rigid and argue that, despite structures, subjects can do things through words (Diez, 1999, pp. 600-1).

The second move that Diez proposes is a ‘Foucauldian move’. Foucault’s notion of discourse famously opened the way to an understanding of knowledge as unsteady and contested rather than fixed and universal. In this sense, the meaning of any concept can never be grasped outside of the social processes through which meaning is reaffirmed or challenged, including individual and collective performances. Through the Foucauldian move, Diez suggests that Europe should be studied as a contested concept the meaning of which cannot be fixed or grasped outside of discursive contestation (Diez, 1999, p. 602).

Diez further endorses Foucault and recognizes that objects and subjects of knowledge are mutually constitutive and equally constructed in discourse (Diez, 1999, p. 603). If subjects can indeed exert agency in the form of discursive performances (the Austinian move), they do so from those subject positions that are available to them in currently existing discourses. Noticeably, some subjectivities might be excluded from participation through processes of abjection that exclude them all together. Thus, not all subjectivities are equally positioned to participate in the discursive production of ‘Europe’.

Finally, Diez suggests a ‘Derridarean move’. Through this move, Diez aims at embedding in his framework a focus on continuity and change as part and parcel of the same process. Diez makes reference to Derrida’s conceptualization of discourses as a series of open-ended chains that can be complemented with new elements and therefore altered. In light of the multiple discourses to which each individual is subjected, discursive performances almost inevitably add new elements to one open-ended chain by borrowed elements taken elsewhere (Diez, 1999, pp. 607-8). This

vision also resonates in the work of those queer theorists arguing that the failure to reproduce norms in light of multiple subject positions represents a crucial site for political contestation over meanings otherwise taken for granted (Butler, 1990; Halberstam, 2011).

Crucial to Diez's framework is the idea that different discourses join each other at what he terms 'discursive nodal points' (DNPs) (Diez, 2001). Through a joint reading of Laclau and Mouffe (1985) and Hejl (1993), Diez defines DNPs as 'central concepts in the political debate around which meaning is stabilized' (Diez, 2001, p. 16). Much like Laclau's (2005) empty signifiers, DNPs are central to the political debate insofar as they can be filled with meanings. In turn, and based on the above Derridean move, these meanings are borrowed from 'other discourses that Diez (2001) terms 'metanarratives'. If, for example, 'European culture' is the nodal point under consideration, discourses of freedom, justice, Christian-ness, etc. function as its metanarratives. Usually, and despite being contested in their own right, the meanings of the metanarratives are taken for granted as natural when deployed in another DNP.

Based on the above threefold model, Diez further argues that struggle over meaning takes place on three interrelated levels. Firstly, individual subject positions within a discourse engage in micro-level struggles for the negotiation of meanings derived from competing discourses in order to achieve at least some level of internal coherence (Austinian move). Secondly, better positioned subjects engage in a meso-level struggles to establish the primacy of a given discursive understanding of contested concept (Foucauldian move). Finally, macro-discourses frame struggles at the micro- and meso-level and de facto construct the subject position of those collective and individual actors deploying them. Nonetheless, these struggles can redefine macro-discourses, thus unlocking the potential for structural change (Derridean move).

### *Section summary*

I opened this section with a brief discussion of intergovernmentalist, neofunctionalist, and constructivist approaches in international relations, setting the stage for a discussion of Diez's (1999, 2001) postmodern constructivist approach to the study of Europe. Diez's threefold model borrowing from Austin, Foucault, and Derrida is particularly open to fruitful conversation with the ones that are outlined in further sections of this chapter for the study of gender, gender equality, and discursive processes via social media platforms. Furthermore, Diez's framework is open to being operationalized in the terms that are outlined in the next chapter devoted to methodology.

## **Feminist political analysis: Some key tenets**

In a thought-provoking book titled *Why Stories Matter*, Claire Hemmings (2011) pointed out that academic recollections of ‘the history of Western feminism’ often adopt problematic narratives that speak of a trajectory marked by either ‘progress’, ‘loss’, or ‘return’. In narrative of progress, the allegedly misguided focus on sexual difference of radical feminism is overcome in the 1990s with postmodernist and post-structuralist intervention that displace ‘women’ as the privileged subject of feminism. In narratives of loss, postmodern and post-structuralist interventions are represented as having betrayed the ideological purity that allowed radical feminism to be effective in achieving progress for women. In narratives of return, neomaterialist perspectives are represented as having opened new possibilities for feminism mobilization by recovering the importance of embodiment while simultaneously respecting the contributions of postmodernism and post-structuralism.

Depending on what perspective is taken, the publication of Judith Butler’s (1990) *Gender Trouble* is presented as a positive, negative, or uncomfortable turning point. This is true regardless of whether the analysis that follows does engage with Butler’s work or simply mentions it in passing. In this project, I do endorse an understanding of gender that is heavily influenced by Butler’s work on performativity. It would be therefore tempting to introduce this conceptualization through a history of Western feminism that closely resembles the narratives of ‘progress’ outlined by Hemmings. Instead, this section tries to pick up on Hemmings’ invitation to rethink the way in which we as feminist scholars position our own work in the trajectory of Western feminism.

In what follows, I sketch an overview of the feminist literature that does not tie any of its strands to specific times or ‘waves’ of feminist mobilization. Rather, I borrow from the typology developed by Kantola and Lombardo (2017) to define five key approaches to feminist political analysis that to some extent coexist and compete to these days. These are, namely, (i) women, (ii) gender, (iii) deconstruction, (iv) intersectionality, and (v) post-deconstruction. Compatibly with the constructivist approach to ‘Europe’ that I adopt in this study as described in the previous section, I adopt an approach to feminist analysis that Kantola and Lombardo (2017) would categorize as ‘deconstructionist’. In light of the indebtedness of my approach to Butler’s (1990) theory of gender performativity, the following sub-section expands on Butler’s perspective.

After briefly presenting the key elements of my understanding of gender, I then turn to outlining a typology of different approaches to ‘gender equality’ discernible in feminist political scholarship along the lines suggested by Kantola and Verloo (2018). These are, namely, (i) escaping equality; (ii) fixing equality; (iii) deconstructing equality; and (iv) delegating equality to theory. One further sub-section outlines my understanding of feminism as a progressive political project that mostly stands in opposition to a neoliberal political project in a fashion resembling Mouffe’s (2013) agonistic politics.

### *Feminist political analysis*

In their review of different approaches to feminist political analysis, Kantola and Lombardo (2017) identify five different strands in the literature, namely: (i) women, (ii) gender, (iii) deconstruction, (iv) intersectionality, and (v) post-deconstruction. In this sub-section, I go through the key features of each of them, setting the stage for discussion of the deconstructionist approach inspired by Butler’s work that I adopt for this study.

Some feminist scholarship adopts a perspective that Kantola and Lombardo (2017) term ‘the women and politics’ approach. This scholarship has an explicit focus on ‘women’ as the subjects of their work and a more or less implicit focus on ‘men’ as a benchmark against which women’s achievement is compared. Firmly tied to positivist epistemologies, this position equates gender with biological sex and assumes women and men to be fairly homogenous categories. Therefore, their political attitudes, needs, and preferences can be objectively identified and researched. For example, this is the approach that most government agencies (including EU agencies) have to gender issues.

The key advantage of the ‘women’ approach is that it makes male social domination immediately manifest through reference to large statistical figures. In turn, these studies tend to be appealing for policymakers and open a window of opportunity for feminist advocacy in more formal political fora such as national parliaments or supranational institutions. The key disadvantages of the ‘women’ approach reside in the fact that it assumes the existence of an *a priori* category of ‘womanhood’ (Celis, Childs, Kantola, & Krook, 2014), obscuring differences among women (Yuval Davis & Anthias, 1989) and potentially neglecting less visible inequalities beyond formal representation (Meier, Lombardo, Bustelo, & Pantelidou Maloutas, 2005).

Kantola and Lombardo identify the so-called ‘gender approach’ as a second popular strand in feminist analysis. Broadly speaking, the gender approach encompasses studies that understand gender as a social construct that nonetheless has important material repercussions. This approach sets gender in its broader social context and studies it as the interplay between a multiplicity of masculinities and femininities. Emphasis is on the relational character and the structural inequalities produced therein. The ‘gender’ approach emerged as part of a Marxist tradition and aimed at addressing the material inequalities embedded in structures such as family relations and the division of labor, pointing out their gendered character (e.g. Fraser, 1994, 1996). More recently, the gender approach can be found in studies of gender regimes of power that take into consideration material inequalities that go beyond gendered relations of production (e.g. Walby, 2015).

The key advantage of the gender approach is its ability to encapsulate the character of gender identities and gender relations as context specific and always contingent (Connell, 1987). The Marxist tradition of the gender approach also allows for an understanding of gender regimes as strictly tied to a gendered division of labor that results in material inequalities between women and men (Fraser, 1994; Connell, 2005). The main disadvantage of the gender approach is its often incomplete implementation in political analysis. ‘Gender’ as a word enjoys broad currency, but it is often used synonymously with ‘women’s issues’, thus bringing it close to the ‘women’ approach described above and diluting much of its potential. A focus on gender might also have the undesirable effect of reifying rather than undoing gender regimes of power by reiterating women’s otherness to the male norm, which in turns remains untouched (Bacchi, 1990; Eveline, 1994).

The ‘deconstructionist approach’ is the one from which I borrow the most for the purposes of this study. Kantola and Lombardo (2017) define it as an approach that theorizes gender as a set of discourses and practices that is constantly reproduced and contested through individual as well as collective performances. The broad epistemology of the deconstructivist approach is heavily influenced by post-structuralism and postmodernism. Therefore, the deconstructionist approach assumes that there is no reality ‘out there’ outside of discourses and practices. Objects and subjects of knowledge are the product of discursive struggles that are oriented by power relations (Bacchi, 1999, 2009).

The main advantage of the deconstructionist approach is its focus on gender as a process rather than an attribute of personhood. Discourses and practices are understood to be *gendering*

practices, i.e. practices that are productive of gendered subjects (Eveline & Bacchi 2005). For example, policies tackling gender inequalities are gendering practices insofar as they embed assumptions regarding what is the most appropriate way of performing femininity or masculinity, favoring and reproducing some gendered identities while silencing and obscuring others. Through a deconstructivist lens, these hidden assumptions can be made visible, questioned, and eventually disrupted (Verloo, 2007; Lombardo, Meier & Verloo, 2009; Lombardo & Meier, 2014). The main disadvantage of a deconstructivist lens is that it explicitly aims at displacing and undoing identity categories, potentially leading to political paralysis (Benhabib, Butler, Cornell, & Fraser, 1995, p. 29; Fraser, 1995, pp. 163-4). The deconstructivist approach has also been criticized for a quasi-sectarian attitude that does not take into consideration factors other than the discursive (McNay, 1999) and refuses to dialogue with other approaches (Mazur, 2011; Mazur & Hoard, 2014).

Kantola and Lombardo (2017) identify the 'intersectionality approach' as another key strand in the literature. The intersectionality approach emphasizes the fact that social inequalities are produced along multiple axes of domination, such as gender, race, and class, among others. Challenging inequalities, therefore, demands a systemic approach that takes into consideration the multiple dimensions of inequality as a phenomenon. Intersectionality was originally developed by black US American scholarship to expose the limitations of the 'women' approach, and in particular its inability to capture the experiences of women of color (Crenshaw, 1995; hooks, 1981; Hill Collins, 2000). In the European context, intersectionality is now often used as an approach to study the intersecting discriminations affecting migrant women and other minority groups (Siim, 2014). Emphasis is often on the racialization of Muslim women through policies that specifically construct them as gendered others (Lépinard, 2014).

Intersectionality enjoys broad currency in feminist scholarship as well as support by policy circles and founding bodies. Its dominance might be due to the fact that it directly addresses questions of power and oppression that are crucial to feminist scholarship and activism alike (Hill Collins & Chepp, 2013). Indeed, intersectional approaches seem to have allowed for the overcoming of long-standing divisions within feminist movements, unlocking the potential for new forms of feminist alliance politics (Predelli & Halsaa, 2012). The main limitation of intersectionality is that it is applied inconsistently in political analysis. Often enough, intersectionality is only paid lip service because of a perceived need to acknowledge its relevance.

Just as often, intersectionality is applied in reductionist ways, addressing multiple discriminations separately rather than looking at the complex mechanisms through which different axis of discrimination co-construct and support each other (Kantola & Lobardo, 2017).

The post-deconstructionist approach to political analysis is the last one identified by Kantola and Lombardo (2017) in their survey of the literature. The term designates a wide range of feminist positions that are close to new materialism, corporealism, and affect theory (e.g. Grosz, 1994; Braidotti, 1991, 1994, 2002, 2006). The main focus of these approaches is on the role that embodied affects and emotions have on gender as a political issue. These approaches challenge deconstructionism by advocating for a renewed emphasis on socioeconomic materiality and its impact on gendered bodies. It is not discourses, but affects that shape individuals and collective identities as well as their mutual relationships. Crucially, affect is considered to be inherently social and political (Ahmed, 2004).

The main advantage of the post-deconstructionist approach is that it unlocks the possibility to study the role of emotions in political processes. In particular, it allows to understand affect as collective responses to unfolding phenomena, transcending positivist accounts of emotions as strictly individual in character. Post-deconstruction has been heavily criticized, however, for over-emphasizing its novelty. It could be argued that these approaches are not inherently 'new' but rather update the materialist analysis of the gender approach. In particular, post-deconstruction has been criticized for neglecting the role that emotions might have in supporting rather than challenging systems of domination. Furthermore, the celebration of post-deconstruction tends to also entail a false opposition with discourse-based approaches from the deconstructionist tradition; an opposition that hinders cross-contamination and is ultimately self-serving (Hemmings, 2005).

For the purposes of this project, I adopt a lens that mostly relies on deconstructionist approaches but also relies on insights from other of the approaches listed thus far. In what follows, I outline the main tenets of my approach to gender along the lines that borrow from West and Zimmerman's (1987) ethnomethodology of 'doing gender' and Butler's (1990, 1993) theory of gender performativity. I believe this lens to be particularly suitable for the study of discourses, including those circulated on social media, as gendering practices. In turn, this lens opens the possibility of researching the way in which institutions, organizations, and policies participate in the political process through which bodies become gendered.

### *'Doing gender' and gender performativity*

Mindful of the above premises, I adopt an understanding of gender as a social process rather than an attribute of personhood. That is to say, gender is here understood as something that people do rather than something that people are. The genealogy of this idea is usually traced back to West and Zimmerman's (1987) seminal paper 'doing gender'. West and Zimmerman borrow heavily from Goffman's (1976, 1977) description of the 'gender display', which contains many of the elements that later appear in Butler's theorization of performativity. Crucially, however, Goffman's gendered performances are presented as having an 'apparent optionality' (Goffman, 1976, pp. 71). Taking issues with this proposition, West and Zimmerman point out that the display of gender cannot be voluntarily dismissed, insofar as it is enforced in the micro-politics of everyday interactions. 'Doing gender' is presented as being inescapable in light of the omnirelevance of gender differentiation in Western society.

The framework advanced by West and Zimmerman (1987) defines gender as 'a routine, methodical and recurring accomplishment' (1987, p. 126) that is constantly displayed in all social interactions. In an attempt to disrupt the sex/gender binary, West and Zimmerman propose a threefold understanding of the gender display based on 'sex', 'sex categories', and 'gender'. In their work, 'sex' refers to the collectively agreed upon medical criteria to classify someone as a man or a woman. In turn, 'sex category' refers to those displays that allow others to recognize an individual as a member of a given sex. Thus, sex category allows for membership in, say, femininity, even when the medically established criteria could be lacking. Finally, 'gender' refers to the managed presentation of the self according to those norms that regulate culturally appropriate masculine or feminine behavior (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 127).

Still based on Goffman and to some extent pre-dating Butler, West and Zimmerman are mindful that the gender display is heavily regulated by a series of 'institutionalized frameworks' (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 137) that are presented as producing sex differences. In turn, these frameworks sustain those social arrangements that are based on the differentiation between sex categories (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 146). It follows that gender displays are open to be scrutinized and assessed against a set of socio-cultural norms. That is to say, subjects are accountable for their gender display and their gendered self-presentations are at constant risk of assessment (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 136). The act of appropriately doing gender sustains

the existing institutionalized framework and reproduces it, while failing to do so exposes subjects to the risk of being marked as ‘inappropriate’ (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 146).

Since the theorization of West and Zimmerman has acquired currency in feminist studies, the original idea of ‘doing gender’ has taken a life of its own and departed in direction that the authors admittedly did not imagine (West & Zimmerman, 2009). The concept has become so seminal that it is almost commonplace to deploy it without acknowledging its origin and it just as common to bend it to acquire different meanings. West and Zimmerman (2009) themselves make irony of the fact that Butler titled one of her books *Undoing Gender* (Butler, 2004) without ever quoting them, neither there, nor in any other of her publications.

While not acknowledging West and Zimmerman, Butler does take issues with Goffman’s work, from which the two heavily draw for the development of their framework. According to Butler, Goffman’s model is behaviorist and assumes the existence of a pre-discursive subjects that fashion their social life through expressions (Butler, 1988). In accordance with a post-structuralist epistemology that aims at displacing the subject, Butler directs her focus towards the study of the way in which social subjects are produced in performances and discourses that are ‘a publically regulated and sanctioned form of essence fabrication’ (Butler, 1988, p. 528).

However resonant with the framework outlined by West and Zimmerman, Butler’s theorization of gender performativity is necessarily different in light of the above epistemological divergence. Way before the publication of *Gender Trouble*, the bulk of gender performativity was already present in Butler’s reading of de Beauvoir, in which she outlined an understanding of the gendered body as the product of a context-specific system of meanings (Butler, 1986, 1989). Although indebted to de Beauvoir, Butler criticizes her phenomenological perspective, insofar as it stresses the ways in which subjects ‘become’ their gendered selves rather than focusing on how collectively enforced expectations over individuals produce gendered subjects (Butler, 1988, p. 519).

To develop her framework, Butler moves away from phenomenology and turns to performance studies, and especially Turner’s (1974) understanding of human life as a ritualized social drama that depends in the repetition of scripted performances. As outlined above, West and Zimmerman (1987) point out that gender is a performance that subject can never dismiss. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler goes one step further to argue that there is no ‘doer’ behind the ‘doing’ of

gender. That is to say, the performance of gender is not staged by a subject that pre-exists the performance. ‘There is no gender identity behind the expression of gender’ (Butler, 1990, p. 25), Butler ventures, explaining that the gendered identity of the subject is produced in the performance that is ‘said to be its result’ (Butler, 1990, p. 25).

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler’s subjects are arguably presented as somewhat powerless in the face of the necessary repetition of gendered performances. To address this shortcoming, Butler turns to the issue of agency and political mobilization in 1993 with the publication of *Bodies that Matter*. If *Gender Trouble* is mostly concerned with embodied performances, the propositions advanced by Butler in *Bodies that Matter* represent a sharp turn towards the discourse-based frameworks of Derrida and Austin. Explicitly drawing on Derrida’s work, Butler argues that performances are neither singular nor deliberate, but rather regularized and constrained repetitions that ‘cite’ prior actions (Butler, 1993, pp. 225-7). That is to say, the normative power of gender norms draws its strength from the collective reiteration of those behaviors that have come to be contextually identifiable as masculine or feminine.

To embed the possibility for agency, Butler borrows again from Derrida, and specifically from the idea that the signified and the signifier are not strictly tied. Butler argues that a specific gendered performance can be taken out of context, reproduced in infinitely many other situations, and therefore re-signified. Agency is thus theorized as a property that stems from the citational character of gendered performances. Agency is, therefore, not one of the characteristics of the gendered subject, whom remains produced in discourses and performances, but rather one of the properties of performativity (Butler, 1993, p. 237).

Despite a constant reference to bodies, Butler’s turn to discourse-based approaches might appear to make her framework too far removed from embodied reality. While obviously not unfounded, such criticism neglect to acknowledge Butler’s engagement with Austin’s (1962) theorization of speech act theory in *Excitable Speech* (Butler, 1997). Austin famously distinguished between three kinds of speech acts, namely locutionary (the act of making a meaningful statement), illocutionary (the performance of an act in saying something, e.g. declaring two people united in marriage), and perlocutionary (a saying that produces some material effects). In her discussion of Austin through a Derridarean lens, Butler (1997) argues that words perform actions and therefore a stark separation between speech and action is ontologically impossible.

### *Feminist solutions to the problem of 'gender equality'*

The above overview of different approaches to feminist political analysis should have pointed out that gender equality is a crucially political issue. This is because gender relations are inescapably infused with issues of power and the allocation of resources within any community; issues that are of the utmost importance to political analysis. There seems to be, however, relatively little theoretical discussion over gender equality in political science scholarship. In a recent review of feminist political theory, Kantola and Verloo (2018) identified four key approaches to gender equality: (i) escaping equality; (ii) fixing equality; (iii) deconstructing equality; and (iv) delegating equality to theory. What follows is a summary of their typology.

Kantola and Verloo (2018) argue that a relatively popular strategy to deal with the issue of gender equality as a political issue is that of shifting the conversation towards other terms that are, however, less contested. They denominate this approach as 'escaping equality', defined as a move towards the de-problematization of gender equality. Studies adopting this strategy are usually strong on metaphors and empty signifiers such as 'women-friendly', 'gender-friendly', 'LGBTI-friendly', and the like. These terms invoke a feeling of harmony that disguises the contested nature of gender equality and, in turn, take the edge off of feminist political analysis.

The main merit of the escapist approach to gender equality is that it can be effective as a discursive strategy to introduce at least some level of concern for gender equality in environments that would be otherwise weary of feminist interventions (e.g. policy circles). The main shortcoming of 'escaping equality' is that it is incapable of accommodating conflict of any kind. In particular, it assumes women to be a homogenous group whose needs are universal and free from contestation (see Borchorst & Siim, 2002; Vickers, 2011; Wang, 2013). All in all, this strategy seems to be captive of a vagueness that can hardly produce concrete results for women. Furthermore, metaphors of harmony and cooperation do not sit well with a generalized feminist wish to challenge a gender-unequal status quo (Verloo, 2001).

Kantola and Verloo (2018) identify the 'fixing equality' paradigm as a second strategy to address the issue of gender equality as a political problem. These approaches are broadly defined as those that establish the *a priori* political salience of 'gender equality' and then go on to study multi-level political processes concerning equality in different contexts. This is usually achieved through appeal to political documents (e.g. international conventions), norms contained in

supranational programs for gender equality such as the Beijing Platform for Action, or quantitative evidence contained in increasingly sophisticated indexes (e.g. those periodically issued by EIGE).

The main advantage of this approach is that it can bring gender equality in virtually any political forum. The main shortcoming of this perspective is that it is usually adopted to advocate for equality through ‘single issue’ solutions rather than addressing gender equality as a systemic problem that demands multidimensional answers (Annesley, Engeli, & Gains, 2015, p. 527). In particular, the ‘fixing equality’ approach seems to have a quasi-obsession with formal representation. Without discounting the crucial importance of representation, having it as the sole focus might be a straightjacket that leaves wide parts of gender inequality untouched. Furthermore, focusing on formal representation might be missing the point when analysis refers to a context characterized by multi-level governance in which many political subjects do not respond to the logic of electoral politics, of which the European socio-political space is an example.

A third approach to gender equality as a political problem is identified by Kantola and Verloo (2018) as that of ‘deconstructing equality’. Closely related to what was defined above as the deconstructionist approach to gender (Kantola & Lombardo, 2017), this approach aims at deconstructing gender equality discourses in order to find the explicit and implicit meanings that are embedded therein. The primary focus is, therefore, on the struggles over what gender equality means in these discourses and on the specific outcomes that these processes of discursive contestation have (e.g. Bacchi, 1999; Verloo, 2007; Lombardo et al., 2009; Lombardo & Forest, 2012; Lombardo & Meier, 2016). The main merit of these approach is that it aims at exposing the ways in which power works to produce gender equality as an object of knowledge and ‘men’ and ‘women’ as gendered subjects therein.

The main shortcoming of this approach is that it explicitly avoids taking a position vis-à-vis the phenomena it scrutinizes. Since its main focus is on describing gender equality as the product of broad processes of discursive contestation, it often ends up pushing gender equality into a grey area in which upholding its legitimacy is difficult at best. While complexity is indeed to be welcomed, defending a generalized argument in favor of gender equality becomes virtually impossible in light of its discursive origin and its character as neither legitimate nor illegitimate (Kantola & Verloo, 2018).

The last approach to gender equality identified by Kantola and Verloo (2018) is that of ‘delegating equality to theory’. At first, this approach seemed to produce more questions than answers. Feminist political theory dwelled at length on the so-called ‘Wollstonecraft dilemma’. Should gender equality be sought in the form of sameness to the male norm? Or should it be sought by affirming the equal value of women’s difference from it? The conundrum was in part overcome by displacing the question and grounding gender equality in a quest for broad social transformation that ultimately aims at removing the root causes of inequality (Squires, 1999; Rees, 1998, 2002; Walby 2005) and possibly gender categories all together (Halberstam, 2012).

Feminist debates in the 1990s seem to have converged on a vision of equality that was famously articulated by Fraser (1995, 1997) in terms of redistribution of wealth and recognition for diversity. Soon thereafter, Young (1999) argued for the inclusion of one further element: representation in decision-making. Arguably, this triad encompasses claims from different strands within feminism, and especially the ‘women’ approach and the Marxist current in the ‘gender’ approach as well as the ‘intersectional’ approach. As feminist debates over the content of equality continue, there seems to be no main weakness to the ‘delegating equality’ approach other than the fact that its ranks are rather narrow.

### *Feminism as a progressive political project and its neoliberal adversaries*

My project has a markedly deconstructionist approach. This notwithstanding, I do attempt to overcome the ambiguity of this approach towards gender equality as a political issue. Therefore, I broadly outline a vision of gender equality as a political project that is grounded in the tradition of ‘the left’. During the course of this research, it was particularly evident that gender equality is a political project that stands in opposition to other political projects, of which neoliberalism is the most clearly identifiable one. In what follows, I outline a basic framework for the study of the relationship of feminism and neoliberalism in the context of Europe.

For the purposes of this study, I adopt an understanding of ‘the political’ that mostly makes reference to the framework of ‘agonistic pluralism’ by Chantal Mouffe. According to Mouffe (Mouffe & Laclau, 1985), it is impossible to conceive of a society beyond divisions and power. Thus, political analysis has to come to term with the fact that meanings are always contested and any order is inherently contingent. ‘Hegemonic practices’ are those that aim at creating and supporting a given social order and temporarily fix the meaning of social institutions. Any order

is the expression of contingent power relations therein. Things could always be otherwise, and any hegemonic order can be challenged by counter-hegemonic forces. ‘The political’ is, therefore, the inherently antagonistic dimension of all social relations. This is different from ‘politics’, which refers to the discourses and practices that seek to establish order for human coexistence despite the conflictual character of the political.

Any political issue requires deciding between conflicting alternatives. Mouffe posits that interest-maximizing frameworks and moral deliberation frameworks cannot be of help in political decisionmaking. This is because most political dilemmas have no rational answer. Passion and affect largely overshadow interest and morality in most political decisions. Overcoming conflict is, simply put, impossible. Political theory should, therefore, aim at legitimizing conflict rather than overcoming it. This can be achieved by establishing a democratic framework in which different positions can be expressed and advocated without attempts to annihilate political opponents. In other words, conflict should not take the shape of a struggle between enemies but that of a confrontation between adversaries. Mouffe calls the former ‘antagonism’ and the latter ‘agonism’, from which her theory of ‘agonistic pluralism’ takes the name (Mouffe, 2013).

For the purposes of this project, I adopt a definition of feminism that marks it as a progressive political project that is firmly tied in the tradition of ‘the left’ according to the principles of redistribution, recognition, and representation outlined in the previous section. Endorsing Eschle and Maiguashca (2014) interpretation of Bobbio (1996), I understand the left as a political project that upholds the affective value of equality. In turn, the left sees inequality as a problem that is socially induced and sustained, and that therefore can and should be subverted through collective action. Eschle and Maiguashca (2014) also draw on Lukes (2003) to further articulate that the left aims at rectifying unjustifiable inequalities by addressing their source and resisting their re-entrenchment. In this sense, the left is not to be equated with traditional socialist or communist movement, but rather with a broad coalition of egalitarian forces that is reminiscent of Connell’s (1995) alliance politics or Butler’s (2015) politics of cohabitation.

There seems to be strong agreement in the literature over the fact that the main adversary of the feminist political project is a loosely defined ‘neoliberalism’. I understand neoliberalism after Brown (2015) as a rationality in which every human activity is seen as a market, every entity is governed as a firm, and all humans are turned into market actors. Simply put, neoliberalism is

the marketization of everything. It is not uncommon to find claims regarding the neoliberal ‘capture’ or the ‘cooptation’ of feminism. Famously, Eisenstein pointed out that feminism has been ‘seduced’ by neoliberalism and that some of its arguments are now deployed for the purposes of capitalist accumulation (Eisenstein, 2009, 2017). Indeed, there has been a recent proliferation of vocabulary to define this trend as ‘market feminism’ (Kantola & Squires, 2012); ‘free market feminism’, ‘hegemonic feminism’, ‘imperial feminism’, ‘managerial feminism’ (Eisenstein, 2009); ‘transnational business feminism’ (Roberts, 2012); ‘governance feminism’ (Halley, 2006); ‘post-feminism’ (Elias, 2013), or ‘faux-feminism’ (McRobbie, 2009).

All of these approaches have been summarized by Eschle and Maiguashca (2018) as narratives of hard cooptation, soft cooptation, and resistance. In narratives of hard cooptation, feminism has been emptied of its political salience and women’s rights are shrunk to entail only the right to work and the right to consume. In narratives of soft cooptation, a Foucaultian system of neoliberal governmentality is pushing feminism to the margins of the political debate with little room for resistance. Finally, narratives of resistance offer a more nuanced reading of neoliberalism as a process that has context specific ramifications. These narratives seem to be more promising insofar as they actually allow for the theorization of feminist resistance and also account for an understanding of inequality as perpetrated along multiple axes (see for example Prügl, 2015; Elomäki, 2015).

A particularly sophisticated approach that Eschle and Maiguashca (2018) would categorize as a narrative of resistance is that of Elomäki and Kantola (2018). In their argument, Western feminism is stuck up against a triangle of hegemonic forces that sustain inequalities: neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism. They define neoliberalism as the marketization of public services and the transfer of state responsibilities to the private sector or the individual. Conservatism is defined as the promotion of conventional gender roles and family structures, as well as a broader conservative stance on moral and ethical issues. Finally, nationalism is defined as an exclusionary political stance that draws a racialized distinction between a national ‘us’ and a foreign ‘them’, manifest through support for far right populist groups. Crucially, neoliberalism, conservatism, and nationalism as political projects that work to sustain each other. Therefore, feminist resistance can only take place by addressing all three corners of the triangle.

### *Section summary*

In this section, I survived different approaches in feminist political analysis. I endorsed a deconstructionist approach to gender in light of its particularly suitable character for the study of discourse as gendering practices. Thereafter, I expanded on my understanding of gender as constructed in discourses and practices along the lines of West and Zimmerman's (1987) and Butler's (1990, 1993) theories of performativity. The latter was indicated as more suitable for the purposes of this study in light of its emphasis on discourses and practices. I then moved on to discuss different approaches to the issue of gender equality. In light of what was discussed thus far, this project is obviously close to a deconstructionist vision of equality as an object of knowledge that exists in the grey area between legitimacy and illegitimacy because of its discursively contested character. This notwithstanding, I attempt to politicize gender equality as a project of the left that competes in an agonistic framework (Mouffe, 2013) against a neoliberal project.

### **Social media as a space of political performativity**

Discussion thus far presented a constructivist/deconstructionist approach to the study of Europe and gender as objects of knowledge that are produced in discourses and practices. This section attempts to further qualify this claim and establishes its links with social media discourses and performances. For the purposes of this project, I adopt a twofold approach to social media performances. On the one hand, Part II in this study addresses the individual performances of particularly visible political institutions and personalities in the field of gender equality in Europe. On the other hand, Part III takes into consideration the collective performances of individual users. Justifications for this twofold approach were foreshadowed in the introduction and will be further articulated in the next chapter that directly addresses methodology. This section has a narrower focus on the performative element of social media discourses, dwelling on individual as well as collective acts of political performativity on social media. My argument here is that individual and collective discourses and performances on social media platforms contribute to the construction of Europe and gender equality as objects of knowledge, obviously alongside other discourses.

### *Public figures and institutional performances of the self*

There seems to be a burgeoning corpus of literature investigating the ways in which politicians, parties, and institutions use strategic communication on social media in their attempts

to influence elections and other parts of the political process (e.g. Fountaine, 2017; Farci & Orefice, 2017). Obama's successful presidential bid in the United States in 2008 is usually referenced as the turning point where politicians started adopting social media as part of their communication strategies (among many others, see for example Wattal et al., 2010). Since then, a consensus seems to have developed around the position that social media engagement can potentially be beneficial to politicians (e.g. Kruikemeier, 2014).

Two key advantages are usually mentioned in this context. Firstly, social media allow politicians to circumvent the gatekeeping of mainstream news outlets (Towner & Dulio 2011), thus allowing for the production of messages that are potentially tailored for their constituencies (Zittel, 2009). Secondly, social media have algorithmic preferences that make it easier to communicate with audiences that share the same views, discuss the same issues, and potentially mobilize politically either online or offline for the same causes (Donath & boyd 2004). Politicians can (and in fact do at times) exploit this factor to gather support for their campaigns among a group of relatively likeminded users-citizens (Enli & Skogerbø, 2013).

The empirical data gathered during the interviews conducted for this study partially problematizes the first proposition above, namely that social media allow politicians to circumvent the mediation of traditional gatekeepers. While it is indeed true that mainstream news outlets no longer hold a monopoly on the circulation of what is deemed to be 'news', there seems to be no evidence of an imminent demise of traditional media outlets. Social media content cannot reach a mass audience without being reverberated by traditional media. In turn, traditional media is now in the position of needing social media as a source of newsworthy material. In this sense, social media did not replace traditional media as sources of news, but rather became complementary in what Chadwick (2013) defined as a hybrid media system.

Furthermore, the impression that traditional elites now hold 'direct' communication with their audiences via social media is exactly that: an impression. In fact, interview data uncovered a highly convoluted network of practices of production behind the messages voiced on social media by traditional elites. The tweeted voice of institutions and politicians are produced through a complex set of negotiations involving formal and informal policies, procedures, workflows, micro-political negotiations at the cabinet or press office level, and so on. I argue that it is perhaps more fruitful to interpret these social media personae as subjects that are produced in performances and

discourses that shape their messages way before they get typed onto a computer or a smartphone and tweeted out to the public. This is not to neglect the fact that politicians and institutions may use communication on social media strategically. However, their social media strategies are heavily shaped by broader processes of subjectification that transcend social media environments.

This theoretical position sets my project in a broader literature that distances itself from the techno-optimism that characterized early studies on political communication via social media. Indeed, there seems to be a growing corpus of evidence documenting that traditional elites do not ‘directly’ speak their voices on social media and actually shy away from conversation with private users (Graham, Broersma, Hazelhoff, & van’t Haar, 2013; Gibson, Römmele, & Williamson, 2014; Ollier-Malaterre, Rothbard, & Berg, 2013). One of the primary challenges identified in the literature and connected with the above framework is the need for politicians to have profiles that are ‘personal’ in nature (boyd & Ellison, 2007), regardless of the fact that there might be multiple individuals managing them.

The need to appear as their genuine selves despite the complex procedures behind their communication puts large amounts of pressure on the believability of their performances. It is therefore unsurprising that these performances try to appeal to as many followers as possible. Way before the advent of social media, D’Alessio voiced skepticism towards the transformative potential of the internet over the political process, claiming that politicians’ online presence mostly resembled ‘electronic brochures’ (D’Alessio, 2000). While having some advantages (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014), social media seems to present politicians with audience management issues that prevent them from overcoming the ‘electronic brochure’ format in their performances.

Drawing from Marwik and boyd (2011; 2014), Hoffmann and Suphan (2017) explain the above described challenge in terms of the impossibility for efficient boundary-making in online communication. In their view, most social media users tend to craft their online self-presentation by carefully deciding what content to share with what users. For professional social media users such as politicians, the need to address private audiences as well as a wide array of professional audiences (e.g. other politicians, political institutions, social movements, news outlets, etc.) renders boundary-making virtually impossible. In other words, the need to stage self-presentations that remain somewhat believable to all the possible audiences accessing their online personae

creates a paradox in which traditional elites cannot afford personalized accounts and direct engagement with users.

*Performing assemblies: Institutional brokerage, collective performativity, affect*

Public figures are by no means the only ones who stage individual performances of the self on social media. Indeed, private users also make use of social media as textually based platforms where they use language to perform the material act of communicating, but also interpret the social world through established patterns that are available to them in light of their specific contexts. Together with Papacharissi (2015), I contend that individual performances on social media platforms can be understood as political in character even when they do not explicitly appear as such. In Papacharissi's words, 'personal performances of the self ... potentially traverse political elements as they make visible, conceal, or mask cultural processes' (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 95). Making specific reference to the social media platform Twitter, she further argues that tweets tend to condense statements that usually bring together personalized responses to social, economic, and political issues (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 94). By engaging with these issues, users have an opportunity to reinforce them or reverse them, thus expressing the political potential of their everyday lives. In other words, social media in general and Twitter in particular present users with the possibility of performing their socio-cultural, political, and personal identities on a set of 'publicly private stages' (Papacharissi, 2015).

The potential for performative disruption enabled by social media platforms, however, should not be overstated. Papacharissi's own idea of a 'publicly private stage' hints to the fact that social media platforms tend to produce a 'context collapse' (boyd, 2008) that blurs the boundary between public and private. Context collapse erases the difference between the front stage of the performance and the backstage where the performance can be temporarily set aside without risking its disruption (Goffman, 1959). Private users tend to respond to this risk of performative incoherence by producing performances that attempt to simultaneously appeal to all of their imagined audiences without compromising their sense of self.

The risk of performative disruption can be daunting, producing users that are particularly self-aware and constantly curate their social media personae (Turkle, 2008). Unsurprisingly, therefore, it is common to observe performances of the self that involve self-commodification (Senft, 2008, p. 25) and micro-celebrity practices (Marwick, 2011, p.141; Marwick & boyd, 2011;

boyd, 2014). Crucially, the ‘self’ that is constructed in these performances is a ‘networked’ one (boyd, 2006, 2007; Papacharissi 2002). Networked selves are not only available to a large number of possibly unknown publics, but are also replicable, searchable, and almost impossible to erase (boyd, 2010). In light of these features, the self increasingly becomes a commodity that is not only consumed by an imagined audience, but that can be capitalized upon by private corporations (Fuchs, 2013b).

In this project, my focus is on the political salience of collective performances via social media. Mindful of the above, I theorize collectivities on social media as ‘publics’ that jointly act politically or react to unfolding political events. For these purposes, I find particularly useful to adopt Bennett and Segerberg’s (2012) typology for collective mobilization on social media as a roadmap. Bennett and Segerberg’s differentiate between groups that mostly adopt collective action formations and groups that mostly adopt personalized action formations. The former refers to collective performances that emerge out of centralized consultation within a community of practices (e.g. a traditional social movement). The latter refers to the sum of individual messages expressing viewpoints somewhat related to a loosely defined political claim (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, pp. 774-6).

The crucial difference lays in the role of institutional brokers. While collective action formations require the presence of some structure to produce a unified narrative and convey it beyond the boundary of the community producing it, personalized action formation can be voiced individually and can travel across community boundaries thanks to the affordances of social media (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 777). Based on the above, Bennet and Segerberg (2012) advance a threefold typology for present day social mobilization. A first category is represented by ‘institutionally brokered networks’: groups that mostly use collective action formations and follow what they termed as ‘the logic of collective action’. A second category is represented by ‘self-organizing networks’: people that mostly use personalized action formations and respond to what they termed ‘the logic of connective action’. A last category named ‘institutionally-enabled networks’ includes elements of both connective and collective action and exemplifies the tension between the two logics.

Taking Bennet and Segerberg’s (2012) as a starting point, I contend that most collective performances on social media fall within the hybrid category of institutionally enabled networks.

That is to say, most collective performances on social media have some degree of institutional brokerage, but also entail an unruly component made of individual affective reactions to unfolding political events. I ground my argument in a joint reading of Gerbaudo's (2012) choreography of assembly and Butler's performative theory of assembly (2015), complemented with input from Papacharissi's (2015) affective publics.

Gerbaudo (2012) and Butler (2015) seem to have independently developed two rather similar theorizations of social mobilization that draw from Hanna Arendt's notion of the space of appearance. Both Gerbaudo and Butler borrow from Arendt to argue that collective political claims need to be performed within 'the space of appearance' in order for them to be visible and audible. The space of appearance, in turn, is not given a priori, but rather needs 'to be performatively constructed and re-constructed through the act of gathering of otherwise dispersed individuals' (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 38). As outlined by Arendt, bodies need to come together in order to produce a space of political visibility; a space that, once produced, can be occupied by said bodies that then proceed to act politically within its boundaries.

Gerbaudo and Butler show a deep awareness of the limitation to collective political action imposed by the conditions of living under neoliberal capitalism. Gerbaudo argues that summoning bodies in any physical location has become increasingly difficult because of growing geographical dispersion of bodies and because of ever more individualized lifestyles. In a relatable vein, Butler argues that neoliberal mentality demands self-sufficiency while at the same time the neoliberal economic order is making self-sufficiency impossible. Privatization, financialization, and 'debtocracy' are cumulatively working to dispossess people of the necessary means of subsistence, de facto producing the conditions for their abjection (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013, p. 12). These people are systematically pushed out of the space of appearance, prevented from acting politically, and ultimately stripped of their 'right to have rights' (Butler, 2015, p. 50).

In light of the above, Gerbaudo contends that gathering a large number of individuals in the public square, produce the Arentian space of appearance, and thus have them act politically necessarily requires two key elements. The first element is the presence of a core group of individuals orchestrating the gathering. The second element is some form of technological mediation. Gerbaudo calls this process 'choreography of assembly', defined as 'the mediated "scene-setting" and "scripting" of people's physical assembling in public space' (Gerbaudo, 2012,

pp. 40). The metaphor of the 'choreography' is borrowed from studies that compare public protests to performance arts because of their similar physicality (Foster, 2003) and mediated character (Alexander, Giesen, & Mas, 2006). In Gerbaudo's view, the metaphor emphasizes the need for a structure (however light) behind collective action and points the spotlight towards the 'choreographers' working 'behind the scenes' to make collective action possible (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 44).

Gerbaudo and Butler differently address the relevance of technological mediation in the production of the space of appearance. Gerbaudo contends that the advent of social media did not radically disrupt the way in which the act of 'choreographing' public gatherings used to take place in the past. That is to say, technological mediation through social media might be a necessary element of present day public gatherings, but it is not sufficient to make a public gathering happen. Like in the past, the coming together of bodies 'requires the construction of common collective identifications among participants' (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 40). Therefore, social media tend to exert support functions that closely resemble those of their predecessors (TV, radio, leaflets, and word-of-mouth): facilitating the 'choreographic' process through which the collective is molded into a singular entity (see also Mattoni, 2017).

While Gerbaudo's work clearly focuses on the importance of technological mediation in collective performativity, Butler takes a wider perspective according to which collective action cannot take place without adequate 'support' (Butler, 2015, p. 73), including 'the availability of spaces where to perform and the technological means to capture and convey gatherings' (Butler, 2015, p. 19). However, this 'support' does not pre-exist collective action; it must be performatively produced (Butler, 2015, p. 16). Thus, when bodies come together and occupy a public space, they are enacting a claim to be political and to be recognized as such (Butler, 2015, p. 18). Mass public demonstrations, therefore, not only re-appropriate the space of appearance, but also work to undo the power relationship between that space and the existing regime and thus performatively produce new possibilities for existing (Butler, 2015, p. 85).

Gerbaudo does concede that the advent of social media platforms has substantially reshaped participation as well as leadership, insofar as they rendered formal adherence to a social movement somewhat obsolete. He argues, however, that understanding contemporary social movements as leaderless rhizomes (Castells, 2012) or swarms (Hardt & Negri, 2005) would be

largely misleading. Borrowing from scholarship on North American feminist groups in the 70s (Freeman, 1972), Gerbaudo contends that leaderless-ness is an ideology that only conceals the presence of informal leadership and potentially blinds the research to the internal power dynamics that shape the functioning of a social movement.

Gerbaudo, therefore, re-reads the role of ‘choreographic’ leaders as that of setting the scene where mobilization can happen by providing potential adherents to the movement with an ‘empty signifier’ (Laclau, 2005, p. 69) to fill with their grievances. In this sense, leadership entails the preparation of the scene for participation, and is understood as ‘a relatively centralised form of influence over the course a collective action will take’ (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 43). Once the scene setting is done, the ‘performers’ (that is, those participating in the gathering) will then have substantial leeway in deciding how they will navigate the ‘stage’ (that is, the space of political visibility) that choreographers made available to them.

Before moving on, it is perhaps necessary to clarify that, together with Butler, I recognize the possible issues that arise when adopting some Arendtian concepts within a mostly constructivist and feminist framework. By Butler’s own admission, her framework both endorses and resists Arendt’s theories (Butler, 2015, p. 60). Butler makes it abundantly clear that, by thinking through some of Arendt’s theories, she is by no means claiming “‘I am now an Arendtian!’” (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013, p. 122), and that the leftist political project she is envisioning is one that Arendt would most probably not join (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013, p. x). Indeed, Arendt is known to be a key figure of the liberal humanist current of thought that post-structuralist interventions aimed at displacing. For example, Arendt’s attachment to a division between a rational realm of political freedom and an embodied realm of ‘need’ is at odds with the Butlerian framework of performativity (Butler, 2015, pp. 45-7). Similarly, her attachment to the divide between public and private space, with gendered implications regarding who belongs in the former and who belongs in the latter, is mostly incompatible with a feminist wish to undo the difference between the two (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013, p. 179).

Mindful of the above shortcomings, Butler posits that she wants to take from Arendt the notion that there are forms of political agency that require a self conceptualized as a plurality. This is not an internally divided self, but rather one that comes into being through its relation with others (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013, p. 122). In other words, it is not a self that is dissolved in the

collectivity, but a collection of performances in which enough interconnection is registered to claim that there exists a self made of interlinked individuals. A crucial part of this relational self is the unchosen-ness of its plural character. In other words, what Butler finds particularly fruitful of Arendt's framework is the idea that human cohabitation on the planet has an unchosen character. From this shared unchosen-ness, Butler derives a moral framework in which humans have an obligation of solidarity towards one another even when there appears to be no reason to do so.

It is in this context that the metaphor of the space of appearance is taken as a starting point to think of who can appear politically, who is structurally prevented from doing so, and what are the necessary conditions for bodies to come together as a relational self and perform claims that are political in character. The objective is not that of reinforcing the notion of a public sphere where people perform their political claims. In fact, the aim is that of displacing the public sphere by arguing that the space of appearance is produced through the political performance of the relational self. Therefore, the space of appearance is understood as a condition of 'taking place' of collective political claims (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013, p. 194). If it true that precarity works towards abjecting some groups, it is equally true that, by coming together in a relational self and staging a political claim, abjected individuals are *spacing their appearance*, i.e. they are performatively producing the conditions for their claim to exist in the political.

To bring the discussion back to the case of collective performances via social media platforms, I argue that these online spaces are structurally designed in such a way as to background political speech in general and to prevent private users from speaking politically in particular (see discussion the next chapter). This notwithstanding, I contend that private individuals can and in fact do use these platforms to space their appearance and participate in the political, therefore partially overcoming their individual abjections through collective action.

Gerbaudo and Butler independently developed compatible theoretical frameworks that can be particularly fruitful to interpret political mobilization on social media. Their frameworks mostly emphasize the need for technological mediation and institutional brokerage (i.e. leadership) in the production of the space of appearance and thus in the performance of political claims on behalf of a collectivity. This notwithstanding, completely discounting the views of those stressing the spontaneous and somewhat unruly character of present day mobilization on social media would be

throwing away the baby with the bath water. To reintegrate this perspective, I now briefly turn to Papacharissi's (2015) theorization of affective publics.

Papacharissi's (2015) core argument is that social media facilitate a feeling of engagement insofar as networked selves (boyd, 2006, 2007) are therein joint into 'networked publics' by a set of latent ties with each other. While undetectable in most cases, latent ties do have the potential to become active and produce strong feelings of belonging and solidarity. Papacharissi contends that affect plays a crucial role in activating latent ties and sustaining networked publics. In her view, affect is characterized by intensity and is released in interactions. In these encounters, humans express belonging, abjection, in-between-ness, and accumulative beside-ness. In light of its relational character, affect is inherently political, insofar as it points to emotional togetherness as a collective human activity (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 16).

When individuals react to unfolding events by commenting about them on social media, they are engaging in communication that is both affective and collective at the same time. The accumulated beside-ness of individual political commentary on social media can activate the latent ties of a networked public and express itself in a collective show of emotions. While not necessarily creating communities, affect might create the feeling of a community, in turn engaging users in a paradoxical yet not impossible state of engaged passivity (Papacharissi, 2015, p 9). These collective and affective performances bear the potential to produce spaces where individuals can 'think and feel their way into politics' (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 25), creating new outlets for the affective component of the political. Therein, individuals can collectively express themselves in ways that deviate from the models of deliberative democracy of institutionally brokered decision-making and experience the political in a way that provides them with a feeling of belonging.

In light of the above, Papacharissi (2015) posits that affective publics co-produce content in ways other than collective action formations centrally produced by an institutional broker. The joint message of an affective public emerges through bottom-up processes of validation such as 'collective framing' (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013) and 'networked gatekeeping' (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008). The former refers to the ways in which an affective public shapes its aggregate voice by re-circulating those messages that resonate most with a wider portion of its adherents. For example, it is not by chance that the most re-tweeted tweets in many hashtag campaigns are those with a strong affective appeal. The latter is the process through which leadership emerges within affective

publics with little respect for pre-existing structures but rather through bottom-up mechanisms of selections. That is to say, opinion leaders do not pre-exist affective publics but emerge therein because their messages are widely endorsed by their expanding follower base.

### *Section summary*

In the first part of this section, I started with a broad description of the performances of the self staged by politicians and political institutions on social media. Drawing from a growing scholarship in the field, I argued for an understanding of politically visible social media personae as subjects of discourses and practices that shape their social media messages way before they get typed on a laptop and tweeted out to the public. Interpersonal concertation, conflicting priorities, and the strategic need to appeal to a diversified audience make their social media performances rather static and impersonal. This neutralizes their potential for a form of engagement with the public that circumvents the gatekeeping of press rooms and could be therefore more ‘direct’.

In the second part of this section, I started from Bennet and Segeberg’s (2012) threefold typology of collective social media mobilization to advanced an understanding of collective performances on social media as ‘institutionally-enabled’ ones. That is to say, most collective performances on social media adopt both the logic of collective action and the logic of connective action. To advance my argument, I sketched a joint reading of Gerbaudo (2012) and Butler (2015), further complementing it with some reflections on the work of Papacharissi (2015). I argue that, on the one hand, most collective social media mobilization is choreographed by a group of behind the scenes leaders that set the stage for the performance to take place. On the other hand, however, the overall message of a collective performance via social media is mostly shaped by the individual performances of loosely affiliated individuals that decide to join the mobilization. Often enough, these individual contributions have a strong affective character. These affective performances are crucial outlets for the often unacknowledged role of passion in the political.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter attempted to sketch the key features of the theoretical framework that guides the analysis in the empirical part of this study. In the first section, I outlined different approaches to the study of ‘Europe’ and the process of European integration in political sciences and international relations. After presenting an overview of different traditions, I offered a more in-

depth discussions of different currents within so-called ‘constructivism’. Finally, I presented the case for the adoption of the constructivism framework of Diez (1999, 2001) as a potentially fruitful one for the study of social media discourses as gendering practices that are also productive of ‘Europe’ as a socio-political space.

I then turned to a discussion of ‘gender’ and ‘gender equality’ as crucial concepts for this project. In a deliberate attempt to avoid tracing a history of the concept of feminism resembling Hemmings (2011) narratives of ‘progress’, I outlined key approaches to gender as a concept borrowing from the typology of Kantola and Lombardo (2017). Coherently with the constructivist lens adopted for ‘Europe’, I positioned this study within the framework of the approach defined by Kantola and Lombardo as ‘deconstructionist’. I further articulated on this perspective by sketching the key features of Butler’s (1990) theory of gender performativity, complementing it with some reflections borrowed from West and Zimmerman’s (1987) ethnomethodology of doing gender. I then moved on to the discussions of ‘gender equality’, outlining different approaches following the typology of Kantola and Verloo (2018). I therein confirmed a commitment to a deconstructivist ethos, but also expressed a wish to surpass the ambiguities of deconstructivism by endorsing a vision of gender equality as a normative political project. Therefore, I defined gender equality as a political project that belongs in the broad framework of ‘the left’ that is currently stuck up against a competing and hegemonic political project broadly defined as ‘neoliberalism’ (Eschle & Maignashca, 2014, 2018).

Finally, I moved to discussion of social media as spaces potentially conducive of individual and collective acts of political performativity. I started by outlining the staged character of individual performances of the self by political institutions and visible politicians. Based on the literature and the empirical research conducted for this study, I theorized these performances as inherently polysemic and ultimately produced in processes of subjectification that transcend social media environments. I then moved on to outline an understanding of collective social media performances by private users as institutionally enabled networks (Bennet & Segeberg, 2012). I thereafter developed a framework that mostly draws on Gerbaudo (2012) and Butler (2015) to theorize the role of institutional brokerage and technological mediation for the production of collectivities on social media. I finally tried to complement this framework and account for the

affective and somewhat unruly character of social media collectivities through the work of Papacharissi (2015) on affective publics.

What emerged from the ensemble of these different corpora of literature is an overall constructivist/deconstructivist framework that is, however, open to influences from more materialist currents as well as to the inputs of post-deconstructivist critiques such as affect theory and new materialism. Most of the tools here presented borrow to some extent from a post-structuralist tradition rooted in the work of Austin, Foucault, and Derrida, and to some extent also include the contribution by Goffman to the study of political performativity. In the chapters to follow, I privilege these perspectives in order to achieve the key objective of this project, that is, uncovering the ways in which discourses of gender equality in Europe produce ‘European’ and ‘gendered’ subjects. However, these perspectives are not closed to external contributions. Insights from materialist and neomaterialist strands in the literature are taken into consideration in the production of what is, hopefully, a fruitful synergy that contributes to the potential of this project rather than detracting from it. Before diving into empirical discussion, the next chapter outlines the key features of a methodological framework deemed to be coherent with the ontological and epistemological approach herein proposed.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

In light of the ontological and epistemological premises outlined in the previous chapter, I present in this chapter a broad overview of the methodological framework that I adopt in the analysis that will be carried out in the empirical part of this dissertation. As mentioned in the introduction, the methodology for this dissertation is inspired by the framework for the analysis of social media discourses developed by Majid KhosraviNik. The framework of KhosraviNik was selected because of two key elements, that is, the tendency to start from mediated discourse and then proceeding to gather further contextual elements as well as its reflection on the broader structural processes that shape and in turn are shaped by communication on social media.

After outlining the key methodological lenses for this study, I discuss the rationale for the sampling technique adopted. As mentioned in the introduction, data for this study was gathered from a limited number of key Twitter profiles selected through theoretical sampling and a limited number of Twitter hashtags selected through convenience sampling. Theoretical discussion in the previous chapter already gave some basic epistemological justifications for a focus on institutional actors and on crowd-sourced narratives via hashtags. Discussion in this chapter builds upon those premises through the lens of the work of Christian Fuchs and provide further ground to justify the selection of the data to be scrutinized. Finally, I make reference to those approaches in comparative politics that attempt to interpret the European Union as a polity with structures resembling those of a nation-state (Hix, 1998) to further justify the sampling in light of the comparative character of this project.

#### **Social media and critical discourse studies: A roadmap**

Computer mediated communication (CMC) has been object of extensive study across different disciplines in the social sciences, and especially socio-linguistics, sociology of communication, and so-called digital anthropology. While doing justice to all different approaches would require a level of detail that is impossible to achieve in this context, it is safe to state that these approaches can be placed along a spectrum ranging from purely ‘user-based’ to purely ‘screen-based’ research (Androutsopoulos, 2013; see Figure 1 below). On the one side of the spectrum, user-based approaches understand digital media as discursively or material spaces of

human interactions that are dynamically related to analog spaces. On the other side of the spectrum, screen-based approaches understand digital media as sources of ‘data’ to be explored for linguistic analysis, sentiment analysis, data mining, and other such (usually quantitative) techniques that require no engagement with users and only limited engagement with context.

Figure 1 - Screen-based and User-Based data in CMC research (Androutsopoulos, 2013)

	Screen-based		User-based	
Relation of researcher to source of data	No online observation	Systematic online observation	Online observation and contact to users	Contact to users without online observation
Resulting type of data	Online data	Online data	Blended data	Offline data

Considering that at least *some* contextual elements are often necessary to understand social processes, most approaches fall in between these two extremes. Researcher’s engagement with users (e.g. whether or not he or she conducts interviews) is usually considered to be the cleavage point between the two approaches. In what follows, I do not discuss strictly screen-based approaches such as studies using ‘the web as corpus’ for quantitative linguistic analysis (e.g. Fletcher, 2012) for sentiment analysis (see the review by Thelwall, 2014) or content analysis (see the review by Thimm, Einspänner, & Dang-Anh, 2014). Rather, the focus is directed towards those approaches that include a blend of user-provided and computer-retrieved data.

### *Danny Miller and digital anthropology*

Approaches in so-called ‘digital anthropology’ can be placed relatively close to the user-based end of the spectrum. Daniel Miller is possibly the most influential scholar in this field. His theoretical perspectives emerged during his early ethnographic fieldwork in Trinidadian internet cafés (Miller and Slater, 2000) and consistently continued through the following decades (See for example Horst & Miller, 2012). Miller’s most recent project, financed by the European Research Council under the title of *Why we post*, involved nine researchers and gathered ethnographic data on social media practices across nine field sites scattered around the world. The project was completed in late-2015 and is currently undergoing the dissemination phase through the publication of a series of books and other related activities. The main title of the collection, *How*

*the World Changed Social Media* (Miller et al., 2016), further expands on concepts already developed by Miller in previous studies.

For the purposes of this study, Miller's work is particularly relevant on account of his elaboration of the concept of 'polymedia'. Miller defines polymedia as 'an environment of practice' where different media sources exist in relation to the people that use them as well as in relation to each other (Madianou & Miller, 2013). Close to concepts such as Slater and Tacchi's (2004) 'media ecologies' and Couldry's (2011) 'media manifold', polymedia has the advantage of focusing on the meaning that people themselves give to online communication platforms. Adopting the lens of polymedia allows the researcher to understand different modes of online communication as being interconnected not necessarily because of their own features, but rather because of the ways in which people use them and understand them in their lived experiences. The concept was developed in an attempt to overcome the stark divide between 'the real' and 'the virtual' proper of early research on the web and thus better capture online sociality. Crucially for Miller, polymedia should be understood as a space that represents an extension of offline spaces and where people spend part of their lives.

Miller's work is also relevant because it strongly rejects the idea that communication on social media can in any way be 'more mediated' than offline communication. Firmly grounded in anthropological tradition, Miller points out that there is no such a thing as pre-cultural or non-mediated communication. Rather, all communication happens to be mediated, with social media being only some among many possible media for human communication to occur (Miller et al., 2016; see also Kozinets, 2010). Expanding on this vision, Miller argues that it is presumptuous to claim that social media did (or ever could) change the world. That is to say, the advent of social media did not change politics and/or society in light of some of their technological qualities. Rather, it is more accurate to say that social media unlocked the potential to communicate in ways that were previously unattainable, thus prompting people to do politics and/or society otherwise.

Miller's work mostly focuses on the study of communities online. That is to say, it focuses on the cultural practices of a given community and the role of social media therein. I take a somewhat different approach, insofar as my aim is that of investigating the cultural practices of an online community. That is to say, my focus is on the cultural practices of a geographically dispersed group of users that happens to do community through online engagement (Kozinets,

2010). While recognizing the relevance of some of Miller's concepts, I now turn to discuss other approaches that privilege online engagement with users and online data gathering over traditionally ethnographic approaches. The next sub-section is devoted to an exploration of two such approaches, namely Androutsopoulos' (2008) discourse-centered online ethnography (DCOE) and Herring's (2004) computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA). These approaches are then brought together following the joint reading offered by KhosraviNik (2017) in his social media – critical discourse studies (SM-CDS).

#### *Androutsopoulos' Discourse-centered online ethnography*

Discourse-centered online ethnography was first presented in an open access paper published in 2008. Starting from the assumption that all communication takes place in context, Androutsopoulos suggests that investigation of screen data should be complemented with a mix of direct and participant observation. Therefore, DCOE uses a blend of screen data, contextual knowledge, and user generated data to make sense of the discursive formation found online. In practice, DCOE combines ethnographic engagement with users (*a la* Miller), the study of the so-called facets of computer mediated communication as developed by Herring (2007; see also Herring, 2004), and tools from different approaches in critical discourse analysis.

Androutsopoulos develops his approach from the perspective of studies in the ethnography of communication. Unsurprisingly, therefore, DCOE somewhat privileges context over textual data. This is for example visible in the use of context as the entry step into the research process, followed by data gathering in an ethnographically established 'field'. For example, a study adopting a DCOE methodology would start the research enterprise by setting up a Facebook group for the purposes of the research, recruit the research participants through online and offline engagement, and then gather screen data from the above mentioned Facebook group in parallel with interview or focus group data from the participants.

Androutsopoulos' methodology can be said to be particularly compatible with the theoretical framework outlined in the previous chapter because of its focus on so-called practices of 'entextualization'. In the original formulation by Bauman and Briggs (1990), entextualization is defined as the process of 'making a stretch of linguistic production into a unit - a text - that can be lifted out of its interactional setting'. In Androutsopoulos' reading, the advantage of

entextualization over more static definition of ‘text’ is that it accounts for the possibility of lifting said text out of the original context and re-embed it in a new site of discourse.

This approach is resonant with a Derridean ontology that forms part of the background for this study. Looking for instances of entextualization can be a fruitful way of accounting for the ways in which users draw from existing discourses to negotiate new meanings. Indeed, concepts such as the networked self (boyd, 2008) of the tethered self (Turkle, 2008) hint to the fact that users can be said to entextualize themselves into being by drawing from different discursive resources and reworking them in the form of online multimodal text.

### *Herring’s computer-mediated discourse analysis*

Herring (2004; 2007) developed a rather popular approach to the study of computer mediated communication that is firmly grounded in sociolinguistics and starts from screen data to move towards context. Herring proposes that the peculiarities of communication on social media require the adoption of an extended toolkit that not only includes familiar elements of linguistic theory (genre, modality, nomination, argumentation, etc.) but also a set of ten medium factors and eight social factors. Known as ‘faceted classification scheme for computer-mediated discourse’, Herring’s model de facto represents a methodological toolkit for the study of computer mediated language with an eye to the broader context surrounding it.

The ten medium factors that Herring suggests taking into considerations are, synchronicity (whether exchanges are taking place in real time or over extended timespans); message transmission (whether or not messages are transmitted as self-enclosed pieces of text); persistence of the transcript (whether or not a record of the interaction remains available over time); size of the message buffer (whether there is any length limit to the size of a message); channels of communication (whether messages are communicated with text, images, etc.); anonymity (whether or not anonymity is an option); private messaging (whether the exchange of private messages is allowed on the platform or not); filtering (whether or not it is possible to filter out undesired messages); quoting (whether it is possible to quote parts of other people’s messages); and message format (what do the messages look like on the screen).

The above list essentially functions as an extension of traditional tools in sociolinguistics to take into account some of the features of commercial social media. While it offers some insight

on context, the real transition to a context-aware analysis takes place when considering Herring's social factors of CMC. These are, namely, the participants (i.e. the users involved); the kind of interactions that are allowed by the platform (e.g. one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many); the structure of participation (e.g. its intensity or frequency over time); the purpose of the interaction (what goals are pursued); the possibility of narrowing down the focus on a specific topic or theme (e.g. hashtagging); the kind of activities therein performed and their 'tone' (debate, agreement, slender, etc.); the 'norms' regulating the use of language in a given space (e.g. presence or absence of moderation); and, finally, the 'code' adopted for said communication (font, writing conventions, language variety).

With the above toolkit, Herring aims at providing scholars in sociolinguistics with a paradigm for the study of CMC that remains centred on mediated text and only subsequently embarks on the acquisition of further contextual elements to corroborate the analysis. While relatively static in comparison with the framework outlined by Androutsopoulos, Herring's framework has the advantage of being implementable and replicable in the context of a single study as well as across studies and social media platforms.

#### *KhosraviNik's Social media – critical discourse studies*

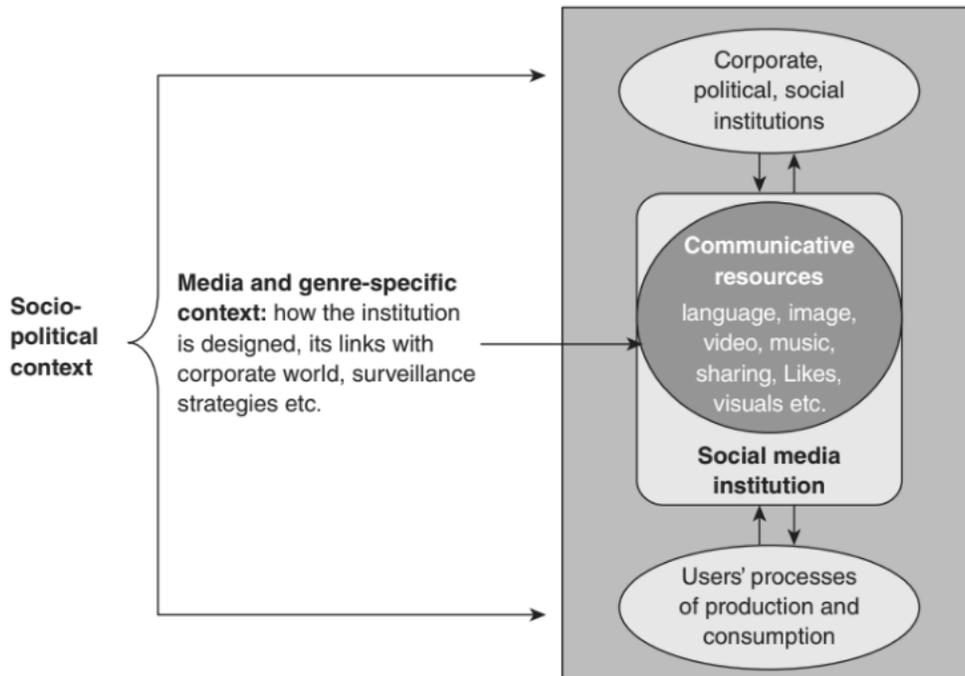
Majid KhnosraviNik is an emerging scholar in the field of critical discourse studies as applied to communication on social media. His work is infused with the key insights of the discourse-historical approach (DHA) to critical discourse analysis as developed over the years by Ruth Wodak. His own approach, termed Social Media – Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS), explicitly borrows from the work of Androutsopoulos and Herring as outlined above. KhnosraviNik expands on these frameworks by grounding them in the DHA tradition, stressing the critical character of any research endeavor. Unsurprisingly, therefore, KhosraviNik (2017) defines SM-CDS as a 'socially committed, problem-oriented, textually based, critical analysis of discourse'.

In a piece jointly authored with Unger and Wodak (Unger, Wodak, and KhosraviNik, 2016), KhosraviNik suggests the adoption of three broad orientations for critical discourse studies on social media. Firstly, critical discourse analysis ought to consider the social context of the users in order to make sense of their communication. Secondly, mere description of linguistic features, content, or communication strategies cannot be considered to be sufficient for a truly critical field

of discourse studies on social media. Thirdly, critical discourse studies should reject the virtual/real binary that wishes to separate social media from the analog world. Rather, they should acknowledge the peculiarities of online spaces and take those peculiarities into account.

Leaning on a Frankfurt school philosophical background, KhosraviNik claims that the key interest of CDS should be investigating the ways in which mediated communication influences the social and political. In this sense, he expands on all the models presented above by arguing that context should not be understood only in its horizontal sense (i.e. what goes among users on a given platform or across platforms). Rather, any analysis of text should also account for ‘vertical’ contextual element, such as for example sociological factors like access, visibility, and identity (in turn based on class, race, gender, etc.). In other words, the horizontal contextualization proposed by Miller, Herring, or Androutsopoulos should be complemented with a vertical contextualization that takes into consideration the broader socio-political framework within which social media communication takes place.

Figure 2 - The dynamic of text, society, and social media institution (KhosraviNik, 2017)



KhosraviNik (KhosraviNik & Unger, 2015) grounds his critique of contextualization in an attempt to bridge the Habermas-Foucault divide in critical discourse studies. In his interpretation, CDS should concede that social media discourses operate both through the Foucauldian logic of

power *of* discourse and Habermasian logics of power *in* discourse. The former refers to the macro-structural forces behind discourse that work to produce objects and subjects of knowledge. The latter refers to those micro-level instances in which individuals communicate in an attempt to influence each other and in the process construct, challenge, or perpetuate supra-individual discourses. KhosraviNik warrants that these two currents are actually not dissimilar in research practice, insofar as both notion of power feed each other through top-down and bottom-up processes of signification. For example, bottom-up language use can sustain discriminatory structures, while top-down discourses can also produce resistances that in turn might succeed in changing the hegemonic order.

### *Section summary*

The methodologies surveyed above offer an overview of different approaches along the user-based to screen-based spectrum. In this study, I adopt a methodology that is somewhat tilted towards the screen-based end of the spectrum, insofar as it favors screen data over user-generated data. This is mostly due to the multi-sited character of the research as well as the wish to remain close to a critical discourse studies tradition that makes of text the main site of its inquiry. In this sense, my methodology is closer to those proposed by Herring (2007) and KhosraviNik (2017). That is to say, screen-based data was used as the starting point around which elements of vertical and horizontal contextualization were gathered via ethnographic engagement.

### **The field: Twitter in Europe, Twitter in Italy, and everything between**

Based on Herring's medium factors of computer mediated communication, I now turn to an overview of the facets that characterize the social media platform known as 'Twitter'. As mentioned in the introduction, Twitter is a text-based microblogging platform launched in 2006 and run by Twitter Inc., a for-profit corporation headquartered in San Francisco, California. Twitter's main affordances allow some 330 million users worldwide (We are social, 2018) to share short messages, known as 'tweets' via their public or semi-public individual profiles (message transmission). Tweets mostly contain text, but can be accompanied by pictures, videos, or links to sources outside of Twitter itself (channels of communication). Tweets are displayed in a somewhat reverse-chronological order that is, however, heavily shaped on the basis of other algorithmically determined preferences on a 'feed' page (message format).

Unlike Facebook, where a ‘real name policy’ is in place on behalf of the platforms and anonymity is strongly discouraged, Twitter allows users to choose to what extent they want to disclose their identity (anonymity). Twitter users can broadcast their tweets to an audience of ‘followers’. Users whose profiles are public can also participate in keyword-based conversations with publics beyond their follower base by marking the keyword in object with the hash (#) symbol. These keywords have come to be known as ‘hashtags’. The most popular hashtags in a given location are displayed on the left hand side of the ‘feed’ page in a list of ‘trending topics’. The maximum length of a tweet used to be 140 characters including spaces before being expanded to 280 characters in early 2018 (size of the message buffer).

Strictly speaking, communication on Twitter is asynchronous, insofar as users can and often do share their messages without expecting immediate reactions from their follower base or from other participating in the same hashtagged conversation. However, Twitter seems to be particularly popular because of its ‘real time’ character (Papacharissi, 2015, pp. 33-34), questioning the extent to which it can be said to be asynchronous. Tweets have a relatively permanent character, insofar as each message is tagged with a unique ‘tweet ID’ number and can be retrieved at any point after its publication. However, users have the possibility of removing their tweets (persistence of the transcript). Twitter does allow for private messaging, although it is not the primary means of exchange on the platform (private messaging). Filtering out undesired messages is somewhat difficult, although users can block other users and prevent them from visualizing their own messages and from interacting with them (filtering).

I now turn to outline the features of the data sampled for this study, putting the accent on the fact that vertical contextualization (KhosraviNik, 2017) heavily shaped the selection of the sampled material. In particular, I sampled users with an eye to the power dynamics shaping access to visibility on social media along the lines of Fuchs’ (2013b; 2016) ‘political attention economy of capitalism’. The exploration of Fuchs’ work sets the stage for a description of the sample in the sections to follow.

### **Selecting the sample: Accounting for a political economy of visibility**

Christian Fuchs is one of the most prolific scholars in the field of critical social media studies. A recurrent argument in Fuchs’ work is that commercial social media such as Twitter and Facebook are highly stratified non-participatory spaces (for example, Fuchs, 2011). Fuchs

advances this argument in open polemic with a wide array of scholars who optimistically celebrated so called ‘Twitter-revolutions’, and most prominently Castels (2009, 2012). In opposition to their views, Fuchs argues that social media might facilitate political mobilization, but can hardly be said to drive it because of stark inequality in access to communication technology and inequality in access to visibility, as documented in a host of empirical studies he brings forward to substantiate his claims (Murthy, 2013; Wilson & Dunn, 2011; Fuchs, 2013a; Gerbaudo, 2012 among many others).

In Fuchs’ view, the production and circulation of social media content is overwhelmingly dominated by corporations and other subjects who have preferential access to visibility because they are endowed with a disproportionate share of material, symbolic, and discursive resources. Simply put, ‘[t]hose who have a lot of reputation, fame, money or power tend to have many more followers than everyday people’ and ‘[t]heir tweets also tend to be much more often re-tweeted than common people’s tweets’ (Fuchs, 2013b, p. 192). Fuchs denotes this trend with the name of ‘asymmetrical political attention economy of capitalism’, and contends that under such conditions the concept of ‘social media participation’ is an ideology (Fuchs, 2013b, p. 102).

While not ruling out the possibility that commercial social media could facilitate political mobilization, he argues that collective action can be impactful only in those cases where its operations extend far beyond social media. Fuchs’ (2013b) work can help in exploring how social media are power-laden spaces on a par with analog spaces. Accordingly, social media platforms offer the possibility to ‘appear’ only to a restricted group of individuals and, crucially, offer support only to certain kind of action. Indeed, there is growing consensus in the literature around the view that traditional elites (politicians, journalists, etc.) and traditional media outlets (tv shows, radio channels, newspapers, etc.) are the most influential social media profiles on virtually all platforms, including Twitter.

Taking Fuchs’ understanding of visibility on social media as a starting point, I gathered data through a combination of user-based and keyword-based sampling (Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan, 2013). After a preliminary phase of online observation, I directed my focus on those Twitter accounts that seemed to be particularly visible within discussions of gender equality at the European supranational level and at the Italian national level. Similarly, I kept an eye on unfolding

political events at the two levels and sampled those keyword-based discussions (hashtags) that seemed to achieve particular visibility during the timespan of my project.

### *Sampling users*

Accepting Fuchs' propositions and after a preliminary phase of screen-based observation, I sampled a set of Twitter users believed to be particularly visible at the European supranational level and at the Italian national level within discussions of gender equality. On the one hand, I sampled users with an eye to common measures for visibility and popularity on social media. In particular, I took into account the measures suggested by Dubois and Gaffney (2014), and thus understood visibility as (i) having a following, (ii) being recognized as expert, (iii) the expert content produced, and (iv) social embeddedness. The selection also considered the relatable measures suggested by Cha Haddadi, Benevenuto, and Gummadi (2010), namely understanding visibility in terms of popularity (number of followers), content value (number of re-tweets/share), and name value (number of 'likes').

On the other hand, I also operated the sampling with an eye to traditional categories in comparative politics. The previous chapter outlined how some approaches in comparative politics attempt to interpret the European Union as a political system akin to a nation-state. This perspective was particularly supported by Hix (1994, 1998, 1999), who argues that the EU is obviously less than a state in the Weberian sense but can nonetheless be theorized as a political system featuring a network of legislative, executive, and judicial institutions that influence the allocation of resources within the European space.

It has been argued time and again that the comparativist perspective on the EU is close to rationalist paradigms and positivist epistemologies that do not sit well with the ontological framework outlined in the previous chapter (e.g. Pollack, 2005). This notwithstanding, the adoption of a comparative perspective does not need to be considered as inherently disruptive of the constructivist ethos of this study. The use of traditional categories in comparative politics turned out to be somewhat of a pragmatic necessity that, however, does not necessarily exclude the possibility of analyzing the discourses of the sampled users through a constructivist lens and understand them as productive of 'gender equality' as an object of knowledge.

Based on the above, the user-based part of my sample aims at being representative of those voices that happen to be more visible within discussions of gender equality at the two levels under scrutiny as well as being to some extent representative of a range of ‘traditional’ political categories that can be comparable across the national-supranational divide. These categories are broadly understood as (i) a group of gender equality institutions and self-declared feminist politicians, (ii) women’s rights groups, (iii) LGBTI rights groups, and (iv) groups of men in favor of gender equality. The user-based part of the sample is summarized in the table below. Each of the users was followed for a 12-month timespan (1 September 2016 – 31 August 2017). Rather than presenting the selected users one by one in this section, each of them will be object of in-depth presentation in the chapters devoted to their respective social media narratives.

Table 1 - User-based sample

<b>User group</b>	<b>Europe</b>	<b>#tweets sampled</b>	<b>Italy</b>	<b>#tweets sampled</b>
<b>Gender equality machinery</b>	Věra Jourová (EU Commissioner for Justice)	1,140*	Valeria Fedeli (former Minister of Education)	1,843*
	Femm Committee	196	Laura Boldrini (former Speaker of the House)	1,708*
	EIGE	459	-	-
<b>Women’s rights groups</b>	PES Women	540	Donne PD	240
	European Women’s Lobby	4,472	Di.Re.	2,858
	-	-	Non una di meno	3,236
<b>LGBTI rights groups</b>	Rainbow Rose	1,453	Monica Cirinnà (Senator sponsoring the same sex unions law)	1,210*
	ILGA Europe	385	Arcigay	346
<b>Pro-equality men’s group</b>	Men Engage Europe	0	Maschile Plurale	165
<b>Total</b>		<b>8,645</b>		<b>11,601</b>
* Individual politicians may and in fact do tweet about issues other gender equality in order to appeal to their broader constituency in a way that is functionally different from that of social movements or gender equality institutions. The number of tweets above refers to the total number of posts by their official profile regardless of content.				

Before moving on to the discussion of the sampled hashtag, one last feature of the users selected for this study is worth noticing. The users happen to be particularly visible *within* discussions of gender equality in Europe and/or in Italy, but their visibility is actually negligible when compared to that of mainstream figures in the context of the entertainment industry. It can be stated that these users occupy subject positions that are hegemonic within a broadly understood field of ‘feminist’ or ‘pro-equality’ discourses. However, they remain at the margin of political discussion, signaling the relatively low priority that gender issues occupy on most political agendas. It is possible to further reflect on the overall marginality of political commentary on social media when compared to the visibility of the entertainment industry therein, further highlighting the stratified character of social media as spaces of participation and questioning their relevance in politics in general and gender equality politics in particular (Fuchs, 2016).

### *Sampling hashtags*

As argued above, focusing on the social media narratives of subjects in privileged positions is not only fruitful, but actually necessary in light of the highly stratified character of visibility on social media. However, as KhosraviNik and Unger (2015) points out, it would be naïve to say that the advent of social media did not unlock the possibility for new ways of organizing discursive resistance from below. That is to say, the advent of commercial social media did open up new ways for private users to collectively voice their grievances and aggregate their voices in order to claim visibility. For each of the two levels under scrutiny, I sampled three hashtag case studies that speak to different ways in which hashtags can be used by private users.

Each of the two levels has a case study featuring an ongoing anti-violence campaign. These are, respectively, #saynostopvaw at the EU supranational-level and #nonunadimeno at the Italian national level. The former was initiated by the European Commission in support of its efforts to make 2017 ‘a year of concerted action to combat violence against women’. The latter is a bottom-up campaign initiated by the newfound feminist network Non una di meno. Based on the framework of Gerbaudo (2012) and Butler (2015) for political performativity on social media (outlined in the previous chapter), I interpret these hashtag case studies as instances of collective performativity that are largely ‘choreographed’. In the former case, the choreographing is explicitly coming from a traditional source of authority. In the latter case, leadership is indeed

more hidden and ‘liquid’, but nonetheless present and identifiable in those feminist groups that happen to coordinate most of the work of the Non una di meno feminist network.

The second hashtag case study for each of the two levels makes reference to somewhat less choreographed instances of aggregated conversation on Twitter that took place in the context of commentary on the occasion of the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT). These are, respectively, #EU4LGBTI and #omofobia. Both these campaigns do feature some choreographic leadership, but are more prone to show dissident voices (Bruns & Burgess, 2011) and adopt affectively charged language (Papacharissi, 2015).

The third hashtag case study makes reference to instances of so-called synoptic resistance as described in the work of Kelsey and Bennett (2014). They were selected to showcase instances in which ‘the many’ surged in response to unfolding political events and staged a somewhat unstructured act of collective resistance against ‘the few’ via their aggregated voices on social media. The case study under scrutiny will be an ensemble of hashtags referring to different cases of top-down discrimination against racialized women happening almost at the same time in March 2017 at the two levels. These are, #hijabban/ #muslimwommenban/ #heascarfban and #parliamonesabato/ #parliamonesubito. The former makes reference to the public reaction to the ICJ decision to allow employers to discriminate against possible employees on the basis of their choice to display religious symbols. The latter refers to the public reaction to a sexist infographic aired on Italian public television show *Parliamone... Sabato*. Both of them share synoptic character (the many watching the few) as well as affective character resembling that outlined by Papacharissi (2015).

Before moving on to discussing the technical aspects of the analysis, it is necessary to stress that the focus on chorographic leadership and other aspects of aggregated conversation is not incompatible with what was said above regarding the stratified character of visibility on social media. In all of the above cases, stratified access to visibility is evident in two parallel dynamics. The first one refers to the very low level of engagement with all of the above hashtags. That is to say, political communication on gender issues is marginal when compared to the levels of social media engagement with large scale entertainment events such as, for instance, the Eurovision music festival.

Table 2 - Hashtag-based part of the sample

Hashtag group	Europe	Timespan sampled	#tweets sampled	Italy	Timespan sampled	#tweets sampled
Anti-violence campaigns	#Saynostopvaw	24 Nov 16 31 Aug 17	3,460	#Nonunadimeno	29 Sep 16 31 aug 17	58,488
IDAHOTB discussions	#EU4LGBTI	8 May 17 7 Jun 17	2,334	#Omofobia	8 May 17 7 Jun 17	7,934
Synoptic resistance	#Muslimwommenban/ #Hijabban/ #Heascarfban	14 Mar 17 27 Mar 17	2,048/ 1,933/ 635 (4,661)	#Parliamonesabato/ #Parliamonesubito	20 Mar 17 3 Apr 17	17,449/ 588 (18,037)
<b>Total</b>			<b>10,450</b>			<b>84,419</b>

The second refers to those users that happen to be particularly visible *within* the discussion taking place on a given hashtag. That is to say, those accounts that happen to have more visibility in terms of retweets and volume of participation are those speaking from a subject position of relative power. Private users with no previous following and no resources to run social media campaigns (e.g. a social media office or a software package for social media management) tend to dwell in relative invisibility even within the context of aggregated conversation via hashtags. In this sense, adopting Fuchs' lens can help uncover the unequal distribution of visibility not only between large corporations and alternative political figures, but also the unequal distribution of visibility between those users participating in a collective act of political performativity.

### **From methodology to methods: Research development in practice**

Discussion so far outlined the methodological debates in the field of so-called digital humanities and social sciences and explained the rationale for the adoption of a method of analysis that combines ethnographic engagement with critical discourse analysis that mostly follows the guidelines outlined by KhosraviNik (2017). That is to say, ethnographic engagement followed screen-based data gathering and was used as element of further contextualization.

#### *Profile of the data*

As mentioned earlier, the Twitter dataset under scrutiny spans from 1 September 2016 to 31 August 2017. The data was gathered with the support of the NCapture browser plug-in of NVivo

11 through several subsequent captures on all of the sampled Twitter profiles as well as in all the sampled hashtags. The user-based part of the sample consists of a total of 20,246 tweets (8,645 at the European level, 11,601 at the national level). The extent of the Twitter engagement of the sampled users varies consistently and ranges from as little as 140 tweets in one year to as much as 3,000. Generally speaking, Institutions and visible politicians tend to have a more static Twitter presence, while activist networks tend to make more extensive and creative use of the medium. The hashtag-based part of the sample is substantially larger and includes some 94,869 tweets (10,450 at the European level and 84,419 at the national level). The sampled hashtags also vary consistently, ranging from the 2,334 tweets gathered for the #EU4LGBTI case to the more than 50,000 tweets gathered for the #Nonunadimeno case. Generally speaking, hashtag publics were more active at the Italian national level than at the European supranational one. However, the extent of public engagement at the national level should not be overstated either, as shown in discussion in the following chapters.

Alongside screen data, I collected user-generated data through semi-structured interviews that took place between February 13<sup>th</sup> and November 27<sup>th</sup>, 2017. The recruited interview participants were selected in light of their privileged positions as the individual social media officers administering the accounts selected for the user-based part of the study. Participants were recruited through different strategies, including emails, phone calls, direct messages on Twitter itself, face-to-face interaction during relevant events, and snowballing. I interviewed a total of nineteen partners in seventeen interviews that lasted around an hour on average and ranged from a minimum of 33 minutes to a maximum of 106 minutes. Interviews took place over the phone, over skype, or in person, depending on the availability of the participants. Discussion revolved around three main areas: (i) practices of production of the social media personae under scrutiny, (ii) in-depth analysis of the key topics advanced in their own social media narratives, and (iii) the connection between the social media narratives and the broad efforts of the user under scrutiny. Of these seventeen interviews, fourteen will be included in the study. These are summarized in the Table below. Unfortunately, two of the originally sampled partners chose not to partake in the study. One key informant committed to answer my questions in writing but did not submit their replies. One key informant declined my invitation to participate in the study.

Table 3 - Summary of interview data

User group	Europe	Itw mode	Itw time	Italy	Itw mode	Itw time
<b>Gender equality machinery</b>	Věra Jourová (EU Commissioner for Justice)	Face-to-face	106'	Valeria Fedeli (former minister of education)	-	-
	Femm Committee	Phone	33'	Laura Boldrini (former speaker of the house)	Face-to-face	34'
	EIGE	Skype	56'	-	-	-
<b>Women's rights groups</b>	PES Women	Phone	52'	Donne PD	Phone	54'
	European Women's Lobby	Face-to-face	48'	Di.Re.	Face-to-face	58'
	-	-	-	Non una di meno	Face-to-face	84'
<b>LGBTI rights groups</b>	Rainbow Rose	Skype	66'	Monica Cirinnà (Sen., same sex unions law)	Phone	33'
	ILGA Europe	-	-	Arcigay	Skype	71'
<b>Pro-equality men's group</b>	Men Engage Europe	Skype	90'	Maschile Plurale	Face-to-face	63'

### *General characterization of the discursive location under scrutiny*

The empirical analysis carried out for this study is presented in Parts II and III. Each chapter starts with a general characterization of the discursive location under scrutiny. These include a description of the users/hashtags under consideration therein and a description of the practices of text production underlying the tweeted text gathered for this study. In the case of users, descriptions of practices of production mostly refer to whether or not there is a formal social media policy, to the number of people involved in the management of the profile, on the structure of the workflow, and so on. For what concerns hashtags, the descriptions mostly refer to context in which the hashtag mobilization emerged, the time span sampled, the number of tweets gathered, what users happened to be the most visible and the most active, and other similar information. This information was gathered on Twitter itself, through screen-based information beyond Twitter, and through interview data.

After providing a general characterization of the object of each chapter, I provide a broad roadmap of the key themes treated by each of the users and within each of the hashtags. In particular, I use word count analysis to draw initial speculations regarding what words happen to be particularly prominent in the discursive production of gender equality as an object of knowledge. In earlier phases of the project, I attempted to complement this with a qualitative coding of the tweets produced by each of the users. I made attempts to produce a coding structure with inductive categories, deductive categories, and a mix of the two. Despite several iterations, I never got to a coding structure that could clearly provide a summary of the topics treated by the sampled users or within the sampled hashtags. This is because too many of the tweets gathered for this study could easily be coded in multiple categories or in none of the categories I could devise. Indeed, the tweets that clearly speak to a sub-topic underneath the umbrella framework of ‘gender equality’ are not as frequent as one would expect in a dataset as the one I sampled. Many of the tweets in my sample are rather generic in character. If anything characterizes these messages, that would be a focus on now-ness (i.e. what’s happening right now) and a strong affective charge.

#### *Fine analysis of discourse fragments*

After a general characterization of the discursive location scrutinized in each chapter, I move on to granular analysis of selected examples from the users/hashtags under consideration. Examples are selected to be as typical and representative as possible of the broader trends encountered in the dataset. Each example is contextualized by making reference to the occasion for its production and analyzed in light of its context. The bulk of the analysis makes reference to the framework developed by Van Leeuwen (2008) to analyze the representation of social actors, the representation of social action, and discursive strategies of (de)legitimizations. I complement this with Wodak’s (2009) framework for the study of argumentation through so-called *Topoi*.

It is worth mentioning that both Van Leeuwen and Wodak are famous for their commitment to the operationalization of discourse analysis in frameworks that can be easily interpreted and replicated. Wodak in particular has often warranted that macro-theoretical discussions in discourse theory can (and oftentimes do) lead to paralysis and stagnation. While such discussions are indeed necessary, they should not get in the way of creating tools that allow scholarly analysis. In this sense, she finds that meso-level theories are usually more fruitful in supporting research effort,

and encourages a data-driven approach to the research enterprise. It is in this spirit that I adopt the above mentioned frameworks and apply them in my analysis.

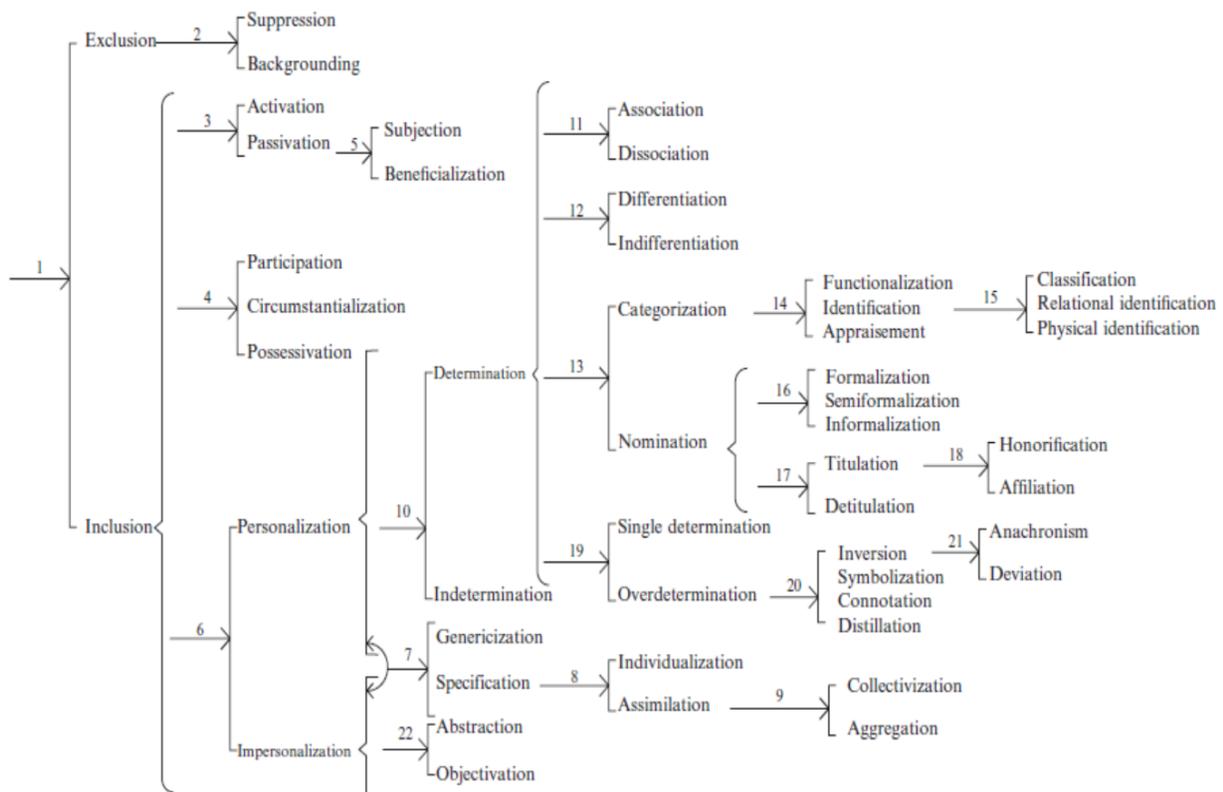
Van Leeuwen grounds his critical discourse analysis in the assumption that, when processes are semiotized, these processes are almost invariably transformed (Van Leeuwen, 2008). To put it differently, once an occurrence is recontextualized in language, it is filtered through a lense that necessarily changes its characteristics. Some elements are deleted. Others are added. Most of them are re-arranged. Sometimes, moral judgments are attached to the representations by the recontextualizing subject. In this context, social actors are also recontextualized in language via a combination of discursive strategies for their inclusion and/or exclusion.

Exclusion can be summarized as the erasure of social actors from recontextualization in discourse. Exclusion can take two forms, namely: suppression and backgrounding. Suppression quite radically erases the social actor in object from the narration. Simply put, these subjects are not mentioned. When suppression is practiced more subtly, it is achieved in language through passive agent deletion (e.g. ‘concerns are voiced about gender-based violence’), the use of non-finite clauses in the place of subjects (e.g. ‘*maintaining this anti-violence policy* is hard’), the use of process nouns (e.g. *support* for anti-violence action is high), and legitimizing adjectives (e.g. *legitimate fears* are expressed concerning gender based violence). Backgrounding mostly adopts the same linguistic strategies as the ones mentioned above for suppression. However, backgrounding stops short of erasing social actors from the narrative, mentioning them sporadically in the text and then letting them lurk in the background for the rest of the narration.

Inclusion in discourse, of course, implies a wide array of nuances. Included social actors can be activated (represented as the dynamic force of an activity) or passivated (presented as being at the receiving hand of the activity). The use of transitivity (active or passive sentence structure) is the main means for the achievement or activation or passivation. The use of preposition (e.g. I received this present *from* you), pre- or post-modification (e.g. *female* claims; the claims *of* women), possessivation (e.g. *my* girlfriend) are also common strategies. Passivation also includes a distinction between being subjected to a social process (e.g. violence *against* women) or being the beneficiaries of social processes (e.g. policies supporting *female employment*). In other words, passivated social actors can be third parties that have a neutral stance towards a process, benefit from it, or receive its negative consequences.

Included social actors are also represented with different levels of specificity and concreteness. At the broadest level, this implies processes of impersonalization or personalization. Impersonalization mostly takes the form of aggregation (usually expressed through numerical figures, e.g. 40% of the European population) or association (usually, in the form of collective identities, e.g. Italians, women). Personalized social actors are referred to by virtue of their individual identity, i.e. they are presented as a specific person. They might be made object of discursive nomination i.e. referring to someone in terms of their unique identity (e.g. Věra Jourová; the Queen; the Doctor), or their identity can be represented as being dependent on that of a social group. This collective categorization might be expressed through functionalization (identity dependent on an activity e.g. professor, cameraman, mountaineer), classification in demographic category (e.g. women, people of color), relational identification (e.g. friend, mother, wife), or physical identification (e.g. blond, tall, with freckles).

Figure 3 - Social actor network (Van Leeuwen, 2008)



These representations can embed moral appraisal, relationality to space and time, assumptions based on symbolism, etc., all of which contribute to the production of the interested social actors as more or less specified and concrete human beings. Figure 3 above summarizes the above described framework.

The representation of social action in Van Leeuwen (2008) follows closely the above description of the representation of social actors. Starting from a differentiation between reaction and action that largely borrows from the framework developed by Halliday (1985), Van Leeuwen starts with a differentiation between representation of mental processes, representation of reactions and representation of actions. The representation of mental processes (e.g. knowing, thinking) is peculiar because it cannot answer a 'do' question (e.g. 'what was he doing?' cannot be answered with 'he knew that she was coming'), usually take the simple present (e.g. 'I am thinking' is an action, 'I think of you' is a reaction), usually require their subject to be human or humanized, and finally can take both a nominal group or a clause as their object (e.g. 'I know about what happened', but also 'I know the answer').

The representation of reactions can be unspecified (introduced by verbs like 'react' or 'respond' and related nouns, adjectives, or verbs), or specified. Specified reactions are classified as cognitive (e.g. taking position regarding an object, e.g. 'she *thinks that* the gender pay gap is a problem'), perceptive (usually in the form of object plus infinitive, e.g. 'I heard *her walk away*'), or affective (usually, in combination with a proposal or an infinitive clause their object, e.g. *feminist critics want to see less gender-based violence*).

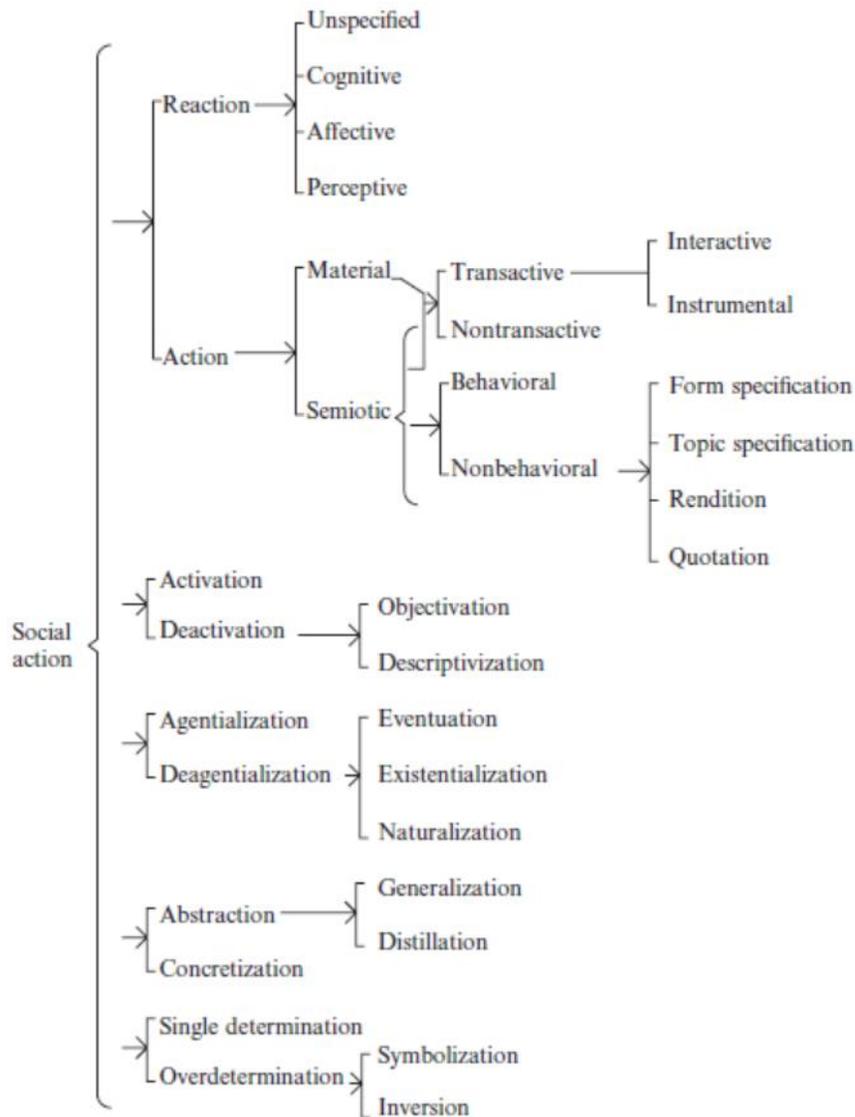
The representation of actions can be classified as representation of material action (the representation of 'doing') or the representation of semiotic action (the action of 'meaning'). The material action represented can involve two participants (transactive) or only one human or humanized participant (nontransactive). Representation of transactive material action can be interactive (involving a human at its receiving hand, e.g. 'I was hugging her') or instrumental (involving an object at its receiving hand e.g. 'I was carrying the groceries'). Semiotic action can be transactive or nontransactive, but also contain other dimensions insofar as it is meant to convey meaning. It can therefore be behavioralized (no transfer of meaning beyond the one strictly represented therein) or nonbehavioralized. Nonbehavioralized semiotic action can embed representations of meaning (e.g. quoted speech), render representations of meaning (e.g.

paraphrased speech), specify the nature of a signifier (e.g. defining it as ‘a joke’, ‘a story’, ‘a lesson’, ‘a song’, etc.), or specify the character of the signified (e.g. presenting them as circumstances of that matter e.g. ‘we should make a point about eradicating violence against women’).

Both reactions and actions can be represented dynamically (activated) or statically (deactivated). Deactivated representations of social action can be objectivated or descriptivized. Objectivated representation downgrade the salience of an action to give priority to something else. This is usually achieved by turning the action into a nominal clause that functions at the subject or object of another action. this might take the form of temporalization (substituting the time of an action for the action), that of spatialization (substituting the space of an action for the action), or of prolepsis (substituting the effects of an action for the action). Descriptivized representations of social action turn the action into a permanent quality of the social actors involved. It can be realized through epithets (e.g. a smiling boy) or through descriptive clauses (e.g. a woman impervious to challenges).

Reactions and actions can be represented as more or less agentialized. That is to say, they can be more or less dependent on human action. These representations can be gradually deagentialized by introducing elements of eventuation (actions that just ‘happen’), existentialization (actions presented as something that simply exists, e.g. ‘there is violence’), naturalization (actions presented as natural, usually via nature-related or evolutionist metaphors, e.g. ‘the gendered division of labor is part of human sociality’). Reactions and actions can also be represented as having different degrees of specificity (generalization), different layers of positive or negative meanings that can be distilled from them (abstraction), and different symbolic charge (overdetermination). These cannot be inferred linguistically. Rather, they require prior knowledge of context and usually comparison with other representations of the same action. Figure 4 below summarizes the representation of social action in the framework by Van Leeuwen (2008).

Figure 4 - Social action network (Van Leeuwen, 2008)



Van Leeuwen (2008) builds on the above to develop a fourfold typology of strategies of discursive (de)legitimization based on the categories of authorization, moral evaluation, mythopoesis, and rationalization. Authorization refers to legitimization via reference to a given source of authority. It may come from the impersonal authority of laws and customs or from the status afforded to a specific individual in light of their position or rank (e.g. the authority of parents towards their children, the authority of ‘experts’ in a field, the authority of role models for their fan-base). An example of this might be a feminist politicians making reference to the impersonal authority of equal rights legislation in order to grant legitimacy to her claims for measures to

eradicate the gender pay gap. In turn, a private individual might grant legitimacy to the same claim in a one-on-one conversation by making reference to the personal authority of the politician in the example above.

Moral evaluation refers to legitimization derived from reference to a value system. This can be explicit or implicit, be the effect of abstraction, or become manifest via comparison to other morally charged narratives. ‘Mythopoesis’ is somewhat related to moral evaluation and refers to legitimization through story-telling, and usually takes the form of a moral tale or of a cautionary tale. These cannot be detected linguistically, are highly context-specific, and can only be analyzed with previous knowledge of the broader context in which their recontextualization in language is taking place. Analysis in the chapters to follow presents examples of value based arguments for gender equality based on an overarching system of values that assumes *a priori* the importance of women’s rights, the rights of sexual minority, and their respective bodily integrity.

Finally, rationalization refers to those cases in which legitimacy is derived from reference to specific social goals and the knowledges that society constructed to validate them. Rationalization might be instrumental (drawing legitimacy from the aims, means, or effects of a given action) or theoretical (drawing legitimacy from ‘scientific’ knowledges, definitions, and explanations). In the chapters to follow, instrumental rationalization is found to be relatively widespread in the form of ‘the business case for gender equality’, i.e. pursuing gender equality derives its legitimacy from its instrumental character in the achievement of an ulterior aim, namely economic growth. Most often, this argument is also backed with theoretical legitimization through the widespread use of statistics, studies, toolkits, and other knowledges specifically gathered for the occasion (Van Leeuwen, 2008, pp. 105-123).

I find it useful to also complement the analysis with reference to Wodak’s framework for the study of discursive argumentation (e.g. Wodak, 2009). In her discourse-historical approach (see for example Reisigl & Wodak, 2015) to critical discourse analysis, Wodak contends that arguments are usually conveyed in the form of *topoi* (singular: *topos*). Usually, argumentation via *topoi* starts with a premise, states a ‘datum’, issues a warrant, and then draws a conclusion in which action is demanded. *Topoi* essentially convey different positions on how an issue should be dealt with. In other words, they convey justifications for actions that the reader should undertake in response to a given issue.

In the *topos of burdening*, the fact that someone is burdened by something should be taken as a justification to remove the burden. For example, given the premise that discrimination is burdensome and the datum that sexual minorities are discriminated, it is possible to warrant that action is required to remove the burden of discrimination against them. In the *topos of reality*, the speaker makes tautological reference to ‘reality’ being ‘the way it is’ and that, therefore, a given action should be performed. For example, the fact that women are as good as men in scientific subjects can be taken as a datum to warrant that their under-representation in science-related professions is unjustified and, in turn, demand that action is taken to ensure women’s equal representation therein. In the *topos of numbers*, statistical or numerically evidence is provided to compel the reader into a given action. For example, the fact that one every three women across the world has been victim of gender-based violence at some point in her life is oftentimes used as a numerical figure to demand action for the eradication of violence against women.

In the *topos of history*, historical memory of causal relation between a given action and its effects warrant in favor or against performing that action. A classic example of this is the warrant against the open display of fascist or nazi symbols, insofar as it invokes historical memories of escalation towards unprecedented violence in Europe and therefore demands opposition to prevent its return. In the *topos of authority*, action is due because its legitimacy is authorized by someone in a position of authority. In a recent example, the premise that sexual harassment on the workplace is a real issue and the datum that a group of Hollywood personalities spoke up against it provided the necessary authorization to trigger action on behalf of many others, eventually resulting in the so-called #MeToo movement. In the *topos of threat*, specific dangers are identified in order to demand action for their elimination. In recent times, the alleged threat posed to ‘European culture’ by incoming migrants is usually mobilized to trigger racist resentment.

In the *topos of definition*, someone or something is described in terms of an attribute and a demand is advanced for them to behave in accordance that is consistent with the meaning of that attribute. For example, the premise that Europe is a place where equality and justice are considered to be fundamental values is often used by EU institutions to argue that sexual minorities should be treated equally and enjoy the same rights as their straight counterparts. In other words, the fact that Europe is allegedly a space defined by the attribute ‘equality’ demands that people ‘in Europe’ should enjoy the same rights. In the *topos of justice*, there is a demand for equal treatment of

people/things that are deemed to be equal in a specific respect. Following along the lines of the previous example, the premise that straight people and LGBTI people are indeed equal in front of the law demands that action is taken to ensure that their rights enjoy equal protection by the state apparatus. Finally, in the *topos of urgency*, an argument for immediate action is advanced because of an unchangeable event beyond the reach and responsibility of the social actors involved. For example, the more or less imagined threat of an authoritarian turn can be mobilized during a campaign to compel voters into casting their ballots in favor of moderate candidates.

## **Conclusions**

This chapter outlined the key methodological decisions that shaped the work I carried out during the course of this project. The first section attempted to offer an overview of key methodological debates in the digital humanities and social sciences. These were presented as existing along a spectrum from solely screen-based to solely user-based approaches, hinting to the fact that most approaches sit somewhere in between the two extremes. Subsequently, I positioned my approach somewhat towards the screen-based end of the spectrum and close to the methodology known as SC-CDS proposed by KhosraviNik (2017). In the following section, I offered a description of the social media platform ‘Twitter’ through Herring’s (2004) facets of computer mediated communication. Thereafter, I moved on to describe the rationale for the sampling technique adopted. These decisions were said to be grounded in KhosraviNik’s (2017) reflections over the role of vertical and horizontal contextualization, in Fuchs’ (2013b) work on the political attention economy of capitalism, and with an eye to traditional categories in comparative politics. In a final section, I went through the structure that will be adopted in each chapter, pointing out the key tools for contextualization and sociolinguistic analysis that I use to scrutinize the data. With this chapter, I conclude the historical, theoretical, and methodological framework of this study (Part I). The next chapter opens Part II, which is devoted to the user-based part of the sample.

## **PART II**

## 4. Gender equality institutions and feminist politicians

### Introduction

This chapter engages with the tweeted communication of users in institutionalized positions within the architecture of the EU and of the Italian state apparatus during the time span under scrutiny. As outlined in the previous chapters, I selected these users because of a combination of factors, namely: the stratified character of access to visibility on Twitter, the peculiarities of the subject positions of institutionalized proponents of gender equality, and the wish to adopt a comparative lens across the supranational-national divide.

This project understands Twitter as a highly stratified space where access to visibility is unevenly distributed on account of material and discursive inequalities (Fuchs, 2013b). Those subjects that enjoy the broadest visibility are usually those that have large shares of material and symbolic resources in the analog realm. As previously discussed, Twitter and other social media are largely dominated by the entertainment industry, with political discussion being marginal at best in its political economy of visibility. It is safe to say that, despite a recent surge in popularity (Friedman, 2016), discussion of gender equality is also marginal within the narrow realm of political discussion on Twitter. Within the constellation of gender equality talk on Twitter, however, gender equality institutions and more or less ‘feminist’ office holders are privileged users in terms of access to visibility, especially when compared to that of, say, a feminist social movement. Coherently with the definition of feminism as a political project of the left offered in Chapter 2, I argued that discourses in favor of gender equality are, in their totality, resistant vis-à-vis a ‘neoliberal’ common sense that is indifferent if not hostile towards them.

The above notwithstanding, discourses of gender equality represent a field of contestation in their own right. That is to say, different ‘feminisms’ compete and co-exist within the ranks of gender equality advocacy, with some voices achieving hegemony while others remaining marginal or silenced. In this sense, the gender equality machineries of the EU or of the Italian state are arguably in a hegemonic position within the narrow field of gender equality, while other voices (women’s rights collectives, feminist movements, LGBTI rights groups) are arguably resistant towards them. The gender equality institutions and more or less feminist politicians that I analyze in this chapter can be said to occupy a dual position as subjects of resistance (vis-à-vis a political

environment that is currently stuck up against equality) and of hegemony (vis-à-vis more progressive and marginalized understandings of ‘gender equality’).

This reading is coherent with the visibility that these subjects enjoy in Twitter’s political economy of visibility. The sampled users are mostly marginal in comparison to entertainment-related users, and so are they when compared with more ‘mainstream’ political figures. However, their vantage position affords them substantially more visibility than that available to other voices in favor of gender equality, such as for example feminist movements. Institutionalized users tend to have more followers and more retweets in light of their recognizability, their attempt to cater to a universalized public, and their fairly stable character. Furthermore, the comparatively large share of material and immaterial resources available to institutionalized actors (budget, staff, expertise) contributes to consolidating their vantage position.

In this chapter, I analyze the tweeted narratives of a sample of three users from the European supranational level and two users for the Italian national level. These users arguably present visions of ‘gender equality’ that exemplify the above described dual positionality of pro-equality resistance but also of dominance within the pro-equality milieu. For the European level, these users are Věra Jourová (Commissioner for Justice, Consumers, and Gender Equality, tweeting as @VeraJourova), The European Parliament Committee for Women’s Rights and Gender Equality (also known as Femm Committee, tweeting as @EP\_GenderEqual), and the European Institute for Gender Equality, (EIGE, tweeting as @eurogender). For the Italian national-level, they are Senator Valeria Fedeli (during the timespan considered for this study, vice-President of the Senate and, later, Minister for Education, University, and Research, tweeting as @valeriefedeli) and Deputy Laura Boldrini (during the timespan considered for this study, President of the House of Deputies, tweeting as @lauraboldrini).

The narratives tweeted by the two groups are analyzed in separate sections of this chapter. Each section features a description of the users, some reflections on practices of production gathered via interviews, and a more in-depth discussion of the narratives voiced through their Twitter profiles. A third section draws links between the two sets of narratives. A final section draws conclusions, reconnect the analysis to the broader argument of this work, and set the stage for analysis in the next chapters.

## **The voice of the EU gender equality machinery**

In this section, I advance a threefold argument derived from the analysis of the narratives advanced on Twitter by three emanations of the EU gender equality machinery. Firstly, the Twitter users under consideration are not individual rational actors who put forward strategic forms of communication for the achievement of mostly fixed policy preferences and goals. Rather, their Twitter personae and their narratives happen to be the product of complex set of negotiations and procedures involving a wide number of people and institutional arrangements. In this sense, it is more appropriate to claim that these Twitter users are subjects produced in practices and discourses rather than actor that willingly deploy discourse to achieve their purposes. Secondly, the narrative advanced by EU Equality bodies conducts discursive work to produce a plurality of individual ‘women’ as the main subject of gender equality. Thirdly and to some extent connectedly, these bodies produce a relatively conservative vision of ‘gender equality’ as a political project.

### *Presenting the sub-sample*

Věra Jourová has been serving as EU Commissioner for Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality as part of the Commission of President Juncker since October 2014. Lawyer by training, Jourová previously served as member of the Czech Parliament and as Minister for Regional Development (from 2013 until her appointment as EU Commissioner). ‘Fighting discrimination, promoting gender equality and pursuing negotiations on the proposed Anti-Discrimination Directive’ features very prominently as the first one of the responsibilities listed on her profile page on the website of the European Commission.<sup>2</sup> Other responsibilities include a reform of online data protection (including a share protocol with the United States), the establishment of an independent European Public Prosecutor's Office, and ensuring the accession of the EU to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of the Council of Europe. At the time of writing this dissertation, Jourová has some 24,800 followers on Twitter at @VeraJourova.

The Committee for Women’s Rights and Gender Equality is one of the 20 standing committees of the European parliament. Also known as ‘Femm Committee’, it was established in July 1984 and currently counts 35 full members and 33 substitutes. During the timespan under

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<sup>2</sup> Jourová’s profile on the EC webpage: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2014-2019/jourova\\_en#responsibilities](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2014-2019/jourova_en#responsibilities)

scrutiny, the Committee was chaired first by Iratxe García-Perez (S&D) until January 2017 and, thereafter, by Vilija Blinkevičiūtė (S&D). A full description of the goals of the Committee is relatively hard to come by on the website of the Committee itself. However, the Facebook page of the Committee outlines its mission in seven points, including ‘the definition, promotion and protection of women's rights in the Union’ and in third countries (with emphasis on implementing international agreements on Women’s rights), ‘equal opportunities policy’ (especially measures in the labor market), the eradication of sex-based discrimination in all its forms, and the mainstreaming of gender in all policy areas.<sup>3</sup> At the present time, the Femm Committee has some 7,500 followers on Twitter at @EP\_GenderEqual.

The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) defines itself as ‘an autonomous body of the European Union’ that was established to promote gender equality, gender mainstreaming, the fight against sex-based discrimination, and awareness of gender equality issues among EU Citizens. Established in 2006 and operating since 2007, EIGE’s offices are located in Vilnius, Lithuania. EIGE’s key objectives for the 2016-2018 period (thus encompassing the timespan scrutinized for this research) are: the provision of high quality research and data to support evidence based decision-making to achieve gender equality, the management and timely communication of all knowledge produced by EIGE to all relevant stakeholders, and the achievement of ‘the highest administrative and financial standards’ while still supporting the needs of its personnel.<sup>4</sup> At the time of writing this dissertation, EIGE has some 9,514 followers on Twitter as @Eurogender.

### *Practices of production*

The Tweeted narratives emerging from these three accounts are the final output of fairly different practices of production, which in turn are due to the different institutional structures that the three bodies happen to have. What follows attempts to briefly describe the process underlying the production of a tweet by each of the actors on the basis of information provided by key informants within the three respective media offices during semi-structured interviews. One of the interviews was carried out in person, one took place over skype, and one took place on the phone. The interviews lasted 106 minutes, 64 minutes, and 33 minutes respectively.

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<sup>3</sup> Facebook page of Femm Committee: [https://www.facebook.com/pg/FEMMCommittee/about/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/FEMMCommittee/about/?ref=page_internal)

<sup>4</sup> EIGE’s webpage: <http://eige.europa.eu/about-eige>

The messages tweeted by the account of Commissioner Jourová are the outcome of a fairly complex set of practices involving several people within different offices of the European Commission. To begin with, it is worth mentioning that ‘gender equality’ is only one among the three areas covered by the mandate of Commissioner Jourová. Coherently, it was found in the data that, out of 1411 tweets posted in the twelve-month timespan under scrutiny, only some 142 directly addressed gender issues understood in the broadest sense possible (around 10%).

Generally speaking, tweets posted @VeraJourova can be divided in two groups: planned and reactive. Planned tweets are based on a yearly calendar of celebrations (e.g. International Women’s Day) scheduled Commission meetings, and activities (e.g. official visits). This calendar intertwines with planned campaigns around one or more of the areas within the Commissioner’s mandate. For example, Jourová’s account was particularly active in the launch of the campaign ‘Say no! Stop violence against women’ initiated by the Commissioner herself on the occasion of the International Day for the Eradication of Violence Against Women (IDEVAW, November 25<sup>th</sup>).

A schedule for all communication activities, including activity on Twitter, is produced at the end of each week by the communication specialists supporting the work of the Commissioner on the basis of suggestions coming from the press office of the Commission’s Directorate General for Justice. A rough schedule is agreed upon by the cabinet of the Commissioner and then implemented on a day to day basis by a single communication officer, pending approval of the text by a more senior communication specialist within the cabinet. Reactive tweets are usually prompted by the Commissioner’s wish to express her view on a matter of current concern. An example of this kind of posts is the Commissioner’s reaction to the mass shooting in Orlando, Florida, in late-2016. In light of the ‘on the spot’ character of these posts, the process is speedier and slightly less institutionalized, although cabinet-level checks remain in place.

The Twitter account of the Femm Committee is substantially less active than that of Commissioner Jourová, insofar as it produced only 196 tweets during the timespan under scrutiny (just above a tweet every two days). However, given the narrower mandate of the Committee, all of the material was somewhat relevant to the discussion of gender issues in the European context. The Femm Committee mostly uses Twitter as a channel to disseminate press releases and advertise its activities to the public. For example, it is rather common for the Committee to tweet links to its schedule of activities, to its press releases, and to the livecast of its meetings.

The Twitter account of the Committee is mostly managed by an individual press officer who is, however, embedded in the broader structure of the European Parliament's press offices. The officer in question seems to enjoy substantial procedural freedom. However, this freedom is almost completely neutralized by a complex set of formal and informal rules as to what the official outlets of the European Parliament can communicate to the public, especially on a politically sensitive topic such as gender equality. Lack of human resources and 'time' were also mentioned several times as the factors behind a relatively static Twitter page that de facto functions as an electronic brochure for the Committee.

EIGE's Twitter presence is also heavily regulated and follows a series of formal as well as informal rules. Understanding EIGE's internal mechanisms is important for a fair assessment of the narratives they advance on social media. To this end, it is crucial to point out that the communication of EIGE is strictly linked to the workflow of the Institute, which in turn is the outcome of political negotiation taking place within EIGE's governing body. Presided by the representatives of the European Commission and representatives from two thirds of the member states on a rotation basis, EIGE's management board sets the priorities for EIGE's workflow, de facto shaping the narrative of gender equality produced and communicated to the public.

EIGE's Twitter account is managed by one senior media officer in collaboration with one or more of the trainees supporting the work of the media unit within the Institute. Other employees within the Institute have been somewhat encouraged to get involved in its social media presence, but the formalities of the process have proven to be a barrier to participation. Encouragement to expand their personal Twitter presence through the promise of endorsement by the Institute's official account has proven to be a more successful strategy in this respect. Nonetheless, EIGE has a fairly wide Twitter presence, with some 459 posts tweeted during the timespan under scrutiny. EIGE's has a non-public social media policy that was developed around 2013 and was updated to meet the changing needs in terms of social media communication faced by the Institute in early 2016. The social media policy includes a description of the tone, attitude, and general approach that EIGE's Twitter presence should have.

Like Jourová's tweets, EIGE's tweets are either planned or reactive. The planned tweets follow a communication schedule that is drafted at the beginning of the calendar year and plans on marking anniversaries, national days, and other key dates in the calendar that could be somehow

related to gender issues as well as key events in EIGE's work calendar (e.g. expected dates for the publication of reports). The yearly calendar is then reviewed on a weekly basis, producing a workflow schedule and drafts of the planned posts on social media. Pending approval of the head of unit, the posts are sent out to the public according to schedule. Reactions to unfolding events is somewhat less regulated, but must nonetheless follow the guidelines in the social media policy.

### *Word frequency analysis*

Despite the small sample size, it is worth devoting some space to discussing the most occurring words in each of the three profiles as a means to have a general picture of the discursive field within which they construct their narratives.

A cursory look at the most occurring words in Jourová's tweets can already shed some light on the overall features of her communication over gender issues. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the most occurring word in her 142 gender-related tweets is 'women' (50 occurrences). A broad focus on women as the subject of her mandate is also detectable because of the relative prominence of the official hashtag for International Women's Day #iwd2017 (12 occurrences) as the seventh most frequent word in the corpus, ranking before #genderequality (11 occurrences). 'Violence' happens to be the second most occurring word (23 occurrences), hinting to the fact that 'gender-based violence' or 'violence against women' are key concerns in the narrative of the Commissioner. This impression is confirmed by the recurrence of the hashtags #saynostopvaw (18 occurrences), #vaw (12 occurrences) and #violenceagainstwomen (9 occurrences). Another key topic of interest is that of equality in the labor market, probably defined in terms of work-life balance, in light of the prominence of #worklifebalance (12 occurrences) and of 'work' (12 occurrences) in the corpus.

A focus on temporality, and more specifically on 'now-ness' can be to some extent inferred from the prominence of words such as 'today' (16 occurrences), 'day' (12 occurrences), and '2017' (11 occurrences). Emphasis on re-circulating messages directed towards herself or towards the institutions of which she is a representative is also confirmed by the prominence of her own Twitter handle (@VeraJourova) and those of the European Commission (@eu\_commission) and the Directorate General for Justice (@eu\_justice) as third, fifth, and fourteenth most occurring words in the corpus. Finally, it is worth mentioning that Commissioner Jourová is one of the very few EU officials regularly supporting the rights of sexual minorities, as detectable through the prominence of #EU4LGBTI as the fifteenth most common word in her gender-related tweets.

A similar exploration of the most occurring words in the corpus tweeted by the Femm Committee renders somewhat relatable impressions. In the 196 posts tweeted by the Committee, ‘women’ was once again the most common word (90 occurrences). Just as it was the case for Jourová’s communication, a vague focus on women as the subject of ‘gender equality’ can be inferred from the prominence of the hashtag for international women’s day #iwd2017 (27 occurrences) appearing somewhat more frequently than #genderequality (15 occurrences). For what concerns key topics, violence against women was again central, as suggested by the wish to participate in aggregate discussion over the Istanbul Convention via the hashtag #Istanbulconvention (26 occurrences), and the use of the word ‘violence’ in just as many cases.

What was said about the electronic brochure format is somewhat confirmed in the wide use of language referring to the procedures of the European Parliament, with words such as ‘president’, ‘#eplenary’, ‘hearing’, ‘debate’, and ‘agenda’ all appearing among the 15 most common ones. A focus on the temporality of ‘now’ can again be found, with words like ‘live’ (55 occurrences), ‘follow’ (36 occurrences), ‘tomorrow’ (15 occurrences), and ‘today’ (14 occurrences) all featuring fairly high among the most common ones. Re-circulating content referring to its own work or to the work of other committees was also central, as confirmed by the prominence of the Committee’s own Twitter handle (70 occurrences) and of the handles of other committees of the European Parliament appearing a combined total of 60 times, further complemented with 25 occurrences for the account of the European Parliament itself (@europarl).

EIGE was far more active than the other two accounts scrutinized in this sub-section, producing some 459 posts throughout the year taken into consideration for this study. Cluster of words within EIGE’s communication are somewhat more difficult to find. A first element that catches the eye is the likelihood of a fairly self-referential communication style, with ‘EIGE’ (152 occurrences), #EIGE (43 occurrences), and “@eurogender’ (36 occurrences) appearing as the first, sixth, and eleventh most commonly occurring words in the corpus. The impression is somewhat reinforced by the prominence of words such as ‘find’ (42 occurrences) ‘read’ (37 occurrences), ‘study’ (34 occurrences), ‘data’ (32 occurrences), ‘meeting’ (31 occurrences), #genderstatistics (26 occurrences), #eigeindex (21 occurrences), and ‘eigecso (15 occurrences), all of which refer to the work and procedures of EIGE as an institution.

In EIGE's communication, '#genderequality' (91 occurrences) surpasses 'women' (88 occurrences), which is shortly followed by 87 mentions of 'gender'. This trend perhaps hints to a difference balance in the construction of 'women' as the subjects of all gender equality discourses. As matter of fact, 'men' also appears in the twenty most frequent words (eighteenth), with 29 occurrences. The importance of 'now' is slightly less evident, although 'today' features 54 times in the corpus and 'day' appears 33. The dual focus on violence against women and labour-related concerns is, however, confirmed also in this third case. Work appears as the tenth most common word in the corpus (41 occurrences). '#vaw' and 'violence' appear respectively 40 and 35 times.

### *Discourse analysis*

In this sub-section, I privilege the three most frequently addressed topics in the narratives of the users under scrutiny because of their relevance for the overall discussion as well as due to space constraints. These topics are: equal opportunities, work-life balance, and violence against women. I acknowledge that this narrow selection in part takes away from the breath of the analysis. However, it was my decision to favor depth and present exhaustive discussion of some of the topics found in the data rather than present a superficial discussion of all of them.

Before diving into more granular analysis, I find it relevant to point out one key feature of the corpus of tweets under scrutiny: it's temporality. Going through the corpus, it was quite clear that gender equality discussions by these three users follows some sort of schedule, increasing in frequency around some key dates and almost disappearing at other times. The overall impression is that of 'a tweeted calendar of gender equality' (Trillò, 2017 May). This is perhaps unsurprising given what was discussed above in the section outlining practices of production. Highlights of the 12-month time span under scrutiny were:

- IDEVAW 2016 (launch of the 'Say no! Stop violence against women' campaign)<sup>5</sup>;
- the publication of EIGE's 'poverty report' (EIGE 2016b) and GEAR' gender mainstreaming toolkit (EIGE 2016a) in late 2016;

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<sup>5</sup> Homepage of the campaign: <http://ec.europa.eu/justice/saynostopvaw/>

- the IWD 2017 event organized by the Femm Committee at the European Parliament<sup>6</sup> and the associated launch of EIGE’s report on ‘the economic benefits of gender equality’ (EIGE 2017a); and
- the adoption of the European pillar of social rights around April 2017 (European Commission 2017b) (eventually endorsed by the Parliament, Council, and Commission on 17 November 2017).

The above list was sketched to function as a map and a summary of the most topical issues during the timespan under scrutiny. Noticeably, most of the themes above are to some extent related to the labor market or the broader economic sphere. In light of the historical outline presented in Chapter 1, this should not come as a surprise. It is a well-documented fact that the European Union originated as a supra-national entity charged with ensuring cooperation in the labor market among its member states (e.g. Lombardo & Meier, 2011, p. 71). Arguably, labour market regulation remains EU’s main area of competence in the field of gender equality, despite a push to expand beyond this area since the advent of gender mainstreaming policies in the 1990s (Lombardo & Meier, 2007, p. 47-8). A key exception is that of anti-violence campaigns, although discussion below will point out that EIGE’s take on the issue mostly revolved around the economic loss allegedly associated with violence against women.

#### Equal opportunity: empowering women, producing citizens-workers

Concerns relating one way or another to the productive sphere were dominant in the tweeted narratives of the three EU bodies analyzed in this sub-section. Equal opportunities were mostly framed as reported in these examples.

#IWD2017 There are plenty of talented women ready to join company boards.

Visit the @ewob\_network talent pool [link to website]

(@VeraJourova, EU Commissioner, 8 March 2017).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Webpage of the event of the EP website: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20170223STO63865/women-s-day-2017-parliament-highlights-women-s-economic-empowerment>

<sup>7</sup> For purposes of intelligibility, tweets from the dataset are cited in the following format: (@[TwitterUserName], [description], [full date]). Directly cited tweets by users with less than 5,000 followers who do not describe themselves on Twitter as public figures (e.g. journalist) were anonymized and referenced in the following format: (@[PrivateUserNumber], private user, [full date]).

#IWD2017 in EP: all about women's economic empowerment. More informations: [link to website]  
(@EP\_GenderEqual, EP Standing Committee, 3 March 2017)

Gender inequalities undermine women's opportunities and affect the global economy. It is time for change! #EIGEeconomicBenefits #IWD

Figure 5 - picture embedded in the tweet above



(@eurogender, European Institute for Gender Equality, 8 March 2017)

The tweet by Commissioner Jourová is interesting for a wide array of features. The language deployed works to clearly construct a boundary around 'women' as a social group and define some of its features. To begin with, 'women' are presented as a large social group that is characterized by a loosely defined 'talent', presumably for business. Furthermore, women are presented as agentic, insofar as they are the one performing the action of 'joining'. The tweet also conveys strong spatial meaning, insofar as the overall impression is that of 'women' being just about to perform a transition from a non-defined space of unemployment or underemployment into the specifically designated space of company boards.

Jourová's argumentation also presents features worth exploring. The tweet can be said to convey a feeling of urgency: the action of 'joining' is presented as having to happen soon in the future in light of women's 'ready-ness'. However, the topos deployed in this tweet is probably not that of urgency, but rather that of reality. That is to say, the reader is encouraged to take action not

because of an imminent and event outside of their control. Rather, by virtue of reality being what it is (women being talented and ready to join boards), action should be undertaken.

The tweet by the Femm Committee is representative of the impersonal and ‘press release’ communication style of the Femm Committee on Twitter. As a matter of fact, the link in the tweet<sup>8</sup> leads to a longer press statement on the website of the Committee. Following the link, it is possible to find wider reference to the above mentioned event on women’s economic empowerment organized for IWD 2017 at the European Parliament and a broad description of the activities organized therein. The webpage hardly contains any statement beyond mere information on the event, and noticeably does not offer any definition of what ‘women’s economic empowerment’ would entail. This might be inferred from a couple of sentences in the introductory paragraph, in which sources of disempowerment are listed in terms of gender pay gap, glass ceilings, violence and abuse (presumably, on the workplace), and lack of education.

It is fair to say that EIGE’s communication follows along very similar lines. Once again, ‘women’ are represented as a collective social actor that is simultaneously positioned as the bearer of ‘opportunities’ but also as the object of processes broadly defined as ‘gender inequalities’ that undermine their potential. The message further articulates that this is particularly concerning because it ‘affect[s] the global economy’ and thus ‘it is time for change!’ The message is complemented with a picture featuring some words in white against an orange background composing the question ‘Gender inequality: a missed opportunity for macroeconomic growth?’ The hashtag #EIGEEconomicBenefits positions the message in the broader discussion over EIGE’s report on the economic benefits of gender equality (EIGE, 2017a). The report produces extensive evidence as a tool of theoretical rationalization to legitimize the argument that gender inequality is an economic liability for Europe and the world at large. Although a feeling of urgency is solicited, the topos deployed is again that of reality: since inequality is a liability, action must be undertaken to remove it.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20170223STO63865/women-s-day-2017-parliament-highlights-women-s-economic-empowerment>

## Work-life balance

So-called ‘work-life balance’ was just as crucial to the communication of the users under scrutiny as the above described emphasis on equal opportunities. As it was the case above, the three users deployed fairly similar narratives also in this case.

FACTSHEET on policy framework on #WorkLifeBalance for parents and carers here: [link to website] #SocialRights @mariannethyssen

Figure 6 - picture embedded in the tweet above

THIS PROPOSAL IS GOOD FOR			
CITIZENS	BUSINESS	MEMBER STATES	ECONOMY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The proposal will improve working parents and carer's conditions, and lead to women's higher employment rate, earnings and better career progression</li><li>• Gender pay and pension gaps, as well as women's exposure to poverty, will be reduced</li><li>• Fathers will have more opportunities and incentives to participate in family life.</li><li>• Caregivers looking after an elderly, ill or disabled relative will be able to take time off from work</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• More women on the labour market will increase the available talent pool</li><li>• Skills shortages will be addressed</li><li>• Businesses will better attract and retain workers.</li><li>• Workers will be less absent from work and more motivated, which will improve companies' productivity.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Public finances will be more sustainable by reducing unemployment and increasing tax incomes</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Increasing labour supply will boost competitiveness</li><li>• Demographic challenges will be addressed by making full use of our human capital</li></ul>

(@VeraJourova, European Commissioner, 16 April 2017)

.@EP\_GenderEqual Chair reaction to the work-life balance proposal: [link to press release]

(@EP\_GenderEqual, EP Standing Committee, 26 April 2017)

Gender equality is one of the @EU\_Commission's European Pillar of Social Rights key principles. See #EIGE's feedback [link to press release] [embeds picture that won't be analyzed]

(@eurogender, European Institute for Gender Equality, 24 May 2017)

Together with Commissioner Thyssen, Commissioner Jourová was one of the main sponsors of the European Pillar of Social Rights, a 20-points policy plan including large sections devoted to work-life balance proposed in April 2017 and approved by the bodies of the European Union in November of the same year. Broadly speaking, the work-life balance component of the European Pillar of Social Rights involves EU regulations over paternity leave, parental leave, rights towards the request of flexible work arrangements, carers' leave to support seriously ill dependents, and protection against discrimination for those who exert these rights (European Commission, 2017).

Jourová voiced bits and pieces of her proposal for a 'social Europe' in several tweets during the year. In the tweet above, Jourová limits herself to announcing the proposal for a policy framework on work-life balance, vaguely positioned within the discussion over 'social rights' as suggested by the use of the related hashtag and by the mention of the Commissioner Thyssen, co-sponsor of the proposal. Once the embedded infographic is taken into consideration, however, the message by Jourová becomes substantially more concrete. The work-life balance proposal has a clearly defined target population: parents and carers. That is to say, the work-life balance package is, at least in theory, designed to cater to the needs of those involved in unpaid care-work regardless of their parental status.

The target of the proposal, however, is immediately broadened by the infographic, in which 'citizens', 'businesses', 'member states', and the 'economy' are mentioned as beneficiaries. Each of these groups is addressed with a list of benefits arising from the proposal. Citizens, framed as workers, would benefit from better opportunities for leave. This is presented as strictly linked to women's employment opportunity, pay, and career progression. Business would benefit from increased female participation in the labor market (defined in terms of a larger talent pool and reduced skill shortage) and from allegedly more 'motivated' workers. Member states would benefit from reduced unemployment costs and increased revenues from income taxes. The economy would benefit from higher employment rates and a 'full use of human capital' to address 'demographic challenges'. The link in the tweet leads to a webpage on the website of the Commission, further expanding on each of these points.

The tweet of the Femm Committee is again highly representative of the communication style adopted by their account. A dry line of text links to a press release on their website,<sup>9</sup> in which the Committee's Chair Vilija Blinkevičiūtė (S&D) comments on the proposal. In her statement, Blinkevičiūtė focuses on three key aspects of the proposal, namely paternity leave, non-transferrable parental leave, and the absence of provisions strengthening maternity leave. In her message the relevance of intra-family arrangements for care work is very prominent, insofar as she declares that the equal sharing of child-care duties 'will indeed help us to achieve that women and men in our societies become equal earners and equal carers'. Thus, at least in this declaration, the immediate reaction of the Femm Committee seems to be directed towards the care-related aspects of the proposal.

EIGE was only partially engaged with the proposal when it was first presented, but issued a feedback paper a few weeks after its publication. Adopting the Institute's usual style, EIGE's tweet connects the proposal for the Social Pillar to a non-defined objective of 'gender equality' and then embeds a copy of the feedback paper issued by the Institute (EIGE, 2017b). In the document, EIGE directly or indirectly clarifies the meaning of 'gender equality' voiced in the tweet, and mostly frames it in terms of 'closing gaps' between women and men in different aspects of life, with particular emphasis placed on employment rates and wages. The document does acknowledge more progressive perspectives, such as the wish to address 'gender equality' as a goal in itself, the need for an intersectional lens, and a life-course perspective on equality issues. However, once developed in the body of the document, intersectionality and life-course perspective are de facto sublimated into issues of access to formal employment and equal wages. Exception made for a scant reference to social protections against poverty, the document essentially understands equality as a matter limited to the labor market.

### Violence against women

For what concerns gender-based violence, the EU-level highlight of the 12-month timespan under scrutiny for this research was the launch of the 'Say no! Stop violence against women' campaign on behalf of Commissioner Jourová on IDEVAW 2016. Since this event is covered extensively in the third part of this dissertation, discussion in this sub-section does not dwell on

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20170426IPR72541/femm-committee-chair-reaction-to-the-work-life-balance-proposal>

the tweeted narratives that emerged in that specific context. Rather, my focus is on other occasions in which violence against women was discussed during the time of this research. Notice, however, that much of the material on this topic was indeed tweeted in close proximity to IDEVAW and in relation to the above mentioned campaign.

The three emanations of the EU equality machinery here scrutinized adopted fairly different narrative styles on the issue of violence against women. Nonetheless, they can be said to be relatively aligned in the underlying assumptions of their statements.

In 2017, let's make sure violence against women becomes an issue of the past  
#saynostopvaw - MY SPEECH [link to webpage with speech]  
[embeds picture that won't be analyzed]  
(@VeraJourova, European Commissioner, 3 February 2017)

Press release: MEPs call for zero tolerance for violence against women: [link  
to webpage] @AnnaMariaCB @cdallonnes  
(@EP\_GenderEqual, EP Standing Committee, 12 July 2017)

EIGE's study estimates that every year #VaW costs the EU 226 billion euro -  
[link to webpage] #UNGA  
[embeds picture that won't be analyzed]  
(@Eurogender, European Institute for Gender Equality, 22 September 2016)

Each of the three examples above points to one highlight of the timespan under scrutiny other than IDEVAW. The Tweet by Commissioner Jourová makes reference to the Maltese Presidency of the European Council, covering the first six months of 2017 and having as its key priority the eradication of violence against women. In her tweet, Jourová addresses an imagined 'us' and uses the imperative form to co-opt the audience in joining the fight against gendered violence. Women are not so much the agents of this process as the object upon which 'violence' is predicated.

The representation of time is also noteworthy. Jourová propels her audience into a future where violence against women is an issue of the past. By doing so, she is subtly acknowledging the fact that violence against women is indeed an issue of the present. This is further anchored by referring to '2017' as the time for action. In other words, actions should be undertaken 'now' to

move into the future and relegate violence against women into the past. The use of the hashtag #saynostopvaw anchors the message into a broader discussion of violence against women and conveys the impression that broader systematic action is being undertaken within a clearly defined policy framework.

The overall narrative conveys a strong sense of ‘progress’ towards a violence-free future. Violence is presented as belonging to a past connoted by backwardness, and not to the present time, represented as a mere transitory space. The same feeling is conveyed in the full speech (1,390 words) delivered by Commissioner Jourová for the inauguration of the Maltese presidency and linked in the tweet.<sup>10</sup> In her speech, Jourová simultaneously constructs Europe as a socio-political community ‘committed to the principles of human rights and gender equality’, but also as a space where ‘women and girls have their rights violated on ... an endemic scale’. Commissioner Jourová proceeds to enumerate Eurobarometer statistics (theoretical rationalization), actions initiated by local partners with the support of the Commission, and existing legal frameworks to combat violence against women (impersonal authorization). She concludes by stating that success is only achievable through concerted action. In her words, ‘I look forward to working together with you on this as "team Europe"’.

The tweet by Femm Committee points to a different yet related to violence against women in the European context: the accession of the European Union to the Istanbul Convention. Accession of the European Union as a single bloc to the Convention has been in the pipelines throughout the timespan under scrutiny for this study, and was eventually achieved with the signing of the Convention on behalf of EU representatives on June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

The tweet by the Femm Committee seems to offer a quite clear political stance: Europe is a space where violence against women should enjoy zero tolerance. The linked press statement<sup>11</sup> reiterates this message, enumerating some of the key benefits of EU accession to the Convention, mostly framed in terms of a transfer of power towards EU institutions for what concerns monitoring and sanctioning non-compliance with the provisions therein contained. The press release also reports on the stance of Anna Maria Corazza Bildt (EPP) and Christine Revault

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<sup>10</sup> Full text of the speech available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2014-2019/jourova/announcements/opening-speech-maltese-presidency-conference-violence-against-women\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2014-2019/jourova/announcements/opening-speech-maltese-presidency-conference-violence-against-women_en)

<sup>11</sup> Full text of the press release available at: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20170711IPR79519/meps-call-for-zero-tolerance-for-violence-against-women>

d'Allonnes-Bonnefoy (S&D), the two MEPs acting as co-rapporteurs of the procedure and also tagged in the tweet reported above. Overall, the impression conveyed is that of a well-developed understanding of violence against women as an issue that is political in character.

EIGE's tweet refers to a third highlight of the season under scrutiny, that is, the campaign to disseminate EIGE's report on the economic costs of violence against women (EIGE, 2014) as part of the lead up to the publication of individual country factsheets on the occasion of IDEVAW 2016. In the tweet, EIGE deploys the topos of numbers or theoretical rationalization to argue that violence against women produces substantial economic loss for European member states. In other words, EIGE uses a large numerical figure compiled via supposedly objective statistical analysis to compel the reader into action. The use of the hashtag #UNGA suggests that this information is being discussed by the representatives of the European Union at the United Nations General Assembly, usually taking place in late September (indeed, the tweet is dated September 22<sup>nd</sup>).

The link<sup>12</sup> embedded in the tweet leads to a page on EIGE's website outlining the key elements in the 2014 report. The webpage further expands by mentioning the three areas of 'loss' associated with violence against women, namely lost output, increased costs of service provision (e.g. healthcare), and personal impact on victims. Further figures are listed in the webpage. Coherently with EIGE's style, the overall narrative aims at making gender-based violence an issue that is mostly technical and that can be measured in monetary terms (theoretical rationalization, topos of numbers). If deemed disadvantageous, the issue can be removed for the benefit of the economy of the member states.

### *Section summary*

This section outlined some features of the narratives advanced by EU-level institutionalized users and their role in the discursive struggle over the meaning of 'gender equality' and, in turn, its place within the European project. In-depth discussion is presented after the next section in comparative key with the narratives advanced by the users sampled for the national level. However, elements of the argument to be built in the next section were here foreshadowed. Firstly, this section hinted to the fact that the users under scrutiny are not agentic individuals, but are produced in a complex set of practices and discourses that shape not only the

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<sup>12</sup> Webpaged linked in the tweet available at: <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-based-violence/eiges-studies-gender-based-violence/estimating-costs-gender-based-violence-european-union>

narratives they advance, but also their subject positions. Secondly, it was relatively clear that the sampled users adopt what was described in Chapter 2 as the ‘women’ approach to address gender as a political category. Thirdly, the approach fixing equality seems to be the one adopted by the EU gender equality machinery. The importance of ‘gender equality’ is established beforehand, mostly because of statistical evidence produced for the occasion, and therefore policy action is implemented to offset imbalances.

### **Italy’s feminist MPs: Domesticating EU narrative, responding to the territory**

In this section, I deal with the tweeted narratives of two users occupying institutional positions in the Italian national context. These are, respectively, Senator Valeria Fedeli (during the timespan considered for this study, vice-President of the Senate and, later, Minister for Education, University, and Research, tweeting as @valeriefedeli) and Deputy Laura Boldrini (during the timespan considered for this study, President of the House of Deputies, tweeting as @lauraboldrini). These users are somewhat different from the one explored in the previous section, insofar as neither of them is an immediate emanation of the Italian gender equality machinery. They are, rather, highly visible politicians (on Twitter and elsewhere) who are self-declared feminists and who acted in official capacity during the timespan of the research. In this sense, their positionality might be somewhat comparable to that of Věra Jourová. Comparability with the Femm Committee and EIGE, however, is obviously debatable. Nonetheless, overlaps in the narratives advanced by the users at the two level make the comparative endeavor of this chapter far from pointless.

The data sampled for this section seems to suggest what follows. Firstly, @lauraboldrini and @valeriefedeli are Twitter users that have narrative deeply shaped by the discourses and practices underlying their production, regardless of the fact that both of their accounts adopt their respective full names as screen names and their faces as profile pictures. Secondly, the key topics of interest for these users seem to be the same as those that were crucial in the narratives analyzed in the previous section, namely equality in the labor market (in its different articulations) and violence against women. This might be taken as an indication of an alignment in the narratives despite scant reference to each other. Thirdly, the focus on women as the key subject of feminism is confirmed. However, the picture presented by the users in this section is substantially more nuanced and does not shy away from engaging with men as possible subjects of their narratives.

Finally, the accounts in this section have a strong focus on marking equality issues as political issues rather than technical problems to be fixed or solved. In this sense, data in this section confirms the markedly more politicized character of national politics as opposed to the technocratic impression of Brussels-based politics.

### *Presenting the sub-sample*

Deputy Laura Boldrini<sup>13</sup> (during the time of the research member of Sinistra Ecologia e Liberta, SEL, left of center) entered parliament after an internationalized career trajectory that was, however, firmly grounded in the broader political scene of Rome. A graduate in law from Rome's University 'La Sapienza', Boldrini spent the early years of her career as a practicing journalist until entering the ranks of the UN as Junior Professional Officer in 1989. Charged with press office tasks at FAO (headquartered in Rome), Boldrini later moved to the press office of FAO's twin organization WFP (also headquartered in Rome) as spokesperson for Italy. In 1998, Boldrini moved to another UN organization as the spokesperson of the UNHCR's Regional Representation in Southern Europe (also headquartered in Rome). A self-declared feminist, Boldrini won several international and national awards for her commitment to equality issues. Boldrini also cautiously expressed solidarity with the Non una di meno feminist network in its launch phase in mid-2016 via her Twitter account. More recently, she participated as a private individual to the Non una di meno rally for IDEVAW 2018. At the present time, Boldrini has 856,000 Followers on Twitter as @lauraboldrini.

Senator Valeria Fedeli<sup>14</sup> (Partito Democratico – PD; center-left) is a politician who entered the realm of representative politics after many years as a labor unionist within the ranks of CGIL (Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro, Italy's largest union). The late years of her career as a labor unionist featured a European dimension with the presidency of the European Union of Textile workers (FSE –Thc) and the vice-presidency of the European Industrial Workers Federation (EIWF). Fedeli was elected Senator in the 2013 general elections, and appointed as vice-President of the Senate soon thereafter. After the government reshuffle of 2016, she entered the cabinet of Prime Minister Gentiloni as Minister of Education. A self-declared feminist, Fedeli has historically been a women's right advocate. Among other initiatives, Fedeli has been one of

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<sup>13</sup> Personal webpage of Boldrini: <https://www.lauraboldrini.it/about/>

<sup>14</sup> Personal webpage of Fedeli: <http://www.valeriefedeli.it/>

the initiators of the ‘Se non ora quando?’ [‘if not now, when?’] feminist network that rose after the ‘Rubigate’ scandal that contributed to bringing down the fourth Berlusconi government (Se non ora quando, 2013). At the time of writing this dissertation, Fedeli has 20,900 followers on Twitter as @valeriefedeli.

### *Practices of production*

The tweeted narratives emerging from the accounts under scrutiny in this section are the outcome of practices of production that are just as complex as the ones discussed in the previous one. Both users under scrutiny tweet with their own name and face as their profile pictures, both tweet in first person, unless specified otherwise, and both have a fairly personalized communication style. The above notwithstanding, neither of them administers her social media communication on her own, nor do they personally type the messages tweeted in their name. What follows is an attempt to outline the practices of production for the tweets of Laura Boldrini as described in a brief interview (34 minutes) with one of the communication specialist managing her account as well as her other parts of her communication. Unfortunately, the press office of Valeria Fedeli refused to partake in the study.

Boldrini’s Twitter communication is set in a complex media ecology and cycles of practices. Once again, it is worth mentioning that gender equality and broader equality issues are only part of the political profile of Laura Boldrini, who happens to be a high profile political figure and is therefore called to express opinions and take a stance on the whole spectrum of politically relevant issues. Consequently, it was found in the data that, out of the 1,698 tweets issued on her profile, only 274 directly addressed issues of gender equality, once again understood in the broadest possible sense (around 16%).

Boldrini’s tweeted presence is characterized by a mix of planned, semi-planned, and reactive posts. Planned tweets follow the calendar of parliamentary activities, political campaigns form her political formation or initiated by Boldrini herself, national and international celebrations, and so on, in this sense mirroring the practices already encountered at the European-level. Once again resembling the practices described in the previous section, reactions to unfolding events happen ‘on the spot’ and along lines similar to those described above. However, alongside planned and reactive posts, Boldrini’s communication office strives to stay alert on what gets featured on Twitter’s list of trending topics and revise their daily communication in such a way as to participate

in aggregate conversations about the most salient topics of the day. This practices arguably reflect the more dynamic character of national politics in comparison to that of Brussels-based political milieus. In this sense, while there might be some fixed dates for the discussion of some topics, speaking of a tweeted calendar of equality would not apply in this case, or at least not strictly so.

Tweets are produced by two of the officers within Boldrini's cabinet on the basis of the above described set of priorities. However, no tweet is actually published without final approval of Boldrini herself. The only exception to this is when the communication team live tweets her declarations during public appearances. In those occasions, tweets are marked with the letter '(s)' (i.e. 'staff') to distinguish them from those that were directly approved by Boldrini. In general, Boldrini's communication team shows deep awareness of the peculiarities of social media communication. They make wise use of Twitter in concert with Facebook, Instagram, more traditional forms of political communication (website, press releases, etc.) and with an eye to the broader media ecology surrounding social media (Slater & Tacchi, 2004). In particular, they are aware of the hybridity of the media system in present day society (Chadwick, 2013) and navigate it with good mastery. That is to say, they craft the performances of Boldrini's tweeted persona in light of the potential for reverberation on traditional media and, in turn, attempt to exploit visibility on traditional media to gain momentum for their messages on social media platforms.

As mentioned above, Fedeli's press office refused to participate in this study. It can be speculated that the practices of production of her tweeted persona and narratives are not dissimilar from those of Boldrini as outlined above or those of Senator Monica Cirinnà that are outlined in following chapters of this work. This claim is grounded in information gathered during fieldwork suggesting that senators from the PD center-left party have somewhat concerted set of communication practices. Things might have become somewhat different with the appointment as Minister of Education in the final months of the sampled timespan. Indeed, negotiations for the interview were entertained with the press office of the Ministry and not directly with the press officers within Fedeli's personal cabinet, thus suggesting one further layer of complexity and possibly a different set of practices of production. Unfortunately, these complexities could not be uncovered in the context of this research.

### *Word frequency analysis*

Word frequency analysis was conducted for both the accounts following the same model adopted in the previous one and throughout this study. While word frequency might suggest a strong overlap in the narratives of the users in this section and their European level counterparts, more granular analysis in the next sub-section shows that the extent of the overlap should not be overstated.

A swift look at the most frequently occurring words in Boldrini's tweets that are related to gender equality show important parallels with those encountered in the previous section. The most occurring word is once again and at this point unsurprisingly 'women' [donne], figuring 66 times as a hashtag (i.e. '#women'), 36 times untagged (i.e. 'women'), and 15 times in the singular (i.e. 'woman' [donna]). This is further corroborated by ten occurrences for the word 'feminine' [femminile]. By comparison, 'gender' [genere] only appears 14 times in the corpus, while 'men' [uomini] appears only 10 times. Therefore, the impression that a collectivity of women happens to be the subject of narratives of equality seems to be confirmed in this case, too.

As it was the case above, 'violence' seems to be a crucial topic appearing 21 times in the corpus as a hashtag (i.e. '#violence'), 20 times untagged (i.e. 'violence'), and 13 times as reference to 'femicide' [femminicidio] (always as a hashtag, i.e. #femicide). The only other topic that emerged in this word count analysis as frequent is a vaguely defined focus on laws, as marked by the recurrence of the word 'law' [legge] appearing 27 times and the hashtag '#rights' [#diritti] appearing 8 times. Another recurrent trend is the attempt to re-circulate messages directed towards her own account or towards the institution over which she presided: her own Twitter handle (@lauraboldrini) and that of the lower house of parliament (@montecitorio), appeared 57 and 44 times respectively in her gender-related tweets.

Word frequency analysis for Valeria Fedeli reveals a similar picture. 'Women' is by far the most frequent word in her tweets pertaining gender equality, with 152 occurrences as an untagged word, 33 occurrences as #women, 24 times in the singular, and 15 times as 'girls' [ragazze]. By contrast, 'gender' appears only 50 and 'men' only 29 times. Violence is again a central topic. The word itself appears 65 times in Fedeli's tweets. It is safe to state that the word probably forms part of the cluster 'violence against women' [violenza contro le donne], insofar as 'against' [contro] appears as many as 57 times. Frequent recurrence of the hashtag #thisisnotlove

[#questononeamore] suggests endorsement of a specific narrative against intimate partner violence.

Another key topic is probably that of labor relations, which would be coherent with Fedeli's unionist background. 'Parity' [parità] appears 27 times in the corpus, probably suggesting a focus on equal salary or non-discrimination. 'Labor' [lavoro] follows shortly afterwards in the list of most frequent words, appearing 26 times. As it was the case for Boldrini, 'rights' seem to also have a spot in the discussion and appear some 22 times. Finally and picking up on the above described trend, recurrence of her own Twitter handle (134 occurrences), the handle of the ministry over which she presided (@miursocial, 34 occurrences), and of the senate (@senatostampa, 18 occurrences) seem to suggest a wish to recirculate material directly referring to her own endeavors. Furthermore, the recurrence of the Twitter handles of other politicians (e.g. Maria Elena Boschi, PD, center left, tweeting as @meb, 36 occurrences) and traditional media outlets (e.g. La 27 ora, a blog dedicated to women's issues on the webpage of Italy's most circulated newspaper *Il Corriere della sera*, tweeting as @la27ora, 32 occurrences) seems to suggest as least a partial wish to engage with the surrounding tweeted environment.

### *Discourse analysis*

As it was the case in the previous section, I now turn to a discussion of the topics of equality in the labor market and violence against women in the tweets of the users here considered. Once again, this is not due to a wish to neglect other topics, but rather to the choice to offer sufficiently deep discussion on each of the topics addressed.

### Equality opportunities: Politicizing EU narratives

Boldrini and Fedeli have a slightly different take on gender issues as related to the market for labor. During the sampled timespan, Boldrini seems to have favored narrative concerning low employment rate for women, while Fedeli seems to have been particularly active on discrimination in access to employment and on parental leave.

Numbers nail us to a reality that is sad and paradoxical: in Italy, only 47% of women work while the European average is 60% (s)<sup>15</sup>  
(@lauraboldrini, Speaker of the House, 11 November 2016)

The above tweet is highly representative of Boldrini's communication on this topic as well as of broader discussions of gender equality in Italy. The first social subject represented in the above tweet is an imagined national 'us'. A policy category of 'women' is then presented as the object of a statistical measurement regarding its employment rate. This figure is compared to a European average. The ensemble suggests that the national 'us' participates in a broader collective European 'us'. The national 'us' is, however, lagging behind in the field of gender equality because of women's low employment rate. And indeed, the national 'us' is not the subject of social action, but actually the object of a metaphorical 'nailing' performed by an abstract entity such as 'numbers'. Notice that, in the Italian language, 'nailing' is not used with sexual connotation. The metaphor is more likely to make reference to 'being nailed to the cross', and is to be interpreted in terms of 'being powerless in the face of public ridicule'.

The argumentative structure can be said to make reference to the topos of numbers or the topos of reality. The reader is compelled to action because reality is what it is or because a statistical reality compels them to do so. 'Numbers' can be said to also perform the role of offering legitimacy for Boldrini's call to action via theoretical rationalization. Boldrini attempts to mobilize action on the base of affect, appealing to the readers' sadness or indignation for the picture represented. Notice that the '(s)' at the end of the tweets suggests that the message was live tweeted by Boldrini's staff as described above. The tweet is quoting one of Boldrini's speeches, in this occasion delivered in the peripheries of Milan during a meeting on the topic of women's participation in the labor force.

The above example can be said to be relevant because of the following. Firstly, Boldrini frequently deployed the topos on numbers in her narratives on this specific topic. Secondly, reference to a 'European average' against which Italy is lagging behind has been a rather frequent argument in the pro-equality discourse at the Italian national level. On the one hand, this feeds into the discursive construction of the Italian collective 'us' as part of a broader collective European

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<sup>15</sup> I numeri ci inchiodano a una realtà triste e paradossale: in #Italia lavorano solo il 47% delle #donne mentre media europea è 60% (s)

‘us’, in this sense supporting Risse’s (2009) argument that the national identity of any European country cannot be understood in separation from its history as part of a European ‘us’. On the other hand, reference to ‘Europe’ as a benchmark against which Italy is lagging behind might at least partially backfire, insofar as it might feed resentment towards ‘Europe’ and play into nationalist and nativist narratives that also happen to be anti-gender equality.

Boldrini’s take on the issue is, of course, not limited to the above. In other tweets gathered for this study, she articulates the issue of women’s low participation rate in the economy in terms that show a more nuanced understanding of the issue at stake. For example, she has time and again referred to the gender equality in connection to socio-economic disparities between the north and the south of Italy, thus transcending its boundaries and reaching into broader socio-historical and class-based considerations. On other occasions, the issue was tied to youth unemployment, thus tying it to address intergenerational differences in access to the labor market. Elsewhere, the issue was also linked to migration, with reference to the double discrimination of migrant women. In sum, Boldrini’s narrative does construct women’s relatively low employment rate as an intersectional issue that reaches beyond a narrow problem definition in terms of equal opportunities.

Fedeli’s was most vocal on a slightly different yet closely related topic within the context of women’s participation in the labor market, namely that of non-discrimination. This is likely to be connected with her background as a labor unionist, and is frequently voiced in terms relatable to the tweets below:

It is not by chance that Art. 3 of the Constitution starts with ‘without discriminations based on sex’ because women’s discrimination affects everyone.<sup>16</sup>

(@valeriafedeli, MP, 20 September 2016)

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<sup>16</sup> Non è un caso che l’art.3 della Costituzione cominci con “senza distinzioni di sesso” perché la discriminazione donne riguarda tutti

Anti-discrimination norms are necessary for real gender parity. Must read @Paola\_Profeta on @corrieremilano [link to newspaper article]<sup>17</sup> (@valeriafedeli, MP, 29 September 2016)

In the last 40 years, my commitment for the erasure of discrimination has been a daily one. Here my interview on @repubblicait [link to newspaper article]<sup>18</sup> (@valeria fedeli, MP, 7 March 2017).

The tweets above present a review of the ways in which Fedeli has been addressing the issue during the timespan under observation. In the tweets quoted above, she makes reference to discrimination as a key obstacle on the way to gender equality. This narrative is derived from a view of equality as sameness that aims at fixing equality through the lens of the ‘women’ approach as outlined in Chapter 2. In this sense, the use of the word ‘parity’ is no accident. In the above mentioned tweets, her narrative is legitimated by appealing to the impersonal authority of the Italian Constitution (in the first tweet), to an absolute moral order in which gender parity is a goal worth achieving for its own sake and without need for further explanation (in the second tweet), and in the decades long struggle of women for the achievement of parity (in the third tweet). The topoi deployed are those of reality (the first two tweets) and history (for the last tweet). Legitimacy for the call to action contained therein is grounded in impersonal authorization or moral authorization.

In these posts, Fedeli constructs a collective national ‘us’ that cares about gender parity enough to enshrine it in the Constitution and that deems anti-discrimination norms necessary because ‘discrimination affects everyone’. Fedeli also constructs herself as a subject who enjoys membership in a feminist community by virtue of her decades long commitment. Membership in this community seems to come with the duty of sharing information that her intended audience ‘must read’, either produced by herself or by others. By making reference to the handles of mainstream media outlets<sup>19</sup> and to content circulated in their webpages, Fedeli’s Twitter persona

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<sup>17</sup> Norme antidiscriminatorie necessarie per una vera parità di genere. Da leggere @Paola\_Profeta su @corrieremilano

<sup>18</sup> Da 40 anni il mio impegno per cancellare le discriminazioni è quotidiano. Qui la mia intervista su @repubblicait

<sup>19</sup> @corrieremilano and @republicait are the Milan local pressroom and the national pressroom of Italy’s first and second most circulated newspapers.

can be said to make an attempt to engage with the peculiarities of a hybridized media system in which social media and traditional media feed into each other's narratives.

### Work-life balance

The issue of work-life balance was also central at the national level in the narratives of Boldrini and Fedeli. Differently from the European level, however, work-life balance was substantially more politicized, as exemplified in the tweets below:

Sharing familial burdens is at the baseline for parity between #men and #women If that doesn't happen it is #women who are penalized<sup>20</sup>  
(@lauraboldrini, Speaker of the House, 11 November 2016)

Let's share maternity and paternity. Let's sustain that socially. Let's create a different culture. @RaiEconomia [link to newspaper article]<sup>21</sup>  
(@valeriefedeli, MP, 7 December 2016)

These tweets show a de facto overlapping narrative between the two users. The vision outlined above is actually very nuanced and progressive. Reproductive labor is clearly presented as 'work' (a burden, in Boldrini's terms) that needs to be shared between parents and that should be made sustainable 'socially' (in Fedeli's terms). Thus, it is safe to state that the topos deployed is that of burdening. The stakes are presented as being particularly high for women, who are penalized whenever shared parental care does not take place. In turn, the achievement of this goal requires 'a different culture', thus hinting to a transformative agenda behind this narrative. While deploying again the language of parity, it is clear that their narratives want to go beyond equality as sameness. Indeed, this vision dips into the 'gender' approach outlined in Chapter 2 and argues for a redistribution of labor and resources that has its roots in a progressive political project (theorizing equality).

The social subjects mentioned in the above tweets are not only women, but 'men' and 'women' in their role as potential or actual parents. While this might seem to be exclusive of people in non-normative family arrangements, it should be noted that Fedeli mentioned elsewhere in the

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<sup>20</sup> La condivisione degli oneri familiari è alla base della parità fra #uomini e #donne Se ciò non avviene ad essere penalizzate sono le #donne

<sup>21</sup> Condividiamo maternità e paternità. Sosteniamolo socialmente. Creiamo una cultura differente. @RaiEconomia

dataset that she would like to do away with the gendered language of parental care and re-name it as ‘function-based allowance’ [indennità di funzione] or ‘mission-based allowance’ [indennità di missione]. This renaming would actually apply to anyone fulfilling parental duties regardless of gender identity, sexuality, or family arrangement. What’s more, it also encapsulates the social dimension of reproductive labor, legitimizing it as a socially necessary mission demanding payment in the form of an allowance provided by the community.

As the above analysis has suggested, the two users under scrutiny seem to have a relatively progressive and well developed understanding of gender issues in the context of the labor market. This was to some extent expected in light of their position on the left side of the political spectrum. Perhaps more surprising is the level of nuance presented in their tweets. In particular, it was interesting to notice the extent to which gender issues in the labor market are constructed as political in character. Indeed, the achievement of parity is presented as embedded in issues that go well beyond the labor market itself, including socio-historical problems of the Italian territory and intersectional discrimination. In light of their political character, the users under scrutiny aptly suggest that change would require a cultural transformation. And indeed, their claims are often legitimized with reference to an overarching moral order, the law, or the Constitution, in which gender equality matters for its own sake.

### Violence against women

Discussion of violence against women on behalf of the two users under scrutiny in this section focused on two key themes: online abuse and femicide. For what concerns the former, Boldrini was far more active than Fedeli. As a matter of fact, Boldrini has been object of particularly venomous commentary on behalf of the public on social media; commentary that can be said to amount to a gendered form of hate speech and that often involves particularly graphic images of death induced through sexualized forms of torture. In light of this, the fight against online harassment became one of Boldrini’s political priorities. Examples of her tweets commenting on this issue are reported below:

It is intolerable that #women rank first in the list of targets of aggression and hate expressed on the #web<sup>22</sup>

(@lauraboldrini, Speaker of the House, 27 September 2016)

In this tweet, Boldrini makes implicit reference to herself as a member of a collective ‘us’ made of women who happen to be the target of online forms of aggression. The social action clearly has women as the object upon which it is predicated, while the ‘aggressor’ is backgrounded. However, Boldrini delegitimizes the social action represented by marking it as ‘intolerable’, a word choice that hints to a form of impersonal de-legitimization or a moral de-legitimization. The agent-less character of the actions Boldrini is denouncing can be somewhat understood by looking at another one of her tweets, in which she states that:

Violence against #women does not only concern the physical level. There is also verbal #violence on social media [a kind of violence] that avails itself of the vile shield of anonymity (s)<sup>23</sup>

(@lauraboldrini, Speaker of the House, 22 November 2016)

In this example, Boldrini makes reference to anonymity with a combat metaphor and suggesting that most online abuse is anonymous. If the previous example is also taken into consideration, it could be possible to argue that the choice of a discursive construction in which the perpetrators of online violence are backgrounded is not accidental. That is to say, a discursive representation in which women are object of violence while the perpetrators lurk in the background can be said to be relatively consistent with a situation in which women’s social media accounts are exposed to aggression in the public on behalf of individuals who remain hidden.

It’s important to notice that, throughout the timespan sampled for this study, Boldrini did not shy away from naming men as subjects of the discourse on violence against women.

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<sup>22</sup> Intollerabile che #donne siano al primo posto nella classifica delle varie forme di aggressività e odio che si esprimono sul #web

<sup>23</sup> Violenza contro #donne non riguarda solo piano fisico. C’è anche #violenza verbale sui social che si avvale del vile scudo dell’anonimato (s)

non-violent men shall be with us us #women in this battle. Shall they put  
violent ones into a corner #cartabianca (s)  
(@Lauraboldrini, Speaker of the Hosue, 16 May 2017)<sup>24</sup>

In this tweet, she directly addresses a collective subject of non-violent men. With a militarizing metaphor, she compels them to join women in a battle against violence. Furthermore, she provides guidelines for action, suggesting that they should ‘corner’ (i.e. calling out and holding accountable) another social group made of ‘violent men’. In this context, ‘men’ are foregrounded as the subjects of the discourse on violence. The non-violent ones are presented as agentic and are invited to take action. The violent ones are passivated and presented as a group that can and should be singled out and cornered. Women are backgrounded as the leading force in a wider battle against violence that goes beyond the social action represented in the specific example.

Fedeli takes a slightly dissimilar stance on the issue. Rather than naming men as an explicit subject in the discourse on violence against women, she tends to sublimate their positionality in a discursive construction according to which ‘everyone’ should be involved in the fight against violence. For example:

The challenge is working for women’s full citizenship in the common interest  
and with the collaboration of women and men #noviolenceagainstwomen  
(@valeriefedeli, MP, 25 November 2016)<sup>25</sup>

This tweet, shared for IDEVAW 2016, is a good example of Fedeli’s stance on the issue. The social subjects represented are ‘women’, who should have access to all sorts of rights summarized as ‘full citizenship’ through the work performed by a collective ‘us’ (encompassing both women and men). Crucially, the social action represented above is constructed as requiring the collaboration of all members of the community, possibly by making moral appeal to a republican ideal of active citizenship. This impression is further corroborated by the fact that the action is presented as being ‘in the common interest’ of all parties to the imagined collectivity addressed in this tweet.

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<sup>24</sup> Gli uomini non violenti siano con noi #donne in questa battaglia. Mettano all'angolo i violenti #cartabianca (s)

<sup>25</sup> La sfida è lavorare per la piena cittadinanza delle donne nell'interesse e con la collaborazione di donne e uomini #noviolenzasulledonno

As the examples above suggest, Boldrini and Fedeli envision the eradication of violence against women as a social process that involves the participation of a wide part of the collectivity, including men. And as a matter of fact, both of them voiced their support for collective mobilization specifically organized to protest against femicide and violence against women. For example

Good that #women are going back to the [public] square against #violence. I hope that tomorrow very many [feminine suffix] will take part in the rally #nonunadimeno<sup>26</sup>

(@lauraboldrini, Speaker of the House, 25 November 2016)

The fight against femicide involves everyone [repeated twice with feminine and masculine suffix]. I stand with Argentinian women #NiUnaMenos [link to newspaper article]<sup>27</sup>

(@valeriafedeli, MP, 20 October 2016)

Both the tweets above explicitly make reference to feminist movements that mobilized against femicide. Boldrini's tweet is an endorsement of the Italian feminist network 'Non una di meno', that is object of discussion in later chapters of this dissertation. In this message, Boldrini speaks in first person to qualify as 'good' the fact that a collective subject of 'women' is performing the action of staging a public protest. 'The square' is a very popular metaphor for social mobilization in the Italian context, and is often presented as the place for progressive politics in opposition to the 'palazzo', where politics is run behind closed doors without taking into account the interest of citizens. Boldrini closes her tweet with a clear stance in favor of the Non una di meno network, hoping that many women (as implied in the use of the feminine suffix) will join the rally.

Fedeli's tweet speaks along similar lines but has several elements of peculiarity. Following the republican argument for active citizenship described above, she argues that fighting femicide is everybody's business, thus also involving men in the project of social transformation behind it.

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<sup>26</sup> Bene che le #donne tornino in piazza contro la #violenza. Mi auguro che domani tantissime partecipino alla manifestazione #nonunadimeno

<sup>27</sup> La lotta contro i femminicidi riguarda tutte e tutti. Sono al fianco delle donne argentine #NiUnaMenos <https://t.co/eOHZs6B9nc>

By expressing solidarity with the Argentinian feminist movement *Ni Una Menos*, Fedeli is also hinting to the transnational character of the fight against femicide; a trope that has gained currency in the recent wave of feminist mobilization. However, by the date of her tweet, the Italian feminist network *Non una di meno* was already operative and engaging in preparation for the rally to which Boldrini made reference in her tweet. In this sense, expressing solidarity for a foreign-based movement is somewhat strident with her wider narrative that deeply relies on an imagined ‘us’ that is national in character.

While Fedeli voiced support for the Argentinian movement on another occasion, she never voiced support for *Non una di meno*. As I discuss in the dedicated chapter, *Non una di meno* clearly constructs its own identity as a movement ‘from below’ that wishes to escape capture by labor unions and mainstream political parties. In this sense, it might be the case that Fedeli could not explicitly express support for the movement because of political calculations or internal guidelines coming from her own party formation. It could also be the case that the relatively radical and somewhat queer vision of feminism that emerged in the early days of *Non una di meno* was not compatible with Fedeli’s personal views, and thus prevented her from explicitly endorsing the initiative.

### *Section summary*

This section offered an overview of the main narratives advanced by Laura Boldrini’s and Valeria Fedeli’s Twitter accounts on gender issues as related to the labor market and to gender based violence. I argue that the two users have a relatively progressive view towards both issues. In both cases, there is a surprising level of nuance adopted in their tweeted narratives despite the limitations imposed by the medium. More crucially perhaps, both labor issues and issues of violence are framed as deeply political in character. The achievement of parity on the labor market is presented and possible only by addressing a wide range of issues that span well beyond non-discrimination laws and would de facto require substantial social transformation. Similarly, the fight against gender based violence is presented as requesting direct mobilization and specific action on behalf of both women and men. If Boldrini seems to speak more explicitly the language of coalition politics and/or intersectionality, Fedeli tends to speak the language of citizenship entailing active involvement of individual citizens because of a combination of duty and interest.

## **Comparative discussion**

Based on the analysis presented above, I argue the following. First and foremost, presentation of practices of production highlighted that the users under scrutiny in this section are not to be understood as individual rational actors communicating on the basis of more or less set preferences to maximize self-interest. In my view, it would be more fruitful to understand them as subjects produced in a rather complex set of practices, usually involving a wide number of individuals, institutions, formal procedures, informal expectations, and very concrete constraints. That is to say, the practices of production underlying the communication of these users not only produces the discourses they voice on Twitter and other platforms, but are also productive of their own subject positions (Butler, 1990; Bacchi, 2016). This consideration holds true for both the supranational and the national level.

Secondly, word frequency analysis pointed out that the key object of the narrative of gender equality advanced by the users at both levels is a collective category of ‘women’. At the European level, this seems to be clearly connected with the ‘women’ approach to gender equality politics. That is to say, women are treated as a single homogenous category with clearly identifiable political needs and preferences. On the one hand, this approach is particularly powerful in conveying the sheer size of women’s subordination through large numerical figures (topos of numbers, theoretical rationalization). On the other hand, however, this approach draws perilous assumptions regarding the political preference of women, allining them with the political preference of majority women and silencing any possible conflict therein. Conversely, ‘men’ is hardly ever used as a subject category; they mostly lurk in the background as potential father, carers, or perpetrator of violence. Most often, their presence is an invisible benchmark against which women’s performance is measured in terms of a ‘gap’.

The situation is somewhat different at the national level. If ‘women’ are indeed the primary subject category of the gender equality discourse sampled thus far, their representation is substantially more nuanced and can be said to fall under the scope of the ‘gender approach’. Indeed, women’s position in the labor market or in an overall ecology of gender based violence is presented as being inherently relational and produced in social processes such as the redistribution of resources or the gendered allocation of tasks in the productive or reproductive workforce. Boldrini’s discourses seem to be also influenced by intersectional approaches to gender, adding

one further layer of nuance to her advocacy. Unsurprisingly, therefore, women are more clearly foregrounded and presented as agentic. In light of the relational character of gender adopted by these users, also ‘men’ appear as subjects of the gender equality discourse. Boldrini does not shy away from explicitly mentioning them as agentic subjects in the struggle against violence. Fedeli also directly addressed them as part of a collective ‘us’ of citizens that jointly hold a stake in the production of a non-violent society.

Thirdly, different understandings of gender as a political issue produce rather different definition of ‘gender equality’ as a political objective and what it would take to achieve it. At the European level, a fairly conservative understanding of ‘women’ as a group and also a quite conservative framing of their demands for equality. These are almost invariably presented in terms of the business case for gender equality. While this narrative might have some minor advantages, its consequences might outweigh the benefits. In theory, the business case for equality does attempt to influence neoliberal discourses by injecting a focus on women’s rights as a political issue. In practice, however, what seems to happen is the opposite: feminist platforms get injected with neoliberal discourses, while these neoliberal discourses remain unchallenged (Elomäki, 2015; Elomäki & Kantola, 2018). Indeed, the European level narratives sampled in this part of the study seem to show discourses of gender equality that speak the language of ‘growth’ as an unquestionable social goal to be achieved at all costs and of self-entrepreneurship as the best way to achieve it. Even issues such as violence against women are measured in monetary terms, essentially emptying them of their political salience. The situation at the national level is rather different. Gender equality and the eradication of violence seems to be indeed a programmatic goal grounded in a progressive political project (Eschle & Maiguashca, 2018).

The (de)politicization of gender equality was surely the main point of divergence between supranational and national narratives sampled for this chapter. This trend is also detectable in the language adopted by the users at the two levels. European level users largely deploy the topos of numbers and theoretical rationalization to argue for action and legitimize their narratives. They make frequent use of language that clearly comes from the financial world and that makes reference to benchmarks, indexes, measures, and ‘implementable’ goals in a ‘gender equality’ narrative that is not political but rather addresses a technical ‘problem’ to be ‘fixed’ via targeted policy intervention. Conversely, Italian level users prefer the topos of reality and impersonal or

moral authorization. While the topos of numbers might be at time deployed also in their narratives, legitimacy for their statements is almost invariably drawn from the Constitution, the law, the history of women's rights struggles, or more broadly from an overarching moral order in which equality matters for its own sake. In this sense, the widespread feeling that Brussels-based politics is technocratic when compared with the more politicized character of national debates seems to reverberate throughout the data sampled for this chapter.

Lastly, attempts to produce 'Europe' as a political community where 'gender equality' matters on behalf of European level actors are not-so-carefully crafted and ultimately fall short of achieving their intent. 'Europe' emerges as a socio-political space defined first and foremost for its commitment to macro-economic growth and competitiveness. Gender equality is mentioned as a fundamental value of the Union, but actually exists in subordination to the economic imperative and is worth pursuing only insofar as it contributes to growth. Conversely, national level actors have adopted an overall narrative in which equality seem to matter regardless of other factors. Despite an unlucky political season, especially in electoral terms, these narrative can be said to provide an uncompromising stance that is clearly identifiable, perhaps not agreeable, but morally respectable for anyone engaging in discussions with it.

## **Conclusions**

This chapter analyzed the tweeted narratives of a sample of user holding political offices or representing political institutions at the European level and at the Italian national level. The main findings of this chapter can be summarized as follows. Through an exploration of the practices of production behind the tweeted narratives here scrutinized, I suggested that interpreting these Twitter users as agents who wield discourses for the achievement of their individual goals on the basis of fixed interest is probably not the best way to make sense of their online personae. Rather, I argued that it would be more fruitful to understand them as subjects of discourses and practices that produce not only the narratives they voice on social media, but also their very subjectivities. These practices of production seem to be rather complex and involve wide range of individuals, institutions, as well as formal and informal norms.

I further argued that the narratives of equality voiced at both levels of analysis make reference to 'women' as the main subject of 'gender equality'. 'Men' as a subject category is hardly ever mentioned at the European level and seldom engaged with at the national level. Noticeably,

both levels seem to be silent on LGBTI issues aside from occasional reference to discrimination against sexual minorities in the context of ad hoc campaigns.

European level users were found to adopt a relatively strict understanding of women along the lines of the ‘women’ approach to gender as a political issue outlined in Chapter 2. In turn, this determined an approach that mostly aimed at fixing the problem of gender equality by defining it in strictly technical terms and thereafter implementing technical policy options to solve the problem at stake once and for all. I found that these discourses were rather prone to slippage into the vocabulary of neoliberalism, presenting individuals as self-entrepreneurs and economic growth as an ultimate and unquestionable goal. Therefore, European level users seem to endorse the so-called business case for equality, often developing their arguments along the lines of the topos of numbers and grounding its legitimacy in theoretical rationalization.

National level users were found to offer a broader and more nuanced definition of women as subjects of their discourses that is arguably closer to the ‘gender’ approach, also described in Chapter 2. These narratives take into account the material, conflictual, and inherently relational character of gender. Therefore, their approach to equality seemed to be more open towards ‘theorizing equality’ as a political project under the broad umbrella of ‘the left’ and involving broader social restructuring. Therefore, national level users seemed to be more prone to develop value-based arguments for equality adopting more or less clearly the topos of reality and grounding the legitimacy of their point of view in impersonal or moral authorization.

This chapter only presented selected topics in the gender-related narratives of the sampled users. Generally speaking, the above described trends tend to hold true also in the parts of the dataset that were not presented. At the European level, equality in sectors other than the labor market or of violence was found to be framed mostly in terms of numerically equal representation in positions of power or in terms of ‘closing gaps’ between male and female performances (including healthcare status) and visibility (mostly in the media). At the national level, equality was again framed in somewhat more progressive terms through a quest for a socio-cultural redefinition of what has value (e.g. what deserves to be shown on public media broadcasting, what deserves to be regarded as history, etc.) in order for it to encompass also female perspectives.

More broadly, I argued that the narratives of users coming from the realm of ‘mainstream’ politics and regularly speaking discourses of gender equality contribute to the production of

subjects and objects of the equality discourse. These discursive constructions are not to be taken lightly. As mentioned in the introduction, users who tweet in the name of institutions or visible office holders happen to have a disproportionate amount of visibility on social media when compared to other users in the pro-equality milieu. Since equality discussion tends to remain at the margins of political commentary, the narratives of the most visible subjects within the pro-equality field might be the only ones that reach beyond its boundaries.

## 5. Women's rights groups

### Introduction

In this chapter I explore the tweeted narratives of some organized groups that can be said to advocate for gender equality from the perspective of 'women's rights'. The groups here scrutinized were selected from two distinct yet inter-related categories of advocacy, namely women's rights groups within progressive political parties and independent women's rights advocacy groups. I sampled two users from the European supranational level and three users from the Italian national level. For the European level, these users are the European Women's Lobby (@EuropeanWomen) and the 'women' unit of the European Socialist Party (@PES\_Women). For the Italian level, these are D.i.Re (national network of anti-violence shelters, tweeting as @direlaviolenza), the 'women' unit of the center-left party 'Partito Democratico' (tweeting as @DonnePd), and the umbrella feminist movement 'Non una di meno' (literally 'not a single one less', advocating for the eradication of systemic violence against women and tweeting as @nonunadimeno).

Deeply rooted in the radical feminist tradition of the 1970s, these groups clearly adopt the 'gender' approach to gender as a political issue and aim at theorizing equality as a progressive political stance. Arguably, women's rights groups are those that pushed for the creation of supranational and national gender equality machineries whose voices were analyzed in the previous chapter. Therefore, their narratives are a relevant point of reference to understand the extent to which gender equality institutions and representatives are responsive to feminist claims as articulated by women themselves. In the previous chapter, I argued that the users speaking the voice of the gender equality machinery are to some extent hegemonic within the field of gender equality despite being resistant towards the surrounding environment. In a similar fashion, I argue here that the users analyzed in this chapter can be said to be 'resistant' to the hegemonic narratives voiced by the users analyzed in the previous one.

The above notwithstanding, it is important to keep in mind that these users are also hegemonic in their own right, insofar as they represent well established, often government-sponsored, and publicly recognized feminist groups. In other words, they are privileged subjects within the discursive field of feminist advocacy. The sampled women's rights groups do enjoy better access to resources and visibility when compared to those of other groups operating in the

same area. This interpretation is coherent with the visibility that these users enjoy on Twitter. The visibility of the users in this part of the sample is negligible vis-à-vis the visibility of the ‘hegemonic’ users discussed in the previous chapter. And yet, they happen to have somewhat broader visibility than private users. Interestingly, this visibility is often obtained through different tactics of social media activism that will be object of the discussion offered below. In this sense, the framework according to which resources largely dictate the distribution of visibility can be said to be confirmed, even though the resources involved in this case are not necessary financial ones but, rather, time and skills of the human personnel involved.

The structure of this chapter resembles the one adopted for the previous one. The two levels are analyzed separately and then brought together in a comparative discussion. Analysis at the two levels features a description of the users, some insights in their practices of production, and more in-depth discussion of their tweeted narratives. After comparative discussion, a final section draws conclusions.

### **Brussels-based women’s rights advocacy**

This section refers to the tweeted narratives of two users mostly operating at the European supranational level. Much like in the previous chapter, the users here scrutinized cannot be said to be individual rational actors. Rather, their tweeted narratives and institutional personae are the product of relatively complex sets of procedures, albeit less formal than the one encountered in the previous chapter.

#### *Presenting the sub-sample*

The European Women’s Lobby (EWL) traces its own genealogy back to a conference held in late 1987. Delegates from 85 organizations met in London to adopt two resolutions: (1) calling for the creation of a lobby organization representing the interests of women’s groups in Europe and (2) demanding the support of the European Commission in the implementation of such structure. Support from the European Commission came in 1990 with the establishment of the EWL secretariat in Brussels. EWL defines itself as an organization that ‘brings together the women’s movement in Europe to influence the general public and European Institutions in support of women’s human rights and equality between women and men’. EWL currently represents more

than 2,000 organizations in all member states and in candidate countries, as well as 19 Europe-wide organizations.

EWL's 'vision' (as stated on their website)<sup>28</sup> is opened with a powerful statement: 'we believe in a Feminist Europe'. The Lobby qualifies this in terms of a holistic and transformational vision for socio-economic restructuring that would bring wellbeing, equality, and social justice. Eradication of women's poverty, equal participation in decisionmaking for women, eradication of violence, are all mentioned as intermediate steps towards the final goal of 'a society in which women's contribution to all aspects of life is recognised, rewarded and celebrated. ... and no woman is left behind'. At the present time, the European Women's Lobby has some 13,900 followers on Twitter as @EuropeanWomen.

The Party of European Socialists (PES) brings together some 48 progressive political party formations (34 full members, 12 associates, and 12 observers) from all EU member states and Norway. Established in 1992, PES currently lists as its key objectives: true gender equality, job creation, international solidarity, growth, worker rights, social protection, progressive migration policies, and green societies. PES is represented at the European Parliament as the group of the Socialists and Democrats (S&D, also known as 'the Progressives'). Furthermore, eight EU Commissioners are members of PES parties.<sup>29</sup>

Gender equality is one of the declared political objectives of PES. Consequently, one of its standing committee regularly works on gender issues and is known as 'PES Women'. The objective of PES women is the pursuit of gender equality and women's representation both inside and outside PES. Key steps towards this goal are listed as the removal of the gender pay gap, the eradication of violence against women, and the promotion of sexual and reproductive rights. PES Women has a standing presidency (currently held by Zita Gurmai, MEP from Hungary), four vice-presidents, and a bureau that currently counts ten members. At the time of writing this dissertation, PES Women has just above 5,000 followers on Twitter as @PES\_Women.

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<sup>28</sup> About page on the EWL website: <https://www.womenlobby.org/-About-us-?lang=en>

<sup>29</sup> Homepage of PES Women: <https://www.pes.eu/en/pes-women/>

### *Practices of production*

The narratives advanced on Twitter by EWL and PES Women are produced in sets of fairly different practices that are due to the different structure of the organizations. What follows offers a description of these practices of production based on two interviews, respectively with one media officer from EWL and two communication specialists from PES Women. The first interview took place in person and lasted approximately 48 minutes. The latter took place over the phone and lasted approximately 52 minutes.

The European Women's Lobby has the most active Twitter account among the sampled ones, and generated some 4,472 between tweets, of which 985 are original content (i.e. not retweets). At the time of the interview (mid-2017), the communication office of the Lobby was reviewing the previously existing communication strategy that was drafted in a single document produced around 2010. The revision was prompted by a perceived need to adapt the communication of EWL to a changing media landscape in which social media communication seems to have acquired broader relevance. EWL is active on Facebook and Twitter, but its strategies on the two platforms are somewhat different. Facebook is mostly used as a digital diary, advertising and reporting from initiatives. It is mostly administered by a single communication officer with substantial freedom on what to post within the boundaries of the mission of the Lobby.

Differently from the above, the tweeted voice of EWL benefits from the contributions of all members of the office. That is to say, everyone working at the EWL Secretariat has access to the Twitter account @EuropeanWomen and is encouraged to tweet or retweet on behalf of the Lobby. In this sense, the communication strategy mentioned above is meant to function as a set of guidelines in order to have a public face that is crowdsourced but retains a degree of internal coherence. The crowdsourced character of the tweeted voice of EWL is further complemented by a strong prominence of re-tweeted material produced by a wide range of feminist organizations. Overall, the impression projected is that of a collective voice with a strong coral character.

In practice, much of the communication of the EWL seems to follow a cycle that revolves around a set of campaigns. Some of these make reference to the calendar of celebrations and commemorations defined in the previous chapter as 'tweeted calendar of equality' (e.g. IWD, IDEVAW). Other campaigns follow the workflow of EWL. In interview setting, it was shared that the Twitter face of EWL campaigns is usually agreed in a fairly informal way between

communication officers and the colleagues in charge of the campaign, and then jointly implemented by them with the support of the other colleagues.

In promoting their campaigns on Twitter, EWL regularly adopts a set of strategies to achieve visibility. The one that was most widely used during the timespan under scrutiny involved producing original content and then re-circulating it (i.e. retweeting it) with the addition of a comment featuring '@ mentions' of politically visible users. For example, it was fairly common for EWL to tweet something on, say, violence against women and then post a series of 'retweets with comment' that included '@ mentions' of every EU Commissioner. The final aim of this kind of action is to bring the campaign in object to the attention of users with more visibility and to their followers, in turn pressuring them into engaging with the topic of the campaign.

PES Women's social media presence is not as active as the one of EWL and follows somewhat different processes of production. Like EWL, PES Women is present on Facebook and Twitter. The division of labor between the two platforms is relatively similar. Facebook is used as a diary of activities (e.g. repository of pictures), while Twitter is used to engage in campaigning and in live commentary on issues of current relevance. During the timespan under scrutiny, PES produced some 540 tweets and retweets. Once again, yearly celebrations and commemorations were highly relevant in determining the schedule alongside pre-planned campaigns that followed the workflow of PES Women.

The PES Women account is managed by a single communication specialist who has been in charge of the social media communication since the very first tweet in the context of the 2009 elections to the European Parliament. They run the social media communication of PES Women in concert with communication broadcasted through other channels and with the support of the communication team of the Party of European Socialists. For example, the general PES communication team offers support during time of leave or in implementing campaigns that might happen to be more labor intensive. In light of such a broad experience in administering the account, the communication specialist of PES Women enjoys substantial freedom in posting whatever they believe to better encapsulate the message of the party on the topic in object.

Similarly to what was discussed above for EWL, PES Women attempts to increase its visibility on Twitter by adopting some relatable strategies. For example, PES Women also adopts the strategy of '@ mentioning' politically visible users in order to bring issues to their attention.

PES Women also adopts the strategy of ‘crushing’ trending hashtags (their own words). As mentioned in the introduction, Twitter has a strong preference for content that is being discussed ‘right now’ in a given geographic location. Twitter promotes ‘live’ content by placing it in a list of trending topics on the left hand of the homepage. PES Women occasionally attempts to promote its own content by using hashtags that are trending in some European capital cities in order to gain visibility with users that would not be aware of their tweeted presence otherwise.

### *Word frequency analysis*

An overview of the most occurring words in the tweets found on the account of the European Women’s Lobby can shed some light and offer a roadmap to find some reference points regarding their broader narratives. In light of what was state above, it is perhaps unsurprising that the most frequent word in their tweets is ‘women’ (1,055 occurrences, plus 158 occurrences for #women) and ‘girls’ (210 occurrences). Women are actually the only social subjects appearing in the top 50 most frequent words, exception made for the Twitter accounts of some individuals within the EWL structure (see below). EWL seems to also be involved in discursive work over the definition of ‘feminism’ as an object of knowledge, as suggested by the prominence of ‘feminist’ (179 occurrences) and #feministperspectives (125 occurrences) as the tenth and twentieth most frequent words in the corpus.

The use of Twitter as a tool of political campaigning is fairly evident in the use of a set of verbs that are likely to have been deployed in the imperative form and featuring prominently among the most frequent words in the corpus. These include ‘join’ (174 occurrences), ‘need’ (142 occurrences), ‘end’ (131 occurrences), ‘support’ (113 occurrences), ‘call’ (109 occurrences), and ‘must’ (106 occurrences). Advocacy around the topic of violence against women was clearly central in EWL’s narrative. #LoudandUnited (a campaign in support of the adoption if the Istanbul Convention), ‘violence’, and #Istanbulconvention appear respectively 330 times, 273 times, and 124 times as the third, fourth, and twenty-second most frequent words in the corpus. ‘Prostitution’, appearing 115 times in the corpus as the twenty-sixth most frequent word, can be said to belong within the violence-related words in light of the stance that the EWL has on the issue (see analysis in the next section).

The representation of time and space is quite unambiguous in the communication of EWL. The ‘time’ in which action is taking place is characterized by a strong focus on ‘now-ness’ as

already encountered in the narratives of other users. This is suggested by the prominence of words such as ‘today’ (207 occurrences) and ‘now’ (161 occurrences). The social representation of space also leaves little doubts: action is taking place ‘in Europe’, probably defined as bounded within the borders of the European Union. ‘Europe’ appears at the fifth most frequent word (235 occurrences), ‘#Brussels’ and ‘Brussels’ as the seventeenth and thirty-ninth (141 occurrences and 99 occurrences respectively), ‘European’ as the twenty-fourth (117 occurrences), and #EU as the twenty-seventh (114 occurrences).

Finally, it is worth noticing that EWL devotes a lot of efforts to recirculating its own material as well as that produced by some key individuals within its structure. @EuropeanWomen is the second most common word in the corpus (879 occurrences) and the Twitter handle of the (at the time) EWL President Joanna Maycock (@joannamaycock) appears 209 times (seventh most frequent). Other examples of this trend include frequent mentions of the Twitter handles of Brussels-based feminist activists such as Pierrette Pape (@pierrettepape) and Gloria Stainem (@gloriasteinem) appearing respectively 163 times (thirteenth most frequent word) and 125 times (twenty-first most frequent word).

A similar exploration of the most occurring words in the corpus tweeted by PES Women produces somewhat relatable impressions. Exception made for ‘@ mentions’ of the Twitter accounts of PES, PES Women, and some key individuals within their structures, the most frequent words in the corpus are ‘women’ (83 occurrences) and ‘#women’ (63 occurrences). It can be speculated that the emphasis is on women’s ‘rights’ (49 occurrences, sixth most common word), also coupled with women’s empowerment (#power2women appears 43 times in the corpus as the 8<sup>th</sup> most common word). Equal pay seems to be just as crucial, with #equalpay figuring 42 times in the corpus (ninth most frequent word) and #epd2017 appearing 23 times (twenty-fifth most frequent word), and #equalpayday appearing 19 times (thirty-fifth most frequent word).

Differently from some of the other users scrutinized so far, the prominence of the topic of violence against women is somewhat less evident from the word frequency analysis. References to violence include #stopviolence (17 occurrences) and #vaw (16 occurrences), as thirty-seventh and forty-fourth most frequent words in the corpus. Reference to sexual and reproductive rights is also not as evident as in the other cases scrutinized so far, with #mybodymyrights being the only hint in the fifty most frequent words (16 occurrences, forty-third most frequent word).

As the interview pointed out, PES Women uses Twitter to report and comment on the spot on what its key figures are doing. This is quite evident in the prominence of its own Twitter handle (@PES\_Women), that of the broader party structure (@PES\_PSE), and that PES Women's president Zita Gurmai (@zgurmai\_EN) as the three most frequent words in the corpus (185, 125, and 101 occurrences respectively). Further hints in this direction include the prominence of the handles of one member of PES Women's bureau (@lesiaradelicki, 38 occurrences), that of PES-associated LGBTI rights organization Rainbow Rose (@rainbowrose, 33 occurrences), and that of the Youth Chapter of PES Young European Socialists (@YESocialists, 26 occurrences). A final element that corroborates this impression of self-reporting is provided by the prominence of hashatags from PES events such as the Annual Congress of the party (#pesinprague, 30 occurrences) and the International Union of Socialist Youth Festival (#iusyfestival2017, 24 occurrences) all appearing within twenty-five most frequent words, ahead of any specific topic other than gender pay gap and empowerment.

### *Discourse analysis*

In this section, I seek to highlight elements of continuity and change between the narratives of women's rights advocates in comparison to those of their institutional counterparts discussed in the previous chapter. I will therefore focus on two main topics, and namely women's leadership and violence against women. For what concerns both topics, the narratives gathered for this chapter can be interpreted as producing 'women' as agentic subjects of the gender equality discourse as well as other discourses. This is somewhat different from what was found in the previous chapter, where women were mostly passivated as objects upon which policy and other social processes are predicated.

### Making women visible: Struggling over the signification of womanhood

EWL is regularly involved in advocacy for the production of women as viable subjects of a wide array of discourses such as politics, economics, history, and the like. The timespan under consideration is ripe with examples of this narrative, such as the one below:

Today we are #WithHer, from Europe! Let's write #HERstory!

Figure 7 - picture embedded in the tweet above



(@EuropeanWomen, women's rights organization, 8 November 2016).

This tweet makes reference to Hilary Clinton's failed presidential bid in the United States, and includes a picture of a pillow embroidered with a reproduction of the White House and the sentence 'a woman's place is in the white house'. With only seven words and two hashtags, this tweet actually encapsulates a large amount of information. First of all, the tweet presents a collective 'we' speaking from a space defined as 'Europe' in support of Hilary Clinton's electoral bid (identifiable as the 'her' in the '#WithHer' hashtag, popularized globally in the context of the Clinton 2016 campaign). The boundaries of this collective 'we' are not clearly defined. If narrowly interpreted, they could only encompass the EWL staff. However, the intention was probably that of conveying a broad sense of community that to the very least encompasses all EWL-affiliated groups, and possibly extends to everyone in the social space of 'Europe', mentioned in the tweet.

The motivation for supporting Clinton's presidential bid is found in the second sentence of the tweet, in which the reader is co-opted in a mission for the writing of 'herstory'. This neologism makes reference to the male bias in history, which is often de-constructed as 'his story': a story by a man. By contrast, the reader can make 'herstory' (i.e. a story presented from a female standpoint)

by supporting Hilary Clinton and, by extension, any female perspective officeholders. The linguistic subversion of ‘history’ into the neologism of ‘herstory’, therefore, hints to a wish for a broad transformation in the way history is told; a transformation that includes and possibly privileges female standpoints.

A similar narrative is produced in the context of EWL’s initiative for the award of a ‘women of Europe’ prize for outstanding achievements by female subjects of so-called ‘public life’:

@FedericaMog is one of the final nominees for the upcoming #womenofeurope awards. Register now for the ceremony. [link to EWL website with full description of the event]

Figure 8 - picture embedded in the tweet above



" Federica Mogherini has shown dedication and strong leadership skills at EU level - Inspiring woman."

### Achievements

Federica Mogherini has led Europe in the World, representing the EU at international fora such as the United Nations. She chairs the Commission’s Group on External Action to deliver a common approach for EU action on the world stage, regularly reporting back to the Commission’s President and to the whole College about geopolitical developments.



(@EropeanWomen, women’s rights organization, 15 November 2016).

This tweet echoes the narrative described above. The tweet mentions Federica Mogherini, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, as one of the candidates for the ‘Women of Europe Awards’. The tweet is accompanied by a picture where Mogherini’s key political achievements are outlined. The link leads to a webpage more fully describing the ‘Women of Europe Awards’ initiative in terms of a prize to celebrate women’s contribution to the European project; a contribution that goes largely unrecognized because mainstream narratives tend to give more space to the ‘fathers’ of Europe. In this context, the Women of Europe Awards is an initiative that aims at undoing the history and making a ‘herstory’ of Europe.

PES Women has a relatively similar narrative, celebrating the achievements of women in politics and therefore producing them as viable subjects of a discourse that is inclusive of and fair towards female office holders. For example:

'One of political reforms in Chile = introduction of quota of 40% for electoral lists' @mbachelet #power2women  
[embeds picture of Bachelet giving a speech that will not be analyzed here]  
(@PES\_Women, progressive party women’s right group, 28 April 2017)

This tweet reports a direct quote by the (at the time) President of Chile Michele Bachelet, member of the Chilean Socialist party<sup>30</sup> and self-declared feminist. Bachelet (whose Twitter handle @mbachelet is mentioned in the tweet) is the speaking subject of a directly reported sentence in which she mentions the introduction of a quota system for parliamentary elections as one of the feminist reforms of her government. In this tweet, Bachelet (i.e. a female political leader) is foregrounded and afforded the right to speak for herself. Bachelet’s quote speaks of the need for positive action measures in support of women’s political participation. The introduction of a quota system is named as a reform that is political in character, thus hinting to the fact that women’s participation in decisionmaking is a political matter (as opposed to a technical one).

The space represented is obviously that of the South American state of Chile. However, there seems to be a wish to suggest that quota systems should also be introduced across Europe. This claim can be said to be legitimized on the basis of moral authorization, personal authorization

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<sup>30</sup> Notice that Presidents of the Chilean Republic have to ‘suspend’ their party affiliation while holding the office of the Presidency.

(via the figure of Bachelet), or instrumental rationalization. The underlying assumption is that Bachelet's government should be endorsed as a positive model of socialist governance in the European context in light of its positive effects on women's rights. One more underlying assumption can be said to be that feminist struggles are essentially equivalent across the globe despite local peculiarities and that, therefore, women's rights advocates should learn from each other and stand together.

The link between progressive political stances and women's rights advocacy was actually fairly pervasive in the narrative of PES Women, as exemplified in a tweet reporting on a speech delivered by its President Zita Gurmai at the PES conference in Prague in late 2016:

'A progressive movement is 1 that includes 52% of population, give them voice & understand how 2 give #power2women, incl #mybodymyrights'  
[embeds picture of Gurmai giving a speech that will not be analysed here]  
(@PES\_Women, progressive party women's right group, 19 November 2016).

Gurmai, again a female political figure, is here foregrounded as the enunciating subject of a direct quote in which she claims that being a 'progressive' cannot be separated from being in favor of women's rights. In this case, 'women's rights' are framed in terms of listening to women's voices, affording them access to political offices, and supporting full protection of sexual and reproductive rights. It should be noted that all the issues in the list are here presented as markedly political in character. If they were technical, there would be no need to establish the link between putting them on the agenda and a progressive political stance.

All in all, PES Women and EWL alike participate in the discursive negotiating of the meaning of 'women' as subjects of policymaking. For PES Women and EWL, inequality is markedly political and demands political solutions.

### Violence against women as political violence

EWL's narratives on violence against women revolved around three key campaigns, advocating for the eradication of sex trade for the purposes of prostitution, for the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, and for the celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the EWL

Observatory on violence against women. In light of the more generalized character of the last one, examples below will only refer to the first two.

EWL devoted substantial effort towards advocating for the elimination of sex trade for the purposes of prostitution. In turn this was linked with two other social phenomena, and namely human trafficking and demand for prostitution, both of which are understood as forms of violence against women. In light of the fact that sex trafficking mostly involves underage women, the campaign was unrolled during the European Week of Action for Girls and peaked during an event titled ‘not for sale’. Examples of the EWL stance on the issue include:

For #EUgirlsweek MEP @AnaGomesMEP takes a stand against the sextrade  
& says that women&girls are #notforsale @PlatMulheres @rpjiomh @CAPintl

Figure 9 - picture embedded in the tweet above



(@EuropeanWomen, women’s rights organization, 12 October 2016)

In this first example, EWL establishes a link between its campaign and the ‘tweeted calendar of equality’ mentioned in the previous chapter by linking it to a EU sponsored events such as the Week of Action for Girls. EWL then foregrounds MEP Ana Gomes (S&D) as the agentic subject of a markedly political action, namely ‘taking a stand’. The foregrounding is

reinforced visually by embedding her picture in the tweet. The ‘stand’ that is taken in this representation is one against ‘sex trade’. In the overall narrative of EWL, sex trade is understood as a complex set of practices that include but are not limited to child abduction, human trafficking, exploitation of sex workers, and violence during consumption of sex work services. The hashtag #notforsale is used to further reinforce the statement visually as well as affectively, feeding into a broader narrative of female bodily autonomy.

In a second example, EWL aims at establishing a link between sex work and a broader patriarchal culture that ultimately produces demand for prostitution:

#notforsale There are obvious links between sexism, sexist advertising, & commodification of women #enddemand @PlatMulheres @CAPintl @CFFB1 (@EuropeanWomen, women’s rights organization, 12 October 2016)

This example is a comment on a retweet. The original tweet was published by a private users and featured a brief comment on a PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) campaign. The original tweet uses a picture of TV star and model Pamela Anderson to prompt the views towards ‘going vegan’. In the picture, Anderson is posing in a bikini and her body parts are separated with dotted lines and marked with the names of beef cuts. The underlying message is that all animals (including humans) have the same body parts and, therefore, should be treated equally.

Figure 10 - picture embedded in the retweeted tweet described above



The narrative advanced by EWL in response to this picture aims at linking patriarchal culture and demand for a sex work. No social actor is foregrounded in this tweet. Women are the only explicitly mentioned social group, passivated at the receiving end of a set of processes that are said to commodify them. ‘Men’ are backgrounded as the implicit subject of ‘demand’ for sex workers. Social processes are substantially more prominent. EWL is here aiming at discursively producing the above mentioned link between a patriarchal social order and the apparatus of the sex work industry. Hashtags once more reinforce the message visually and also positions it in broader discussions of prostitution as a challenge to women’s bodily integrity.

The link between a patriarchal social order and violence against women is also clear in the support that EWL voiced for the adoption of the Istanbul Convention by the European Union and its meaningful implementation in EU member states. The Istanbul Convention has been praised for its quite progressive understanding of violence as the outcome of unequal power relations between men and women in all societies and for its advocacy for structural solutions to the issue. EWL openly lobbied and advocated for the ratification of the Convention at the EU level, and also voiced this via Twitter, as in these examples:

#EU MUST fully ratify #IstanbulConvention to end violence against women & girls #16days #endVAW #herfuture [link to website]

Figure 11 - picture embedded in the tweet above



(@EuropeanWomen, women’s rights organization, 25 November 2016)

#IstanbulConvention: vital opportunity to end violence against women & girls  
in the EU! [link to factsheet on violence against women] #saynostopvaw  
@EU2017MT  
(@EuropeanWomen, women's rights organization, 3 February 2017)

Messages such as the above were tweeted time and again during the timespan under scrutiny, usually complemented with an infographic as the one in Figure 11. On the left hand, the infographic features the famous 'zapatos rojos' [red shoes] installation by Mexican artist Elina Chauvet. The installation is meant as a way of visibilizing the bodies of 'absent' women who are no longer in the public space because they fell victims of femicide. On the right, the image is complemented with some statistics regarding VAW and a call for the EU to adopt and implement the Istanbul Convention. The call is signed by the European Coalition to End Violence Against Women and Girls, a group of loosely associated NGOs working to eradicate VAW.

In these examples, the EU as an entity is presented as the subject of an imperative: ratifying the Convention is something the Union 'must' do. In particular, the second example above marks the Istanbul Convention as 'vital', perhaps alluding to the fact that violence against women indeed kills a staggering number of individuals every year. A set of hashtags is used to locate the action in time. '#16days' and '#saynostopvaw' are used to set the message in the context of the IDEVAW campaigns sponsored by the UN and by the European Commission, thus placing it in the tweeted calendar of equality around the date of IDEVAW in late-November. The hashtag #herfuture positions the message in a present that, by implication, does not belong to 'her'. That is to say, the present time is not one in which women can live in full safety. The reader is thus compelled towards the production of a future in which this is the case.

In this area of advocacy, PES Women favored discussion and advocacy for the adoption of the Istanbul Convention over other topics, at least during the timespan under scrutiny. Examples of this trend are the following:

Join & spread our call for the ratification of the Istanbul Convention by the EU  
#IDEVAW2016 #IDEVAW #EndVAW #25Nov  
[embeds infographic that will not be analyzed here]  
(@PES\_Women, progressive party women's right group, 23 November 2016)

A landslide majority in @Europarl\_EN adopted the resolution for the #IstanbulConvention full ratification by the EU [link to press release] (@PES\_Women, progressive party women's right group, 24 November 2016)

The previous sub-section commented on the link that PES Women establishes between progressive political stances and women's rights advocacy. It is therefore unsurprising that PES Women and the Progressives in general were among the groups lobbying and actually voting for the adoption of the Istanbul Convention by the EU and its member states. The above messages are relatively dry, but clearly establish that the ratification of the Convention is one of the key political priorities of PES Women and, in turn, of the Party of European Socialists.

A somewhat more affective message is produced in a different context, commenting on Jourová's speech at the opening ceremony of the Maltese presidency of the European Council and analyzed in the previous chapter. The tweet reads:

.@VeraJourova announces that the @EU\_Commission will NOT make any legislative proposal on combating #VAW...a disappointment for #women in EU [embeds picture of Jourová giving a speech that will not be analyzed here] (@PES\_Women, progressive party women's right group, 3 February 2017)

Jourová is here presented as the agent of the action of announcing EU policies, thus positioning a female officeholder as the agentic subject of political action. However, Jourová is also presented as the bearer of a political stance that is said to be disappointing for women in the EU. PES takes a discursive stance that is resistant vis-à-vis EU hegemony, portrayed as relatively conservative in the face of the fight against violence. Implicit is a call for a more progressive stance that would produce legal instruments for the eradication of VAW.

### *Section summary*

The above section developed arguments along the following lines. Starting with a discussion of practices of production, I argued that the social media personae of these women's rights groups are produced in a complex set of practices that is relatable to that of their institutional counterparts. I further argued that women's rights groups are resistant vis-à-vis the 'hegemonic' discourses presented in the previous chapter, despite being relatively hegemonic voices when compared to those of other users/organizations in the feminist milieu. In particular, I dwelled on

how this dual positionality produced elements of continuity and disruption with the narratives presented in the previous chapter. Some of this were identified in the more progressive definition of ‘women’ that these users put forward when compared to those described in the previous chapter as well as the political character of their claims.

### **Italian Women’s rights advocacy**

In this section, I focus on the tweeted narratives of two two national-level users that essentially mirror the ones just scrutinized for the European level as well as the narratives circulated via the official account of an umbrella feminist movement that does not have a comparable counterpart operating at the European supranational level. These are, respectively, D.i.Re., the Italian network of anti-violence shelters (tweeting as @direlaviolenza); the National congress of female members of the Democratic Party (henceforth, Donne PD, tweeting as @DonnePd); and the Non una di meno, feminist network, active since mid-2016 (tweeting as @nonunadimeno).

While there is indeed an Italian chapter of EWL, it is not particularly active on Twitter and hardly has any following. After exploring other options, D.i.Re. was recognized as the most closely comparable Twitter handle in terms of follower-base, positionality vis-à-vis national institutions, and ultimately narratives of gender equality. Donne PD is a close equivalent of PES Women. The Italian Democratic Party is a member of PES, and its women’s chapter closely mirrors the trends detected in the narratives of PES Women.

Non una di meno is a nationwide feminist network that can be said to resemble a traditional social movement also using social networks as part of its advocacy (Trillò, 2018c). Several other feminist movements emerged around the same time in Europe (for example, the Black Protest movement in Poland, just to mention one). Information gathered during fieldwork with activists from the Non una di meno network suggests that there is some level of international coordination between the different movements (see Chapter 8). However, these movements tend to be national in character. In other words, I did not detect the presence of a trans-European feminist network operating at the European supra-national level and resembling a social movement as commonly identified in the literature.

### *Presenting the sub-sample*

D.i.Re<sup>31</sup> stands for ‘Donne in Rete Contro la violenza’ (literally ‘networked women against violence’). Officially constituted as an association in 2008, D.i.Re is the first organically coordinated group of anti-violence shelters to have nationwide character in Italy. D.i.Re is the outcome of the concerted action of some 57 entities that drafted a political document titled ‘Charter of the National Network of anti-Violence Shelters and of the Women’s Houses’ (Carta della Rete Nazionale dei Centri anti violenza e delle Case delle donne) in 2006. The document fiercely affirms to be political in character and outlines the vision of the group for the eradication of VAW. This vision is grounded in an understanding of VAW as the outcome of unequal power relations between men and women in different social spheres. D.i.Re, therefore, self-identifies as a political entity that aims at influencing national politics, culture, and institutions with bottom-up interventions that are grounded locally developed knowledges. D.i.Re currently counts in its ranks 80 shelters and women’s houses. At the time of writing this analysis, D.i.Re has some 4,670 followers on Twitter as @direlaviolenza.

The National congress of female members of the Democratic Party (Donne PD) self-defines as the place within Partito Democratico for the elaboration of gender policy, cultural pluralism, intergenerational dialogue as well as the place for the production of proposal for structural reform with an eye to gender issues. The Congress is headed by a spokeswoman and an executive committee that is elected every three years by the members. The permanent component of the Congress is open to all female officeholders from PD, whom can be considered for admission upon their own request. Local level officeholders responsible for equal opportunities in their respective seats are members of the Congress by default. The Congress reportedly holds two national meetings open to the wider PD network (activists and perspective voters) every year. Because of recent turmoil within the ranks of the party, the role of Donne PD has become somewhat unclear. The group actually risks being dismissed. As of the writing of this dissertation, Donne PD has some 1,880 followers on Twitter as @DonnePd.

‘Non una di meno’<sup>32</sup> is the name of the latest nationwide feminist network that emerged in Italy in mid-2016. Non una di meno originated from the concerted effort of three of the largest

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<sup>31</sup> About page on D.i.Re’s website: <https://www.direcontrolaviolenza.it/chi-siamo/>

<sup>32</sup> Homepage of Non una di meno: <https://nonunadimeno.wordpress.com/>

Italian feminist networks, and namely D.i.Re (discussed above), Unione Donne Italiane (UDI, literally, ‘Union of Italian Women’, originating in the anti-fascist resistance movement in the 1940s) and Rete Io Decido (literally, ‘Network I decide’, mostly advocating in the field of sexual and reproductive rights). ‘Non una di meno’ is an Italian translation of the name of the Argentinian feminist movement ‘Ni una menos’. The Italian movement borrowed extensively from its Argentinian comrades for the development of its vocabulary and visual identity. Non una di meno openly became a subject of the Italian discussion on gender equality following a large scale rally for IDEVAW 2016. Since then, Non una di meno held several successful initiatives in several different locations in Italy. The network is operative to the present day. At the present date, Non una di meno has some 10,700 followers on Twitter as @nonunadimeno.

### *Practices of production*

The communication of all the users in this section emerges as the outcome of a relatively complex constellation of practices of production involving mostly informal norms for the drafting and re-circulation of content. In turn, the tweeted narratives of the users in this section are set in a media ecology that involves more than just communication on Twitter but encompasses other social media, traditional media, and face-to-face communication. The information reported below was gathered during three semi-structured interviews that lasted 58 minutes, 54 minutes, and 84 minutes respectively.

During the timespan under scrutiny, D.i.Re’s social media communication was mostly handled by a single communication officer/activist who took charge of expanding the social media presence of the network around mid-2016. The expansion was to some extent connected to the mounting momentum in preparation for the Non una di meno rally for IDEVAW 2016; a correlation that is detectable in the dataset. The officer/activist who took charge of D.i.Re’s social media presence did so on a voluntary basis alongside other voluntary work in the press office of the network. Communication was mostly administered on the basis of trust afforded to the officer/activist managing the account, in turn based on their experience in the Italian communication industry over several decades. No official social media policy was in place. Twitter and Facebook were used alternatively, circulating roughly the same content but with different publication rates, reflecting the different character of the platforms. In particular, it was hinted to the fact that Facebook is more apt to communicating with potential adherents to feminist

mobilization, while Twitter is more apt to the achievement of visibility with traditional elites and traditional media outlets.

Several strategies were devised in order to expand the social media presence of D.i.Re. For what concerns content, wider coverage was afforded to local initiatives, including the re-circulation of press releases and other pieces of multimodal text originally published on the website of the network. Attention was also devoted to feminist mobilization beyond the Italian context and to feminist issues being discussed elsewhere in the world. A second area of intervention aimed at increasing the follower-base, and especially achieving some degree of recognition by mainstream media newsrooms (e.g. newspapers, journalists), through the establishment of relationships of mutual following. This process involved mobilization on social media but also mobilization of the personal network of the officer/activist managing the account.

Donne PD has a relatable although more structured workflow. It shall be noticed that, following a failed attempt at reforming the Italian Constitution in November 2016, the PD political party has undergone substantial turmoil and internal restructuring that also invested Donne PD. For the first half of the timespan scrutinized for this work, the account was administered by the personal cabinet of the spokeswoman of Donne PD. Following her transition to a different party formation in late-February 2017, the administration of the social media accounts was handed over to a local level officeholder, who at the present date is still individually managing them as part of her duties for Donne PD.

At the time of the interview (November 2017) Donne PD had no social media policy in place. General guidelines for conduct on social media were borrowed from the ones developed by PD for its different units and individual members holding elected offices. Social media are declaredly used to broadcast the messages of the party in the area of gender equality. In this sense, much of the communication resembles that of old style ‘press releases’ and explicitly avoids engaging in conversation with private users. Facebook is recognized by the officer managing the communication as somewhat more active, or at least more diversified in the number and geographic locations of the users sharing or otherwise engaging with Donne PD.

Twitter, conversely, is deemed as more static. The content circulated on Twitter by DonnePd is mostly gathered beforehand by its members, who privately forward it to the social media manager through different channels of communication. The manager then proceeds to select

the material and broadcast it on social media. The material is hardly ever circulated in the form of re-tweets. The preferred strategy is that of retrieving the original source and then link it directly in a new tweet, often without any comment attached. It was specified in interview setting that said content does not necessarily have to originate within the PD ranks. As long as the content is deemed to be progressive and in tune with the general ethos of Donne PD, it can be re-circulated on its social media.

In light of its different character, the communication of Non una di meno diverges from that of the other users presented so far. Non una di meno spreads its messages through a wide array of channels, namely a blog on WordPress, a Facebook page, a Twitter account, and (more recently) an Instagram account. In addition to these communication channels, many of the local chapters of Non una di meno independently circulate their own material through other accounts and pages characterized as ‘local’ Non una di meno outlets (e.g. Non una di meno – Milan). Since its very inception, Non una di meno stressed its positionality ‘outside’ of institutions and independence from ‘politics as usual’; a stance also found in their informal social media policy, in which the movement avoids recirculating the material of political parties, unions, and politicians.

The communication of Non una di meno is the outcome of consultation in one of its units, known as the ‘mediated narratives of violence’ working table as well as the outcome of continued consultation among the different activists involved in the movement. The number of people involved in the management of the social media accounts is actually quite wide and can be said to be somewhere between twenty and thirty activists. However, a smaller unit of around five Rome-based activists manages most of the the day to day worklow. After the end of the data gathering phase for this study, all the activists involved in the communication of Non una di meno at the national and also local level agreed to join a private Facebook group for the purposes of closer coordination of their activities. Some degree of international coordination with social movements abroad was also present. In particular, campaigns taking place around key celebrations such as IWD and IDEVAW was developed in concert with other feminist movements elsewhere in the world. For example, the communication of the campaign for Women’s strike on IWD 2017 was developed in consultation with comrades from feminist movements across the world on a private Facebook group called ‘Paro des mujeres’.

Facebook was recognized by Non una di meno activists as the main platforms for the broadcasting of the movement's message to its perspective supporters, while Twitter represented an outlet needed to catch the eye of traditional elites. Particularly, Twitter was considered to be the most effective medium for communication and reporting 'on the spot' from rallies, assemblies, and other initiatives. This is clearly visible in a surge in activity around the time of the national assemblies of the movement as well as in the relatively large number of initiatives of social media activism that successfully managed to bring feminist content to visibility, also among users that usually would not encounter feminist tweets. These initiatives are devised through the support of some tech-savvy adherents to the movements and some collectives that specifically focus their activist endeavor on social media communication of feminist content.

### *Word frequency analysis*

The most frequent words occurring in D.i.Re's tweet are mostly consistent with what was found so far in the dataset. Noticeably, many of these refer to hashtag campaigns or to the Twitter handles of some relevant figures within Italian feminism and the adjacent political discussions (discussion below). Setting these aside for a moment, the most frequent word in the corpus is once again 'women' [donne] appearing 414 times on its own and 120 times as #women [#donne]. Donne (second most frequent word) is followed by 'violence' [violenza] and 'against' [contro], appearing 337 and 287 times respectively as the sixth and seventh most frequent words in the corpus, suggesting that the cluster 'violence against women' was quite central in the narrative of D.i.Re.

A focus on circulating logistical information and reporting from analog mobilization can be inferred by the prominence of words referring to time and space. Words like 'Roma [Rome] (150 occurrences), 'November' [novembre] (123 occurrences), 'today' [oggi] (115 occurrences), 'towards' [verso] (93 occurrences), 'rally' [manifestazione] (91 occurrences), 'square' [piazza] (91 occurrences), 'strike' [sciopero] (84 occurrences) all feature in the twenty-five most frequent words and appear way ahead of other words that could indicate other topics of interest for D.i.Re.

For what concerns hashtags, #nonunadimeno is actually the most frequent one in D.i.Re's tweets (584 occurrences). The hashtag launched by Non una di meno for women's strike on IWD 2017 (#lottomarzo) is the fourth most frequent word (348 occurrences). The hashtag of a public concert featuring many Italian female singers-songwriters organized in late 2016 to finance the activities of anti-violence shelters #amicheinarena is the tenth most frequent word (130

occurrences). The general hashtag for Valentine's day #sanvalentino2017, 'crushed' by Italian feminists in order to bring feminist content to visibility with the broader public, was the twelfth most frequent word (123 occurrences). Generally speaking, this shows an awareness of the need to appropriately use hashtag in order to join public conversations and reach audiences beyond one's own follower-base.

The wish to engage in conversation beyond D.i.Re's own followers is also detectable because of the frequent tagging of other figures in the ecology of Italian feminism, possibly hinting to an attempt to engage with their follower base. @nonunadimeno appears 381 times as the third most frequent word. Similarly, the Twitter handles of activists such as Antonella Veltri (@antonellaveltri) and Luisa Rizzitelli (@luisarizitelli), the group in support of feminist demographer and statistician Linda Laura Sabbadini (@mllsabadini), journalist and writer Alessandra di Pietro (@aledipie), feminist cartoonist Anarkikka (@anarkikka), all appear between 144 and 84 times in the corpus and among the 30 most frequent words. Finally, D.i.Re's own handle also features as the fifth most frequent word, appearing 337 times in the corpus.

Given the narrow number of tweets produced by Donne PD, it is unsurprising that the word frequency analysis does not yield results that are of particular interest. 'women', '#women', and 'woman' are once more the most frequent words in the corpus, with 40, 15, and 14 occurrences each. Aside from this, the only other trend worth noticing is a high frequency for the Twitter handles of women within Donne PD, other progressive party formations, and feminist organizations (e.g. @raffaellasalmaso, @robertagostini\_, @liviaturco), de facto monopolizing the list of most frequent words. Among these, it is worth mentioning the presence of the Twitter handles of Valeria Fedeli and Laura Boldrini, whose narratives were analyzed in the previous chapter.

The most frequent words in the tweets by Non una di meno are also consistent with findings outlined thus far. Aside from hashtags and '@ mentions', the most frequent words are, 'women' [donne] (456 occurrences), violence [violenza] (284 occurrences), and 'against' [contro] (266 occurrences), suggesting that violence against women is the main focus of the movement. The prominence of words referring to the realm of social mobilization also suggests a focus on spreading logistical information and on self-reporting. These include 'strike' [sciopero] (240 occurrences, 7<sup>th</sup> most frequent), 'Rome' [Roma] (216 occurrences, 8<sup>th</sup> most frequent), 'towards'

[verso] (213 occurrences, ninth most frequent), ‘Pisa’ (150 occurrences, twelfth most frequent), ‘square’ [piazza] (125 occurrences fifteenth most frequent), ‘feminist’ [femminista] (112 occurrences, twenty-first most frequent), and ‘assembly’ (109 occurrences, twenty-second most frequent), just to mention a few.

Hashtags were widely used as a tool for the achievement of visibility with audiences attuned to feminist messages as well as other audiences, within Italy as well as beyond. #nonunadimeno was the most frequent word in the corpus, appearing 936 times, to which it is possible to add the 99 occurrences of the Spanish-speaking hashtag #niunamenos. Hashtags referring to the Women’s strike on IWD 2017 such as #lottomoarzo (590 occurrences) and #feministstrike (193 occurrences) appear as the second and tenth most frequent words in the corpus. Other hashtags from the IDEVAW 2016 and IWD 2017 mobilizations feature in the top 20 most frequent words. These include #26n (136 occurrences), #8m (117 occurrences), and #siamomarea [#weareatide] (136 occurrences). Finally, the general hashtag for Valentine’s day #sanvalentino2017, ‘crushed’ with feminist content via concerted action of the Non una di meno activists appears 115 times.

‘Mentions’ are somewhat less prominent than they were in the case of D.i.Re, but remain present and relevant. For example, the handle of DinamoPress, an online alternative news outlet friendly to the movement, appears as the eleventh most common word in the corpus (164 occurrences). The handle of a popular activist in the context of Non una di meno (@franca\_stra) appears some 114 times at the twentieth most frequent word, closely followed by the handle of Aqara (@aqara), a Pisa-based collective of feminist IT specialists who developed most of the movement’s concerted actions on social media. Scrolling down the list of most frequent words, handles of other relevant activists and collectives are increasingly frequent. Finally, Non una di meno’s own Twitter handle (@nonunadimeno) is the third most frequent word in the corpus, signaling relatively frequent re-tweeting of tweets mentioning the movement.

### *Discourse analysis*

I now turn to a discussion of the same topics that were selected for analysis in the part of this chapter focusing on the European level, namely discourses referring to women’s visibility and discourses referring to violence against women.

## Making women visible: Struggling over the signification of womanhood

Both Non una di meno and Donne PD produced tweets attempting to give visibility to women's role in society and therefore producing them as viable subjects of history and politics. For example:

Angela Davis in the frontline for women's global strike in New York. Always nice to see you Agela #nonunadimeno #lottomarzo #8M<sup>33</sup>

Figure 12 - picture embedded in the tweet above



(@nonunadimeno, feminist network, 6 March 2017)

In this tweet, Non una di meno is operating along lines that are substantially similar to those adopted by the European level users presented above. Angela Davis, a woman of color, is foregrounded as the main character of the action represented. The use of 'frontline' as a combat metaphor further foregrounds Davis and also deliberately conveys the message that feminism is indeed *fighting* against patriarchy. Action is clearly set in a North American space. However, the

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<sup>33</sup> Angela Davis in prima linea per lo sciopero globale delle donne a New York. Sempre bello rivederti Angela #nonunadimeno #LottoMarzo #8M

second sentence produces a sense of familiarity and communality. Davis is addressed with the first name, and the subject enunciating the tweet (the collective self of Non una di meno) claims that it is nice to ‘see’ Davis again, as if they were in physical co-presence. Finally, the Italian-speaking hashtags in the message complete the linkage between the US American setting and the Italian context, suggesting that feminist struggles are joined across space.

Non una di meno’s Twitter handle did not directly participate in the production of a ‘herstory’ of Italy. However, it did so through frequent re-tweeting of messages produced by collectives and organizations loosely adhering to the network.

RT @Casa\_donna\_Pisa: the streets belong to women! Pisa has a new feminist #toponymy! #LottoMarzo #nonunadimeno<sup>34</sup>

[link to a slideshow with several pictures of street sign covered with a mock ups bearing the names of a female historical figures]

(@nonunadimeno, feminist movement, 11 March 2017)

RT @NonunadimenoMI: women partigiane are back #feminist25April #milan #bandits #25April<sup>35</sup>

Figure 13 - picture embedded in the tweet above



(@nonunadimeno, feminist movement, 25 April 2017)

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<sup>34</sup> RT @Casa\_donna\_Pisa: Le strade sono delle donne! A Pisa una nuova #toponomastica femminista! #LottoMarzo #nonunadimeno

<sup>35</sup> RT @NonunadimenoMI: Le donne partigiane sono tornate #25aprilefemminista #Milano #bandite #25aprile

The above examples refer to the actions that key groups adhering to Non una di meno staged to re-write a ‘herstory’ of Italy. The former tweet aims at undoing the male bias in toponymy (the naming of places), in turn a product of the above discussed male bias in history. The action being reported involves covering street posts bearing the name of male historical figures with mock ups that bear the names of female ones. The action has the dual aim of producing women as viable subjects of history and, therefore, viable subjects of toponymy. The message is simple and powerful: women belong in history and, in turn, their names belong on street signs.

The second example above reports on the mobilization of the Milan chapter of Non una di meno on the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> of April: national day celebrating the liberation of Italy from the Nazi invasion at the end of WWII and the capitulation of the Fascist regime. The tweet embeds a picture of women marching with a Non una di meno banner and comments that ‘partigiane’<sup>36</sup> are back. By using the female suffix for ‘partigiano’, the tweet foregrounds the women that participated in the resistance against Nazi-fascism at the end of WWII, thus highlighting their often forgotten contribution. By saying that partigiane ‘are back’, the tweet is attempting to produce an imagined link between resistance to Nazi-fascism in the 40s and the resistance against patriarchy that Non una di meno activists are performing in the present. The link between partigiane and Non una di meno activists is also reinforced through the hashtag #bandite [#bandits], signaling a shared positionality outside of the law or at least outside of acceptable social norms for both partigiane and feminist activists. Finally, the link between women in the resistance and Non una di meno activists is reinforced through the first hashtag (#25aprilefemminista) which attempts to re-frame the celebrations for Liberation Day in feminist terms.

Donne PD operates in a way that is significantly less bold and that mostly resembles that of PES Women. Most of the tweets of Donne PD in this topic referred to the lead up and live reporting from an event organized by the Italian parliament to celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Italy’s constitutional referendum of 1946, marking the first time in which Italian women were

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<sup>36</sup> ‘partigiano/a’ is the collective name of the Italian guerrilla fighters that constituted the bulk of the so-called ‘resistance’ against Nazi invasion in 1943-45. They are commonly celebrated as heroes that made an invaluable contribution towards the end of the fascist regime. Their figures are usually associated with PCI, which was underground during the Fascist dictatorship and emerged as the second largest political force in the country soon thereafter.

allowed to vote. For example, Donne PD reported on a comment advanced by Valeria Fedeli at the above mentioned event by tweeting what follows:

@valeriefedeli: steps forward in this electoral cycle, but there are still discriminations concerning #maternity. "70years of women voting"<sup>37</sup>  
[link to picture of Fedeli speaking at the event that will not be analyzed here]  
(@DonnePd, progressive party women's rights group, 15 September 2016)

As it was the case in most of the examples above, Fedeli, a female political figure, is foregrounded as the subject enunciating the content of paraphrased speech in the rest of the tweet. Fedeli's words to some extent produce the 1946 referendum as 'time 0' in the history of women's rights in Italy, and traces an ideal link between that event and current progress allegedly obtained in the 20013-2018 electoral cycle. However, Fedeli also warns that equality is far from being achieved, as testified by persistent discrimination, for example with regard to maternity leave.

Another example of a somewhat more standardized attempt at celebrating the life of an iconic female politician in recent Italian history came in late-July 2017:

29 July 1976, Tina Anselmi, the first [female] Minister of the Italian Republic!  
@valeriefedeli @LauraPuppato @TurcoLivia @DonnePd<sup>38</sup>

Figure 14 - picture embedded in the tweet above



<sup>37</sup> @valeriefedeli:passi avanti in questa legislatura,ma su #maternità ancora discriminazioni."70anni voto delle #donne"

<sup>38</sup> 29 luglio 1976, Tina Anselmi, la prima Ministra della Repubblica Italiana! @valeriefedeli @LauraPuppato @TurcoLivia @DonnePd

(@DonnePd, progressive party women's rights group, 29 Luglio 2017)

In this tweet, Donne PD produces a discourse in which a female political figure is foregrounded and celebrated for being the first female member of a government cabinet in the history of the Italian republic. While being a member of the Christian Democrats (and thus not of the Italian Communist Party, from which present day PD inherited much of its structures), Anselmi was a 'partigiana' during the resistance year, once again building a link between women's presence in the anti-fascist resistance and their belonging in the realm of representative politics. The tweet chooses to give prominence to the date in which Anselmi was appointed as Minister of Labor. On the one hand, this produces the impression that the exact date is worth celebrating. On the other hand, it also produces the impression that up until 40 years ago, women were non-viable subjects of politics to such an extent that none of them had ever been a member of cabinet.

The most remarkable content circulated by D.i.Re to produce 'women' as viable subjects of an array of areas is a series of short videos specifically produced to promote participation in the Non una di meno rally for IDEVAW 2016 and in the Non una di meno-led women strike for IWD 2017. The videos were tweeted out by D.i.Re and by other feminist groups, including Non una di meno:

RT @InGenereIt: #video call to action by @direlaviolenza for #Nonunadimeno 26 November in Rome, cinematic omage to women's strength<sup>39</sup>

[link to video]

(@direlaviolenza, women's rights gorup, 14 November 2016)

Watch our videos for the 8<sup>th</sup> of march. They are at everyone's [female suffix] disposal. Use them to invite everyone [female suffix] to #Lottomarzo<sup>40</sup> [Italian slogan for the women's strike]

[link to webpage with the videos]

(@direlaviolenza, women's rights group, 2 March 2017)

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<sup>39</sup> RT @InGenereIt: #video appello di @direlaviolenza per #Nonunadimeno 26novembre Roma, omaggio cinematografico alla forza delle donne

<sup>40</sup> Guardate i nostri video per l'8 marzo. Sono a disposizione di tutte. Usateli per invitare tutte a #Lottomarzo

All the videos were produced by D.iRe with the technical support of the collective of feminist directors involved in the production of post-pornographic short movies ‘Le ragazze del porno’ [literally, ‘the porn girls’]. The video produced for IDEVAW 2016<sup>41</sup> was a patchwork of 2-3 seconds shots borrowed from blockbuster movies and popular TV series featuring a strong female lead. These shots mostly portrayed female characters in the process of gathering energy, standing up, shouting, mimicking a fight towards the camera, laughing, and other such activities that convey a sense of ‘empowerment’. The last shot in the video is the iconic scene of Thelma and Louise laughing while driving a cabriolet car towards the canyon. The video concludes with fade-out music while infographics invite the viewer to join the rally in Rome on the 26<sup>th</sup> of November 2016. The same audio-visual technique was used to produce three videos for IWD 2017.<sup>42</sup> The three videos showed strong lead character from TV and movies while staying in bed (i.e. not going to work), openly refusing to perform work, or actively participating in a strike march. Each of the videos invited the viewer to partake in the strike, deliberately stating that society cannot function without women’s contribution to productive and reproductive labor.

The discursive contribution to these videos is arguably the following. The video produced for IDEVAW 2016 can be said to aim at providing short snaps containing a high concentration of ‘empowered’ female characters. This representation wishes to produce women as a categories of individuals having attributes such as strength, power, and agency; all attributes that are usually denied them in mainstream media, especially when it comes to narratives of violence against women. The three videos produced for IWD 2017 can be said to aim at foregrounding women as subjects that participate in the productive and reproductive sphere with a contribution that is indispensable. The point of the IWD women’s strike was to highlight that without women, the world would stop going around. These videos attempt to encapsulate this message, thus producing women as viable subjects of a labor market discourse that often background them.

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<sup>41</sup> Videos available at: <https://video.corriere.it/camusso-dandini-altre-cento-manifestiamo-contro-violenza/51081892-aabe-11e6-952b-c4754eb1c6f0>

<sup>42</sup> Videos available at:

[https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2017/03/01/news/8\\_marzo\\_sara\\_sciopero\\_globale\\_donne\\_in\\_marcia\\_in\\_40\\_paesi\\_del\\_mondo-159523140/](https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2017/03/01/news/8_marzo_sara_sciopero_globale_donne_in_marcia_in_40_paesi_del_mondo-159523140/)

## Violence against women as political violence

D.i.Re. advances a vision of violence against women that is very nuanced and grounded in several decades of women's rights activism as well as professional experience in anti-violence shelters. Some particularly poignant examples of this emerged in the tweets that D.i.Re. published in the aftermath of a sadly famous case of multiple sexual assaults over time in the Southern Italian town of Melito Portosalvo. In early September 2016, a 16-year-old girl broke the silence and reported years of sexual abuses and gang-rape by not less than nine underage men from her town. It was eventually found that many in Melito Portosalvo, including the girl's parents, knew of the abuses and kept quiet for fear of retaliations at the hand of the father of one of the abusers, known to be associated with mafia-like organizations in the area.

@meb should go to #Melito to defend the little girl who was raped by the pack as well as the rule of law. Make it go up! Help us! [link to statement by D.i.Re.'s president on D.i.Re.'s website] @Anarkikka<sup>43</sup>  
(@direlaviolenza, women's rights group, 12 September 2016)

In the example above, D.i.Re. mentions a series of social actors that are worth analysing. First of all, D.i.Re tags the Twitter handle of (at the time) Minister Maria Elena Boschi, delegate of the Prime Minister's office for Equal Opportunities. Boschi is directly addressed and made subject of a moral imperative: she should go to Melito Portosalvo. The second social subject in the tweet is 'the little girl', who is not mentioned by name probably for reasons of privacy and respect. In the Italian language, the use of the suffix '-ina' to mark the girl in object as 'little' is probably deployed to trigger an affective reaction in the reader. The group of abusers is collectively named as a 'pack' (e.g. a pack of wolves). In spoken Italian, the metaphor of the pack has mostly negative connotations, such as a tendency to cover up the misdeeds of other 'pack' members. The imagined audience of the tweet is then addressed directly and invited to make the tweet 'go up' in the list of trending topics. Finally, a relatively well-known feminist cartoon artist is tagged, probably to bring the tweet to her attention and to the attention of her follower-base.

The social actions represented in the tweet are just as noteworthy. As mentioned above, Boschi is made object of a social imperative: to visit the town of Melito Portosalvo. Boschi should

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<sup>43</sup> @meb vada a #Melito a difendere la ragazzina stuprata dal branco e la legalità. Fatelo salire! Aiutateci! @Anarkikka

perform the action in light of a dual moral duty: the relatively mundane duty to defend ‘the little girl’ as well as the much more abstract duty to uphold the rule of law. The two are here presented as being closely linked: siding with one specific victim of abuse might seem like a small gesture, but actually implies a mission as high as the defense of the rule of law itself. Also the order in which the two are presented is just as relevant. Defending the little girl comes first, to signal that upholding the rule of law is a bottom-up process that is composed of seemingly small gestures.

This example points to an understanding of violence against women as a structural process that involves many subjects at different levels, the eradication of which demands focused actions as well as structural adjustments. On the one hand, there is the narrow context of Melito Portosalvo, where a specific instance of abuse took place and demands action in defense of the victim. On the other hand, there is the macro-structural framework within which the action took place; one in which violence against women is condoned and actually happens as part of broader social processes, including mafia-like violence. Therefore, D.i.Re argues that taking action falls within the duty of the elected representatives of the state machinery in the name of the rule of law.

Non una di meno’s understanding of violence against women is equally complex and largely grounded in the experience of the lead organizations within its ranks (including D.i.Re) as well as that of all the feminist collectives involved. This vision is often complemented with inputs from other groups and currents within the movement.

When addressing violence, there is a tendency to produce institutions, as it was the case with family planning centers. #CAVs [anti violence shelters] are instead spaces of #selfdetermination in a society that is not free<sup>44</sup>

(@nonunadimeno, feminist movement, 8 October 2016)

#violenceagainstwomen is #femicide,#media,#healthcare and a lot more.

Violence against women is complex and cannot be solved with pink quotas

#iodecido<sup>45</sup>

(@nonunadimeno, feminist movement, 8 October 2016)

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<sup>44</sup> Su violenza si istituzionalizza, come si è fatto con i consultori. I #cav invece sono spazi di #autodeterminazione, in una società non libera

<sup>45</sup> #violenzasulledonno è #femminicidi,#media,#salute e tanto altro. La violenza sulle donne è complessa non si risolve con quote rosa #iodecido

Udi: #violenceagainstwomen is structural, symbolic, political. In the name of the different realities we represent, we must resume the #fight not protest but change the real<sup>46</sup>

(@nonunadimeno, 8 October 2016)

The three posts above were live tweeted during the first public assembly of Non una di meno in Rome in October 2016. After a few months in the backrooms of Italian feminist activism, Non una di meno was emerging as a public movement with a clear leadership, mission, name, and visual identity. The public assembly of October 2016 brought Non una di meno to visibility and started setting the stage for the collective action on IDEVAW 2016. The three leading groups within Non una di meno (D.i.Re., Io decido, and UDI) took the floor at the assembly and spoke to their vision of what a feminist fight against violence would entail.

Somewhat diverging from what was discussed above, D.i.Re. reiterated the non-affiliated characters of its anti-violence shelters, voicing diffidence towards ‘institutions’ such as state-run family planning centers and marking its own centers as spaces of (feminist) self-determination. Io Decido voiced an understanding of violence against women as a structural problem that goes way beyond equal representation. UDI spoke of violence against women as structural, symbolic, and political. Recognizing the diversity of the feminisms composing the Non una di meno network, UDI concluded that the fight of Italian feminism should aim at changing ‘the real’. That is, changing the macro-structural setting that enables and facilitates violence against women. Based on these premises, Non una di meno set off to mobilize people across Italy for the production of a feminist plan to systemically tackle violence against women. The plan was developed over the course of one year by the local chapters of Non una di meno and by the activists involved in the working tables of the movement. The plan was published for IDEVAW 2017 (beyond the end of the data gathering phase for this study), and is strong of an understanding of violence against women that recognizes the political character of the issue at stake (Non una di meno, 2017).

In this sense, it can be claimed that Non una di meno is a feminist movement that seeks to deconstruct as well as theorize equality as a political issue. In turn, this is based on a nuanced understanding of gender that borrows from different strands of feminist thoughts and various

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<sup>46</sup> Udi: #violenzasulledonno è strutturale,simbolica,politica.Come realtà diverse dobbiamo riprendere la #lotta non protestare ma cambiare reale

currents within feminist mobilization, covering all of the approaches surveyed in Chapter 2. The plurality of the movement is not without challenges. It is safe to state that the movement is partially captive of some tensions between a transformative ethos and a separatist/essentialist narrative of sisterhood. The existence of this tension should not be understated, but neither should it be blown out of proportion. The movement has proven time and again to be, for example, trans-inclusive and open to a renegotiation of the gender binary, as detectable in language because of the widespread use of neographisms that defy the gender-marked constraints of the Italian language.

While being indeed vocal on the issue, Donne PD speaks of violence against women mostly according to the tweeted calendar of equality mentioned time and again in this study (e.g. around IDEVAW) or in connection with the news cycle. For example,

Free to choose. Free to live. #25November International day against  
#violenceonwomen<sup>47</sup>

[link to a cartoon with a sign saying ‘stop’ on a red bench that will not be  
analyzed here]

(@DonnePd, progressive party women’s right group, 25 November 2016)

Boldrini: “on the rape in Rimini the debate is appalling: we are reaching the  
bottom” [link to news article] via @repubblicait<sup>48</sup>

(@DonnePd, progressive party women’s right group, 29 Agosto 2017)

The above examples point in a direction that is similar to that encapsulated in the tweets of PES women and that picks up on many of the trends described so far. That is to say, discussion clearly points to violence against women as a political issue, but stops short of making it a priority year around. However, discussion also foregrounds women as agentic subjects of the violence discourse and does not reduce VAW to a technical issue or to a negligible part of everyday life.

### *Section summary*

My argument in this section can be summarized as follows. Firstly, the narratives of the users here scrutinized are the product of a diverse albeit complex set of practices, some of which

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<sup>47</sup> Libere di scegliere. Libere di vivere. #25Novembre Giornata Internazionale contro la #violenzasulledonno

<sup>48</sup> Boldrini: "Sullo stupro di Rimini dibattito agghiacciante: stiamo toccando il fondo" [link to news article] via @repubblicait

resemble the ones of other users presented so far, while others diverge substantially. Once again, describing the users sampled in this section as agents that wield discourse at will underestimates the relevance of vertical contextualization and other discourses in producing their narratives. It is perhaps more accurate to describe them as subjects whose own positionality and narratives are outcomes of the macro-structural circumstances in which they are set.

I also argued that women's rights advocates such as the users here presented are marginal in the overall political debate, resistant to the hegemonic narratives of gender equality by institutionalized users such as the ones presented in the previous chapter, but to some extent hegemonic within the women's rights/feminist movement vis-à-vis possibly more radical voices. I finally argued that these users are involved in defining 'women' as subjects that are endowed with political agency. This discursive construction of womanhood is substantially more progressive than the one presented in the previous chapter. This political agency of women is framed in the context of 'feminism' as a political movement that aims at achieving equality through political intervention rather than technical solutions.

### **Comparative discussion**

Drawing from the above, this chapter contributes to my broader argument by highlighting the following. I have so far argued that Twitter users, especially institutional users and political figures, are to be understood as subjects who do use the discourses available to them in order to achieve their political goals, but are also produced in a wider context that defines what these discourses are (Bacchi, 2016; KhosraviNik, 2017). The examples selected for this chapter can be said to confirm this trend, in some cases following patterns that were already identified in the previous chapter and in some cases presenting practices of production that are largely divergent.

As it was the case in the previous chapter, the collective category of 'women' was the key social subject produced in the narratives under scrutiny. Differently from the somewhat passivated women encountered in the previous chapter, however, the women's rights groups sampled for this chapter adopt discourses in which women are foregrounded and activated. In other words, these users produce a narrative of womanhood that is resistant to mainstream ones (that mostly invisibilize women) as well as to hegemonic ones within the gender equality discourse (that mostly passivate women). In their narratives, women are produced as agentic subjects of the gender equality discourses as well as a range of other discourses, including history and politics. Indeed,

their tweets regularly represent actual women with names, faces, and voices (e.g. directly quoted) rather than presenting an abstract category of ‘women’ on the receiving end of policy processes. Narratives at both the European and Italian level were found to be largely overlapping.

The above representation of women as agentic results in a politicization of ‘womanhood’ as a subject category. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the claims of the women presented in this chapter go beyond non-discrimination and equal representation to encompass a much wider understanding of what ‘equality’ would entail. In a way, the women’s rights users sampled for this chapter voice a more progressive understanding of feminism that stands clear of possible neoliberal cooptation and that is more or less explicitly aligned with a project of the left. In the cases of PES Women and Donne PD, this is obviously understood in traditional ‘socialist’ terms and therefore tied to labor rights, although complemented with wider claims as reported above. In the cases of EWL, D.i.Re, and Non una di meno, this takes a much wider stance to encompass not only labor relations but society at large.

In some examples, the political project articulated in these narratives goes as far as demanding a full transformation of the existing social order, seen as the only possible way to dismantle inequality and violence against women. These arguments are not grounded in instrumental rationalization and conveyed via the topos of numbers. They are mostly grounded in moral authorization, making reference to overarching concepts such as freedom from fear and freedom from harm. The final result is a relatively powerful demand for a revised political agenda in which women’s rights are indeed a fundamental value and a political priority that is worth pursuing for its own sake.

## **Conclusions**

In this chapter, I analyzed the tweeted narratives of a sample of user advocating for gender equality from the perspective of women’s rights. I restated that these users are to be understood as agentic within the limits imposed on them by existing discourses, and especially within the limits imposed on them by the ‘vertical’ context in which they are set and encapsulated in the practices underlying the production of their tweets. I also argued that the users sampled for analysis in this chapter are resistant towards a hegemonic narrative of gender equality produced by the gender equality machinery and conveyed in the examples presented in the previous chapter of this dissertation. this notwithstanding, they are to some extent hegemonic in the women’s

rights/feminist milieu; a hegemony that is partially confirmed by their privileged access to resources and, in turn, social media visibility.

The voices of these users were found to present visions of gender equality that are substantially more progressive than those offered by the representatives of the gender equality machinery. These narratives seem to stand clear of neoliberalized arguments for equality, present women as agentic subjects of politics, and articulate claims that are politicized in terms of a progressive political agenda. This was detectable in language because of the use of moral authorization rather than theoretical rationalization as a source of legitimization for their arguments. That is to say, value-based arguments were fairly common and de facto substituted the technical arguments provided by the users scrutinized in the previous chapter. This is not to say that the users here presented were fully immune to the temptation of adopting utilitarian arguments such as the business case for equality. Examples of the business case for equality did appear in their narratives, too. However, they were featured in a minority of cases and their salience was relatively low in light of the much wider presence of value-based arguments for equality.

## 6. LGBTI rights groups

### Introduction

The previous two chapters discussed how gender equality bodies, self-declared feminist politicians, and women's rights group contribute to the discursive construction of 'gender equality' as an object of knowledge as well as of their own positionality vis-à-vis the issue at stake. In this chapter, I expand on those discursive constructions by analyzing the tweeted narratives of some users that regularly engage in advocacy in favor of the rights of sexual and bodily minorities. Following the model of the previous chapter, the groups were selected from the distinct yet closely inter-related categories of LGBTI rights groups and pro-LGBTI advocacy within progressive political parties.

Discussion thus far pointed out that gender equality bodies and mainstream politicians who are pro-equality can be said to be resistant towards an environment that is mostly indifferent vis-à-vis gender issues while simultaneously being among the proponents of a vision of 'gender equality' that is de facto hegemonic. It was also pointed out that women's rights advocacy groups happen to be resistant to these hegemonic visions of gender equality, but still retain partial hegemony within their own framework of reference, and especially in terms of defining 'feminism'. Neither of the two groups devotes a particularly wide part of its communication to discussions on the rights of sexual minorities, despite the fact that LGBTI rights are usually understood as part of the broad umbrella of gender equality.

In this chapter, I analyze the narratives of a sample of two users for the European supranational level and two users for the Italian national level. For the European level, these users are the European chapter of the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA Europe, tweeting as @ILGAEurope) and Rainbow Rose (tweeting as @RainbowRose\_PES), the LGBTI advocacy group affiliated to the Party of European Socialists. For the Italian national level, these are the national umbrella organization for LGBTI rights Arcigay (tweeting as @arcigay) and Senator Monica Cirinnà (tweeting as @MonicaCirinna). Cirinnà is a member of the already mentioned Partito Democratico as well as a member of the Italian Parliament. She is commonly associated with LGBTI rights in light of the fact that she successfully sponsored the bill introducing same-sex civil unions in the country, approved by Parliament in early 2016.

The sampled users regularly engage in LGBTI rights advocacy. Comparably with what was said about women's rights groups, they can be said to be resistant to an environment that is mostly indifferent or hostile to the expansion of the rights of sexual minorities, but nonetheless represent hegemonic voices within the LGBTI milieu. This interpretation is confirmed in terms of the visibility that these users enjoy on Twitter. The follower-base of the users sampled for analysis in this chapter is somewhat smaller than that of women's rights users discussed in previous chapter and negligible when compared with that of the 'hegemonic' users discussed in Chapter 5. This notwithstanding, they do have somewhat broader visibility than private users. Investment in human resources and professionalization can be said to be the main factors influencing the visibility that these users enjoy.

The structure of this chapter mimics the ones adopted for the previous chapters, with the two levels of analysis being scrutinized separately and then joined in a comparative discussion thereafter. Discussion of each of the users includes an in-depth description, some reflections on practices of production based on interview data, and more granular analysis of their tweeted narratives. Conclusions are presented in the final section.

### **Brussels-based LGBTI rights advocacy**

This section outlines the key features, practices of production, and tweeted narratives of ILGA Europe and of Rainbow Rose. The narratives of these users are produced in a set of practices that is rather similar to those discussed in the previous chapter. These present a set of complex procedures and discursive constraints, supporting the claim advanced thus far regarding the importance of vertical contextualization in promoting an understanding of these users as subjects of discourses that go well beyond the text they circulate on social media.

#### *Presenting the sub-sample*

ILGA Europe<sup>49</sup> defines themselves<sup>50</sup> as an independent international NGO that acts as umbrella organization for some 490 national and local organizations in as many as 45 European and Central Asian countries. ILGA Europe were granted the status of a separate regional entity within the framework of the global organization ILGA in 1996. ILGA Europe's vision is that of

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<sup>49</sup> About page on ILGA Europe website: <https://www.ilga-europe.org/who-we-are>

<sup>50</sup> ILGA adopts 'they' as preferred pronoun in all description of their activities. This choice will be respected in this chapter.

contributing to the creation of a world where human rights, fundamental freedoms, and dignity are ensured for everyone regardless of their actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or sex characteristics. At the time of writing this text, ILGA Europe has some 23,900 followers on Twitter as @ILGAEurope.

ILGA Europe operates according to two fundamental pillars. Firstly, they advocate for the human rights and equality of LGBTI people at the ‘European level’, understood as encompassing not only the EU and its member states but also the much wider community of states that are members of the Council of Europe as well as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Secondly, they work to strengthen LGBTI activism in Europe and Central Asia providing training and support to its member organizations.

Rainbow Rose<sup>51</sup> is a network organization that aims at bringing together the voices of LGBTI advocates within labor and socialist parties across Europe. Hosted in Brussels within the premises of the PES headquarter, Rainbow Rose promotes LGBTI rights within the PES political family and European institutions in order to foster equality at the European and national levels. At the present time, Rainbow Rose has some 2,800 followers on Twitter as @RainbowRose\_PES.

Rainbow Rose’s vision and missions are outlined in a ‘manifesto’ that was issued ahead of the elections to the European Parliament in 2014. In its manifesto, Rainbow Rose points out that its work is grounded in a progressive tradition that has its core in the struggle for social equality and equal rights for all individual human beings. Rainbow Rose outlines a set of political objectives for the 2014-2019 European Commission term. These include, enhancement of the coherence of equality and anti-discrimination measures in the EU, support for the adoption of a EU comprehensive package of anti-discrimination laws, strengthening measures to ensure intra-EU freedom of movement for LGBTI citizens and their families, advocating for a full and correct implementation of the Common European Asylum System legislation, support for speedier family reunification procedures for LGBT third country nationals residing in the EU, promotion of comprehensive EU legislation on hate speech and hate crimes, advocating for LGBTI mainstreaming in EU enlargement and foreign policies, and finally lobbying for the proactive inclusion of trans and intersex people.

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<sup>51</sup> Rainbow Rose’s homepage: <http://rainbowrose.eu/>

### *Practices of production*

After long negotiations, the relevant interview partner at ILGA Europe withdrew from participation in the study. The interview with the relevant Rainbow Rose officer took place on skype and lasted roughly 66 minutes. In this sub-section, I discuss the practices of production for the tweets of Rainbow Rose and attempt some speculation regarding the practices of production of ILGA Europe on the basis of the data that was retrieved from their Twitter profile.

Rainbow Rose has a fairly active social media presence across the platforms of Twitter and Facebook. Accounts on both social media were launched in 2013 right after the first general assembly of Rainbow Rose. In light of resource constraints mentioned during the interview, Rainbow Rose decided to set up only a basic webpage and spend most of its communication efforts to build a follower-base on social media. Its Facebook page is de facto used as a proxy for its webpage. The possibility of creating and administering events via Facebook was named as the most valuable affordances of that platform. Conversely, interaction is actively sought on Twitter in light of the possibility of having quasi-direct access to political elites and also in light of its 'live' character. The interview partner explicitly said that Twitter is 'by nature' conversational.

The Tweeted communication of Rainbow Rose is administered by a single individual member of its board, with inputs by another specific board member. This is complemented with occasional involvement of young individual activists from the Rainbow Rose network who are believed to have higher levels of fluency in social media communication. At the time of the interview, no official social media policy nor strategy was in place. A social media policy/strategy seems to be often mentioned within Rainbow Rose as possibly beneficial. However, an overall satisfaction of the board with the current status of its social media presence makes it an item with low priority. Thus far, the direction of Rainbow Rose's social media communication is steered by the board member running it on the basis of their personal expertise. They enjoy substantial freedom to tweet or re-tweet what they believe to better convey the message of the network.

Rainbow Rose seems to believe in the conversational character of Twitter and in the possibility to gain access to political elites through the platform. On the one hand, this is visible in a relatively 'choral' character of Rainbow Rose's Twitter feed, which features a wide number of re-tweeted message in a fashion that resembles that already encountered in discussion concerning the European Women's Lobby. On the other hand, this is also detectable in a large number of posts

that '@mention' institutions and politicians with the objective of making a particular issue visible to them. The interview partner from Rainbow Rose expressed optimism regarding the success of these engagement initiatives. Finally, it is worth mentioning that Rainbow Rose pre-plans some of its campaigns and strategizes accordingly. For example, Rainbow Rose supported the unsuccessful bid of Gianni Pittella (S&D) to the presidency of the European Parliament through an extensive social media campaign that was largely pre-planned and that availed itself of the social media content management software HootSuite.

For what concerns ILGA Europe, the only speculations that can be made regarding their practices of production are the following. There is a good chance that their tweeted narratives are highly strategized and scheduled on a calendar of celebrations, commemorations, and campaigns. These narratives intertwine with a more flexible set of narratives that is issued in response to unfolding political developments at the supranational European level as well as the global level. Campaigning seems to be informed by a fairly well developed understanding of social media dynamics and, at the very least, a heuristic understanding of Twitter's algorithmic preferences for some content over other. In turn, this suggests a good level of professionalization on behalf of the personnel involved. Some fundraising campaigns during the sampled timespan might have been disseminated to ILGA's followers through the use of a content management software. However, this cannot be assessed with certainty without interview data.

#### *Word frequency analysis*

An overview of the most occurring words in the communication of ILGA Europe on Twitter offers a relatively clear picture regarding the discourses most circulated therein. If the word 'women' was by far the most frequent word in the communication of all the users sampled thus far, it should come as no surprise that the most frequent word in the communication of ILGA Europe is 'LGBTI', appearing some 74 times as a hashtag ('#lgbti') and some 38 times on its own. There seems to be a focus on broad social groups in the communication of ILGA Europe, as suggested by the presence of collective names such as 'people' (31 occurrences, seventh most frequent), 'activists' (17 occurrences, nineteenth most frequent) and 'communities' (16 occurrences, twenty-first most frequent).

The use of Twitter as a tool to disseminate information regarding its events and its campaigns is quite evident and to some extent resembles what was observed for the

communication of the European Women's Lobby. ILGA Europe's own Twitter handle (@ILGAEurope) appears as the second most frequent word in the corpus (56 occurrences), signaling a wish to recirculate its own messages. Aside from #LGBTI, four hashtags feature relatively prominently. These are #equalitygala2017 (49 occurrences, third most frequent), #ienicosia2016 (33 occurrences, sixth most frequent), #rainbowspectrum (20 occurrences, twelfth most frequent), and #rainboweurope (17 occurrences, eighteenth most frequent). The former refers to a fundraising event held in Brussels, while the second refers to the ILGA Europe annual general conference in Nicosia in late 2016. The latter two hashtags refer to a campaign that ILGA Europe ran throughout 2017 on the topic of racism within the LGBTI community, intersectional discrimination against LGBTI individuals who also happen to be people of color, and strategies on how to be good allies to people facing these kind of discriminations.

All in all, the impression is that of a tweeted communication that aims at spreading information regarding ILGA Europe's own activities. This impression is reinforced by a focus on now-ness that was also already encountered in the tweeted communication of other users sampled in this study. This is signaled by the frequent use of words such as 'today' (35 occurrences, fifth most frequent), 'now' (24 occurrences, tenth most frequent), and '2017' (19 occurrences, thirteenth most frequent). This claim is also corroborated by the frequency of verbs that probably appear on ILGA Europe's tweets in the imperative form such as 'join' (17 occurrences), 'check' (15 occurrences), and 'read' (15 occurrences). Finally, it is worth mentioning that ILGA Europe seems to position themselves within the European architecture of gender equality through the language of human rights, as suggested words such as 'rights' (30 occurrences, eighth most frequent), 'Europe' (25 occurrences, ninth most frequent), 'gender' (19 occurrences, fourteenth most frequent), and 'equality' (18 occurrences, sixteenth most frequent).

An overview of the most frequent words for Rainbow Rose present elements of continuity with what was discussed so far. As it was the case for ILGA Europe, the word 'LGBTI' is the most frequent one, appearing some 222 times as #LGBTI and some 118 times on its own, and also some 59 times as 'LGBT'. It is very clear that Rainbow Rose uses its Twitter account to disseminate information about itself and about the PES family, as strongly suggested by the prominence of the twitter handles of the Party of the European Socialists (@PES\_PSE, 261 occurrences, second most frequent) Rainbow Rose itself (@RainbowRose\_PES, 195 occurrences fourth most frequent), PES

Women (@PES\_Women, 108 occurrences, seventh most frequent), and the handle of the group of Socialists and Democrats at the European Parliament (@theprogressives, 91 occurrences, eighth most frequent).

Just as evident is the frequent use of Twitter as an outlet for political campaigning at the EU level. Throughout the sampled timespan, a wide array of hashtags was used by Rainbow Rose to support its advocacy efforts. These include #eppresident (74 occurrences, eleventh most frequent), #iamwhatiam (68 occurrences, twelfth most frequent), #gianni4lgbti (63 occurrences, fourteenth most frequent), and #pesinprague (53 occurrences, nineteenth most frequent). #eppresident and #gianni4lgbti make reference to the elections for president of the European Parliament in 2017, with Rainbow Rose stating its support for the failed bid of Gianni Pittella to the presidency. #iamwhatiam makes reference to an event at the EU Committee of Regions on hate speech/hate crimes. #pesinprague makes reference to the annual PES congress that took place in Prague in 2017 and that was already mentioned in discussion of the work of PES Women.

Finally, the positioning of the narrative in the context of rights and equality discussions at the European level encountered in the case of ILGA Europe can be said to be confirmed also for Rainbow Rose. Indeed, its vocabulary frequently adopts words such as ‘rights’ (213 occurrences, third most frequent), ‘Europe’ (79 occurrences, ninth most frequent), ‘equality’ (76 occurrences, tenth most frequent), and ‘legislation’ (60 occurrences, seventeenth most frequent). Differently from ILGA Europe and other cases scrutinized in this work thus far, there seems to be no particular emphasis of a temporality of ‘now’, at least in terms of recurrent words pointing in that direction.

### *Discourse analysis*

This sub-section addresses two topics from the narratives of ILGA Europe and Rainbow Rose that are deemed to share elements of continuity as well as elements of change with the narratives addressed thus far in this dissertation. The topics selected to carry out this discussion are narratives of homophobic/transphobic violence and narratives of ‘rights’ such as access to equal marriage.

I selected the former in light of its potential to showcase some of the ways in which sexual minorities are constructed as a subjects of a discourse on gender-based violence that encompasses but also goes beyond narratives of violence against women. I selected the latter in light of the

crucial role that the language of rights has in the articulation of the demands of sexual minorities across the supranational-national divide, in turn constructing them as subjects of an ‘equal human rights’ discourse that is somewhat separate from those discourses of ‘gender equality’; a discourse that tends to privilege equality between ‘women’ and ‘men’ and often implies straight-ness. These topics pick up on some of the issues discussed thus far but also foreshadow some of the elements that will be object of analysis in further chapters of this dissertation.

### Homophobic/transphobic violence and the production of LGBTI subjectivities therein

A first characteristic of the narratives by ILGA Europe and Rainbow Rose on violence against LGBTI individuals is its macro-structural origin. Homophobic or transphobic violence is hardly ever presented as a technical matter, nor is it presented as a collection of individual instances with no clear connection to one another. An example of this comes from the attention that both organizations devoted to large scale episodes of violence against LGBTI individuals such as those taking place in Chechnya in the spring of 2017 at the hand of the Russian government. According to most reports, more than 100 gay men were arrested, detained, and tortured in prisons akin to concentration camps in Chechnya for no reason other than their perceived sexual orientation.

LGBTI activists supporting survivors still need intl solidarity! Our latest update from #Chechnya is online now >> [Link to website]  
[embeds picture that will not be analyzed here]  
(@ILGAEurope, LGBTI rights organization, 13 April 2017)

@PES\_PSE & Rainbow Rose appalled at reports from #Chechnya. This is a concern for all Europe! Read more: [link to website]  
(@RainbowRose\_PES, progressive party LGBTI rights group, 12 April 2017)

The above examples can be interpreted as follows. First and foremost, attention to what is happening in the Caucasian region of Chechnya by two Brussels-based organizations that have ‘Europe’ as their main area of reference hints to the fact that ‘Europe’ might be a socio-political space that expands beyond the EU. Indeed, speaking of Europe when referring to something happening beyond the boundaries of the European Union does discursive work to produce a ‘Europe’ that has a territorial scope beyond the 27 member states. At the same time, speaking from a Brussels-based positionality and condemning LGBTI violence at the peripheries of Europe is not

unproblematic, insofar as it might reproduce discourses of EU moral superiority measured by its alleged support for LGBTI rights (among many others, see van der Vleuten, 2014).

ILGA Europe's tweet is particularly careful in foregrounding the local LGBTI activists who are working on the ground to support survivors. The topos of urgency is deployed to argue that the Chechnyan emergency is not over and that, therefore, action in the form of international solidarity is still needed. The tweet embeds a link to a webpage that further articulates on the severity of the case in object and, therefore, the urgent need for solidarity.

Rainbow Rose's tweet has a somewhat different character, insofar as it aims at reporting the stance that PES and Rainbow Rose itself have taken on the issue at stake. To be foregrounded is, therefore, not action on the ground, but rather PES and Rainbow Rose as political subjects who receive reports from Chechnya. PES and Rainbow Rose are here positioned on the receiving hand of a passive sentence in which they are descriptivized as 'appalled'. PES and Rainbow Rose, however, are soon thereafter activated as the implicit speaking subject of a sentence in which the situation of violence against LGBTI individuals is presented as 'a concern for all Europe'. The webpage linked in the tweet is very similar to that issued by ILGA Europe and presents some information on the issue in object, the stance of the organizations towards it, and some guidelines for action that mostly adopt the topos of urgency.

What is somewhat backgrounded and yet strikingly clear in both of the examples above is the subjectivation of LGBTI individuals. Indeed, pointing out the specific case of persecution in Chechnya serves the purpose of producing LGBTI individuals as a community that, among other things, is characterized by disproportionate exposure to arbitrary violence (Butler, 2015). Just as crucially, the perpetrator of this arbitrary violence is the nation-state. Pointing fingers at the Russian nation-state might be problematic insofar as it reproduces narratives of EU moral superiority. However, one could also argue that Russia is here presented as an example of all nation-states and their violence against LGBTI individuals as opposed to an example of non-EU nation-state misbehaving by EU standards.

Setting aside the case of Chechnya and looking at broader narratives of violence, it is clear that ILGA Europe and Rainbow Rose present homophobic violence as a multifaceted and macro-structural issue. For example, ILGA Europe was particularly vocal in early 2017 in support of

discussions at the European Parliament addressing the issue of school bullying. One of the tweets issued on that occasion reads that:

56% of #trans people aged 15-19 had suicidal thoughts in the last year in #Sweden. #stopbullying.

(@ILGAEurope, LGBTI rights organization, 24 January 2017)

In this post, teenage trans people are foregrounded as a collective subjects experiencing poor mental health conditions at a rate that is explicitly presented as very high and implicitly compared to a lower one experienced by their cisgender peers. This statistic refers to a specific spatial location: that of Sweden, as suggested by the hashtag at the end of the first sentence. The choice of Sweden as an example aims at heightening the urgency to take action by pointing out that even EU Member states commonly constructed as ‘LGBTI-friendly’ (e.g. Towns, 2002) actually happen to be fairly dangerous places for bodily minorities.

If the statistics reported in the tweet mostly refer to a mental health situation, the hashtag at the end of the tweet positions these statistics within a discussion that pertains to physical or psychological violence taking place in schools or within youth peer groups, and namely that of bullying. Thus, some numerical reports about mental health are actually traced back to systemic violence against trans youth. The reader is mobilized towards action through the topos of number or theoretical rationalization, insofar as mental health statistics are presented as convincing evidence to legitimize intervention.

Also Rainbow Rose makes frequent reference to the structural character of violence against LGBTI individuals. Among other examples, reference to hate speech/hate crimes is particularly poignant in this respect. In a post reporting on one of its initiatives the EU Committee of Regions in late 2016, Rainbow Rose tweeted that:

Name hate crimes for what they are. They're committed to send a message to the victim. - Katrin Hugendubel of @ILGAEurope #IAMWhatIAM

(@RainbowRose, progressive party LGBTI rights group, 29 November 2016)

This tweet offers a direct quote or paraphrases of a statement by Katrin Hugendubel, Advocacy Director of ILGA Europe, during the event in object. Hugendubel is foregrounded as a subject who is speaking on behalf of their organization to condemn hate crimes. In the tweet, an

imagined audience is directly addressed in the imperative form. The audience is told that they should ‘name hate crimes for what they are’. Thus, this tweet explicitly engages in discursive work to define hate crimes as crimes that have a layer of meaning that goes beyond that of isolated acts of violence, insofar as they aim at sending a message to the victims.

The tweet also implicitly defines its addressees as a community that usually shies away from ‘naming hate crimes for what they are’ and therefore fails to address the issue appropriately. The tweet also constructs perpetrators and victims of hate crimes as its subject categories, albeit vaguely defined. The latter group is passivated in the face of structural violence. The former group is activated as agents that perpetrate violence with some degree of awareness regarding its structural consequences. While this specific quote might over-emphasize agency on behalf of perpetrators and lack of agency for victims, it does convey the message that violence against LGBTI individuals is a structural phenomenon that goes beyond support for individual victims and prosecution of individual perpetrators.

Before concluding the discussion of representation of violence against LGBTI subjects, it is worth mentioning that both ILGA Europe and Rainbow Rose regularly take a stance vis-à-vis the issue of violence against women. For example:

#IstanbulConvention: a vital opportunity to end gender-based violence in the  
#EU! [link to website] #saynostopvaw  
[embeds picture from the series of infographics with the red shoes installation  
discussed in the previous chapter]  
(@ILGAEurope, LGBTI rights group, 3 February 2017)

One in three women in the EU has experienced physical and/or sexual  
violence. The EU & member states must ratify the Istanbul Convention.  
(@RainbowRose\_RR, progressive party LGBTI rights group, 15 November  
2016)

The two tweets quoted above refer to the ratification of the Istanbul Convention on behalf of the European Union, one of the latest milestones in the adoption of anti-violence legislation at the EU level that was achieved in early 2017 as discussed at several points in this dissertation. These tweets are not here reported to showcase the language adopted therein, but rather to point

out that both ILGA Europe and Rainbow Rose have been active in denouncing violence against women as a structural phenomenon that directly interests the European Union and its member states. If the institutional users scrutinized and the women's rights users discussed in the previous chapters were mostly (although not completely) silent on LGBTI issues, the same cannot be said about LGBTI rights users vis-à-vis women's issues.

This is perhaps unsurprising given that many LGBTI subjectivities happen to identify with the broad category of women and, therefore, have a stake in eradicating violence against women themselves. However, this is quite revealing of the relationship of LGBTI rights groups in the broader gender equality architecture. It can hardly be denied that these groups advocate for gender equality, as proven by their engagement with an issue as crucial to the equality architecture as violence against women. However, their voice seems to be sidelined as that of some allies looking at gender equality from outside rather than that of parties directly interested in the issue at stake.

Chapter 1 pointed out that the reference point of LGBTI association at the EU level is the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) rather than EIGE, insofar as EU policymaking around issues concerning sexual and bodily minorities adopts the framework of human rights and labor rights rather than that of gender equality. On the one hand, this might be explanatory of the framing of gender issues as women's issues discussed in the previous chapters. On the other hand, this might also explain a marked focus on the language of human rights on behalf of LGBTI organizations such as the ones presented in this chapter.

### Marriage equality and family rights

In recent years, much of the publicly visible work of LGBTI rights group aimed at obtaining legal recognition for 'rainbow families'. From virtually no recognition at the turn of the millennium, equal marriage and other forms of same-sex civil partnership made their way to recognition in 22 of the 27 EU member states as well as in some of the European neighbors of the EU. The examples reported below hint to two features that can be said to be typical of communication on equal marriage on behalf of LGBTI advocacy groups across the supranational-national divide. The former refers to efforts to keep up momentum in favor of equal marriage by celebrating the successful adoption of new legislation. The latter refers to the strategic presentation of equal marriage as a springboard for the achievement of further LGBTI equality.

Throughout the timespan under scrutiny, ILGA Europe as well as Rainbow Rose celebrated new equal marriage legislation in terms that are similar to the following example:

It's official – #MarriageEquality is about to become a reality in #Germany.  
#Ehefueralle [link to website]

Figure 15 - picture embedded in the tweet above



(@ILGAEurope, LGBTI rights group, 30 June 2017)

In this post, marriage equality is foregrounded as the subject of the action taking place. Emphasis on equal marriage as the matter at stake is further emphasized through the use of hashtags that visually highlighting keywords in the text, give them salience, and link them to other posts on the same topic. The tweet has a celebratory tone that can be inferred by the premise that the piece of information being reported is 'official'.

The representation of space is quite relevant in this tweet. While the space being represented is clearly that of the German nation-state, the use of the English language hints to the fact that the intended audience spans beyond Germany and encompasses an international community that is invited to celebrate the new law. There is, however, an attempt to create a link with the German national context with the hashtag #Ehefueralle ('marriage for all'), possibly used by German campaigners in their advocacy. For what concerns time, the tweet positions itself in the 'now'. Indeed, it is 'now' that the news being reported is 'official'. However, this 'now' is a time of transition, insofar as the subject of the action (marriage equality) is presented as moving

(‘about to become’) from the realm of possibility into the realm of ‘reality’. In this sense, the transition marks a ‘before’ and ‘after’ marriage equality legislation, presented as a step that communities (e.g. countries) take to overcome an obstacle (e.g. discriminations).

The message is multimodally reinforced with a picture featuring text superimposed on a background with the colors of the German flag. The text reads ‘Germany finally says... / ja / to making marriage equality a reality’. In the picture, the German national context is foregrounded by making Germany the subject of the action and through the German-flag background. Reference to marriage is evident in the presentation of action that resembles the nuptial ritual in which each of the spouses in turn ‘says ja’ [yes]. The importance of the step is marked temporally with the adverb ‘finally’, suggesting that there was a long ‘before’ that ‘now’ has been surpassed with the approval of the equal marriage bill.

Emphasis on temporality is charged with spatial metaphors that convey a sense of movement from a ‘past’ that was more discriminatory through a ‘now’ of legal reforms into a ‘future’ with more legal safeguards for LGBTI subjects. Indeed, marriage equality is celebrated as one among many steps by LGBTI rights organizations such as the ones scrutinized in this chapter. If beating the drum to keep up momentum on marriage equality is surely part of their discourses, these are often complemented with discourses that mark marriage equality as a springboard for the achievement of further equality.

For example, Rainbow Rose reports on a statement by Italian MEP Daniele Viotti during the already mentioned ‘I am what I am’ event at the EU Committee of Regions, in which Viotti is reportedly arguing that:

Makes no sense to have marriage equality without civil rights for everyone re sexual and reproductive rights. - @danieleviotti

[embeds picture of Viotti speaking at the event that will not be analyzed here]

(@RainbowRose\_PES, progressive party PGBTI rights group, 23 February 2017)

In this post, Viotti (a self-identifying gay man) is foregrounded as the subjects of a relatively radical proposition. Equal marriage is objectified as something that a collectivity of people might (or might not) ‘have’. Viotti claims, however, that equal marriage is pointless

(‘makes no sense’) without further recognition of civil rights for LGBTI subjects. These, in turn are articulated in terms of sexual and reproductive rights.

With just a few words, this tweet encapsulates several features worth outlining. To begin with, LGBTI subjectivities are here constructed via reference to their minority status in light of their fight for the achievement of equal civil rights. Reference to civil rights, in turn, draws on the powerful imaginary of the North American civil rights movements in the 60s, unlocking the potential for a vocabulary that has strong legitimacy and high potential to mobilize affect. ‘Civil rights’ are then articulated in terms of sexual and reproductive rights. This move establishes ties between the struggle of LGBTI people and the imaginary of the women’s movement in the 70s and early 80s for the achievement of some level of recognition for their bodily autonomy, for example through access to legal and safe abortion. Reference to sexual and reproductive rights also ties the discussion to currently unfolding political debates on LGBTI rights to parenthood and on legal recognition of surrogate motherhood.

Through reference to different imaginaries of political mobilizations, struggles for LGBTI rights are taken beyond the narrow issue of marriage equality and positioned in the broader framework of civil rights advocacy. This is, however, immediately operationalized in terms of some key priorities, such as sexual and reproductive rights. The audience is compelled towards action through a mix of topoi. It might be said that the topos of reality is here deployed, insofar as action to achieve civil rights is required because marriage equality without equal rights makes no sense (i.e. because reality is the way it is). It might also be the case that the topos of burdening is here deployed, insofar as action is required to remove discrimination against LGBTI people (i.e. lessen the discrimination that burdens them).

Achieving equal access to sexual and reproductive rights is indeed a key issue for LGBTI rights associations such as ILGA Europe and Rainbow Rose. In particular, there seems to be some focus on the achievement of equal rights to recognized parenthood for same sex couples. One of the most interesting features of the communication of the two users under scrutiny in this area is that they seem to engage in discursive work to resignify the concept of ‘family’. This is particularly explicit in a tweet by ILGA Europe advertising the publication of ‘Using family as a frame in social justice activism’, a 40-page guide for social justice activists and funders (Selun, 2017). The tweet reads as follows:

We must #reclaimfamily for what it is: diverse, loving, universal. New guide  
"Reclaiming Family Values" out today >> [link to webpage]  
(@ILGAEurope, LGBTI rights group, 15 June 2017)

In this tweet, ILGA Europe is offering a comment on what can be done with the guide in object. The subject of the action reported is a collective 'we' probably made of social justice activists, who happen to be the main addressees of the guide. There is very strong emphasis on the action being described, that is, the 'reclaiming' being performed by the agentic 'we' onto an object of knowledge defined as 'family'. The reclaiming is reinforced through hashtagging as well as the use of the modal verb 'must' to mark its utmost importance.

The speaking subject is here presenting the reader with a truth statement regarding the concept of 'family', qualified through the descriptors such as diversity, love, and universality. The speaking subject of this tweet tells us that these characteristics make family 'what it is'. If a 'reclaiming' is needed, however, it is also implied that family is currently defined in different terms. The topos of reality is here deployed to compel the reader into taking action to reclaim family because family is the way it is, and to do so through the tools outlined in the guide.

In light of the centrality of 'family values' to conservative narratives (Lavizzari & Prearo, 2018), reclaiming and re-signifying family is not an easy task. ILGA Europe and the authors of the guide are attempting to do so by pointing out that families are not and never have been monolithic. Rather, diversity is possibly the main marker of 'family' given the wide number of family arrangements present in virtually all societies. This attempt at resignification is charged with positivity with a reference to 'love' and implies that whoever opposes this resignification assumes love to be un-necessary to family-making. It also unlocks the possibility of claiming that opponents of this resignification are actually on the side of 'hate'. The re-definition of family is then complemented with a claim to universality, so that exclusive notions of family are constructed as a logical fallacy.

Also Rainbow Rose engaged in similar discursive work to re-signify family in terms that do not rule out LGBTI subjects. In the example below, Rainbow Rose comments on a tweet by Romanian Minister of EU Affairs Victor Negrescu. In the original tweet, Negrescu (at the time an MEP) was advertising an event organized by him and his S&D colleagues at the European

Parliament discussing children rights. Rainbow Rose seized the opportunity to comment as follows:

Children in #RainbowFamilies do deserve same legal protection too. hope was talked about #lgbti @NELFA\_LGBT @PES\_PSE  
[link to tweet by Mr. Negrescu, Romanian Minister of EU Affairs]  
(@RainbowRose\_PES, progressive party LGBTI rights groups, 6 September 2016).

In this post, Rainbow Rose foregrounds ‘Rainbow Families’, a collective name encompassing all non-heteronormative family formations. In particular, Rainbow Rose is stressing that these families have children. As trivial as this might sound, Rainbow Rose is here engaging in a resignification of the concept of ‘family’ by breaking the taboo on speaking of non-normative family arrangements and the presence of children therein. This narrative has powerful implications, insofar as it shifts discussion from LGBTI people’s right to access parenthood in a hypothetical future to a discussion over the recognition of and legal protection for non-normative families that, crucially, already exist in the present. Rainbow families and their children are, therefore, described as subjects deserving equal legal protection. Rainbow Rose completes the tweet by stating its hope that discussion at the EP did involve the rights of Rainbow children. Finally, it is also noteworthy that Rainbow Rose attempts to bring its comment on Negrescu’s tweet by tagging the NELFA (Network of European LGBTIQ\* Families Associations) and of the PES political family.

Rainbow Rose’s tweets on family rights have the peculiarity of establishing a link between equality for LGBTI families and freedom of movement within the EU. The right for EU citizens to live anywhere in the Union is one of the most celebrated successes of the European Union despite the many loopholes that hinder its full implementation. Rainbow Rose often points out that freedom of movement is only theoretical until the same civil rights are afforded to all individuals residing in the Union. For example, in the post below:

"Freedom of movement" not so true when you look at the details re: #LGBTI Europeans. - RR Pres. Aurélien Mazuy #PESinPrague

(@RainbowRose\_PES, progressive party LGBTI rights groups, 2 December 2016)

This post reports the statement of Rainbow Rose president Aurélien Mazuy at the PES General Congress in Prague in 2016. Mazuy is here presented as the author of the paraphrased speech reported in the tweet. Freedom of movement is foregrounded as the subject of a descriptive action that aims at marking it as ‘not so true’. This untrue-ness is reinforced through the use of inverted commas. This audience is directly addressed (‘you’) and compelled to look at the situation of a collective subject of ‘LGBTI Europeans’. This group is characterized, on the one hand, by its privileged status as European citizens theoretically endowed with mobility rights and, on the other hand, by its minority status of people barred from enjoyment of their mobility rights.

Other tweets in the corpus and interview data suggests that this argument mostly refers to what follows. Equal marriage and same-sex union legislation in the European Union is de facto a patchwork of unevenly distributed norms that afford different rights depending on the geographic location of their subjects. LGBTI family might be afforded a relatively wide range of rights in some EU member states and a much narrower set of rights in others. Thus, Rainbow Rose regularly argues that LGBTI Europeans do not enjoy the same mobility rights as their straight counterparts because their family formations do not enjoy equal recognition across the Union. This is in no way trivial, insofar as differences are wide and have material repercussions in terms of parenthood, taxation, inheritance, and other quite tangible matters.

### *Section summary*

In this section, I summarized the tweeted narratives of two LGBTI rights organizations operating at the European supra-national level, arguing what follows. Firstly and in line with discussion thus far, ILGA Europe and Rainbow Rose produce their narratives in set of practices that is just as complex as that of the other users scrutinized in previous chapters. Therefore, this chapter can be said to offer further evidence that Twitter users, be they ‘individuals’ or organizations, are better described as subjects produced in discourses and practices that shape what they are permitted to say on Twitter as well as elsewhere. Secondly, being subjects of discourse does not prevent these organizations from speaking through the discourses available to them for the achievement of their preferred political outcomes. For example, the above section pointed out

that ILGA Europe and Rainbow Rose engage in the discursive resignification of ‘family’ as an object of knowledge.

Thirdly, both the users here scrutinized engage in a ‘European’ space that has the EU as its center but that spans well beyond the EU member states, as proven by some focus on events happening into the wider ‘European’ geography. Fourthly, ILGA Europe and Rainbow Rose seem to speak from subject positions located at the margin of the gender equality discourse. Previous chapter highlighted that gender equality discussions are strictly tied to ‘equality between women and men’ and mostly silent on LGBTI issues. This section highlighted that this lack of interest is not mutual, insofar as both the users here scrutinized do keep an eye on gender equality discussions and attempt to position themselves therein. Nonetheless, it seems that their main discursive battlefield is not the gender equality one, but the one of human rights/civil rights. While the two are not disentangled, they are functionally different within the EU architecture, shaping what discourses are available and what interlocutors can be sought by these organizations.

Finally, the marginality of these users to gender equality discussion does not imply that these users cannot exert hegemony in their own right. Indeed, these users still speak from the relatively privileged positions of institutionally recognized Brussels-based organizations that participate in the broader ecology of EU-level policymaking. Thus, following what was stated for all users thus far, their voices are resistant vis-à-vis the wider environment and yet hegemonic within the LGBTI rights circle.

### **Italian LGBTI advocacy**

This section analyzes the broad profile, practices of production, and tweeted narratives of two users who mostly make reference to the Italian national context. The first one is the account of the Italian umbrella LGBTI organization Arcigay (@arcigay). The second one is the account of Senator Monica Cirinnà (Partito Democratico, center-left; @MonicaCirinna). Arcigay and ILGA Europe can be said to be widely comparable in terms of their institutional characteristics, vision, mission, and activities in the respective contexts. Since Partito Democratico does not have a clearly identifiable unit or associated group directly dealing with LGBTI rights, it was my decision to give space to one of the most publicly visible advocates for LGBTI rights in the Italian parliament during the timespan under scrutiny, that is, Senator Cirinnà.

### *Presenting the sub-sample*

Arcigay<sup>52</sup> is the main LGBTI association in Italy. Founded in 1985, Arcigay fights for the equal rights and the self-determination of LGBTI people and against any form of discrimination based on preconceptions and stereotypes. At the time writing this dissertation, Arcigay counts some 71 member associations and local committees. The association clearly wishes to be identified for its non-profit character and its independence from governments, parties, or political and religious ideologies. The association also stresses that its day-to-day activity is financed through the contributions of individual members, private donations, and project-based funds, administered with an ethos of full transparency. At the national level, the association aims at actively influencing policymaking to promote and safeguard the rights of LGBTI people. It does so by coordinating and supporting campaigns across the national territory, including support for old and new local level partners.

Arcigay's vision states that they fight for a lay and inclusive society based on solidarity and equality, in which human rights are recognized and guaranteed for everyone. These include the right for LGBTI people to 'be free to be themselves'. To this end, Arcigay's mission is to promote and safeguard equal rights for all by affirming universal principles of solidarity and opposing violence and discrimination against LGBTI people. More specifically, this is envisioned as entailing the achievement of full and equal rights for LGBTI people (including equal marriage and parenthood), the enforcement of legal protection from violence and discrimination, and the promotion of micro-level intervention to enhance the wellbeing of LGBTI people. Arcigay seeks to achieve these goals through lobbying, advocacy, public campaigning, and support to initiatives that have the potential for public mobilization. At the time of this analysis, Arcigay has some 8,600 followers on Twitter as @arcigay.

Monica Cirinnà<sup>53</sup> has been a member of the Italian Senate with the center-left Partito Democratico since the general elections of 2013. After graduating in Law from the University of Rome 'La Sapienza' and a decade-long career in academia, Cirinnà moved to the realm of representative politics at the level of the municipality of Rome in the early 90s. Elected with the Green Party (in Italian, 'Verdi') to the city council for four terms, Cirinnà's early political career

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<sup>52</sup> About page on Arcigay's website: <https://www.arcigay.it/chi-siamo/>

<sup>53</sup> Personal homepage of Cirinnà: <https://www.MonicaCirinna.it/>

was mostly tied to issues of equal representation and a fierce defense of environmental measures and animal rights. After 20 years in the city council of Rome, Cirinnà entered the ranks of Partito Democratico through the public consultations that preceded the 2013 general elections ('parlamentarie').

Elected as Senator of the Republic in that same year, Cirinnà has been assigned to the 'Justice' Parliamentary Committee. Soon thereafter (early 2014) Cirinnà's name became known to the wider public because of its association with a law proposal for the legalization of same-sex civil unions. After more than a year in the back-chambers of the Senate, the 'Decreto Cirinnà' became the crucial piece of equal rights legislation of the Renzi administration (2014-2018). After a heated political debate that regularly made headline news in 2015, the bill is eventually approved by both chambers of parliament in early 2016. At the present time, Cirinnà has some 41,200 followers on twitter as @MonicaCirinna.

### *Practices of production*

The communication of the users in this section emerges as the outcome of the personal experience of the officers involved as well as the political and institutional constraints that they face in their daily work. As it was the case for all the accounts scrutinized so far, these are set in a wide ecology of media practices that involve communication on other social media platforms, traditional media, as well as analog forms of communication such as rallies, public conferences, and the like. What follows is based on two interviews with partners working in the press offices of Arcigay and Senator Cirinnà, respectively. The former took place on skype and lasted approximately 71 minutes. The latter took place on the phone and lasted approximately 33 minutes.

Arcigay has a social media presence on Facebook and Twitter. The association further engages with its audiences via its website, a newsletter, and through a wide range of analog communication activities run by its national apparatus as well as its local members. The communication of Arcigay emerges in a set of collective practices that is rather complex and to some extent resembles those of the women's rights actors from the Italian context described in the previous chapter of this dissertation. Arcigay's strategic engagement on social media started during the lead-up to the European Parliamentary elections of 2014. The interview partner for this study suggested that Arcigay attempted to engage users on social media with the purpose of spreading information regarding the role of EU policymaking on LGBTI equality policy at the national level.

The communication of Arcigay is managed by a single communication officer who has a mandate for the administration of the analog and virtual communication of the association. However, this is run in concert with the national board of Arcigay as well as with local members and with a group of individual activists that have broad visibility on social media and that Arcigay considers a positive group of influencers capable of corroborating the messages of the association. The balance between engagement on Facebook and engagement on Twitter privileges Facebook. Facebook is preferred as a social media outlet for the broadcasting of official press releases communicating the stance of the association on developing political issues. The two accounts are, however, connected so that Facebook posts also appear on Arcigay's Twitter profile. Once these official statements are released, the 'institutional' account of Arcigay willingly takes a back-seat and allows for the discussion to be led by its activists and influencers. Paraphrasing the interviewee, this is because Twitter users tend to seek conversation on unfolding political events with other individuals rather than with institutions as their interlocutors.

Arcigay seems to have very clear guidelines for its social media communication. These are firmly grounded in an equalitarian ethos that privileges transparency and dialogue as well as in a high level of expertise and professionalism on behalf of the personnel involved. Some of the ethical issues that Arcigay encounters on Twitter are tackled with an eye to and expanding on the 'charter of the duties of journalists'<sup>54</sup> issued by the relevant professional association in Italy in 2016. This document was mentioned to be relatively weak regarding what would constitute fair use of social media; a weakness requesting the implementation of stricter guidelines regarding ethically charged issues (e.g. instrumental use of children's pictures). Paraphrasing again the interviewee, social media might be 'a tea room' insofar as the number of people involved is narrow, but it is also 'a bit of a jungle' in light of weak regulations and virtually non-existent moderation. In this context, Arcigay wishes to 're-set the bar' at a level that is, in their view, ethically sound.

In its policy regarding retweets, Arcigay wishes to highlight the fact that it is a national-level organization that has ties with the local level as well as with the international level. Therefore, part of the work aims at making local as well as international news visible and relevant for an audience that is imagined as mostly national in character. Attention is also devoted to pointing out

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<sup>54</sup> Full text of the Charter available at: <http://www.odg.it/testo-unico-dei-doveri-del-giornalista/24288>

the independence of the association from political parties and individual politicians in order to maintain a ‘third party’ stance towards representative politics.

In its own posts, Arcigay strives to adopt gender sensitive language, especially when dealing with issues of homosexuality, thus counterbalancing the perceived or actual domination of gay men within the broader LGBTI community. For what concerns the issue of homo- or transphobic violence, Arcigay privileges narratives that have intervention as their objective rather than focusing on denouncing single violent acts or representing violence in its details for the sake of gaining visibility. It was mentioned that social media do not offer enough space for discussion so that representing violence risks legitimizing it rather than disqualifying it. Similarly, representing LGBTI individuals as victims of violence may have the undesired side-effect of reifying their victimhood rather than challenging their structural disadvantage. The social media efforts of Arcigay are clearly focused on positive news and agentic representations of LGBTI individuals in order to widen the representations of LGBTI subjectivity available to the public.

Monica Cirinnà is active on Twitter and Facebook as well as through her personal website and a newsletter. Cirinnà social media presence was established after her election to the Senate in 2013 in the context of the early discussions of the law proposal on same-sex civil unions for the explicit purpose of having direct engagement with the public on that specific issue. The content that is circulated on the different platforms is fairly homogenous, with strategic differences between outlets based on their affordances. Cirinnà’s communication aims at being of interest to the widest public possible within the Italian national context.

Cirinnà’s tweets mostly adopt the singular first person. As it was the case for the other individual politicians scrutinized thus far in this study, Cirinnà seldom inputs and publishes her tweets from her personal smartphone. Rather, Cirinnà feeds inputs to her communication team regarding her stance on unfolding political events. She then vets messages before they can be broadcasted to the public. Cirinnà does tweet herself occasionally, for example live tweeting in first person from public rallies. For what concerns temporality, the general impression is that of a tweeted communication that is mostly driven by the latest political developments rather than a pre-planned calendar of campaigns. As in many of the other cases scrutinized thus far, the communication staff of Cirinnà is composed of a senior communication officer and some

assistants, all of whom act in coordination with the broader communication infrastructure of their political party of reference.

Cirinnà's press office does not have a clearly defined social media policy, although it does follow the general guidelines for political communication drafted by Partito Democratico for its elected representatives. In general, the communication of Cirinnà seems to follow patterns that were developed through practices rather than pre-established policy indications. In this sense, frequent re-tweeting by her profile suggests an endorsement of a social media practices of sharing and re-circulating messages that is particularly facilitated by Twitter as a platform. It was also mentioned during the interview that 'sharing' [condivisione] is part of the ethos of the progressive political family at large; an ethos that trickles down and finds its manifestation also in communication strategies. Practice-driven policies on social media also include a choice to perform only a minimal level of moderation in order to foster open-ness, transparency, and an impression of approachability. Only openly offensive comments are removed from the @replies and comments on Cirinnà's social media.

#### *Word frequency analysis*

A quick look at the most frequently occurring words in the vocabulary of Arcigay offers a somewhat different profile for its tweeted communication. To some extent, Arcigay does use Twitter for self-promotion in a manner that resembles that of other users. Indeed, the most frequent words in its tweets during the sampled timespan is 'Arcigay' (62 occurrences), complemented with 10 occurrences of #arcigay. Also prominent are the words 'pride' and 'wave' [onda] with 18 occurrences each and making reference to pride rallies and marches, most of which are organized and run with the support of Arcigay on the Italian territory. Also noteworthy is the somewhat wider recurrence of the word 'gay' when compared to the word "lgbti" (18 occurrences, third most frequent compared to 11 occurrences, thirteenth most frequent), suggesting that, at least linguistically, there might be some dominance of gayness over other LGBTI identity categories and/or slippage between LGBTI and gay in the communication of Arcigay.

The focus on campaigning is also confirmed in the case of Arcigay. However, it seems that the campaigning takes a much clearer orientation towards the promotion of LGBTI-friendly cultural content. Indeed, two of the most frequent hashtags used by Arcigay are '#mustread' [da leggere] and '#mustwatch' [#davedere], appearing some 36 and 11 times respectively (second and

tenth most frequent words). These are usually deployed by Arcigay to point out to its audience some content that might be of interest because of its progressive portrayal or discussion of LGBTI issues. Other two hashtags appear as quite frequent in Arcigay's tweets. These are, respectively, '#civilunions' [#unionicivili] and '#thesameyes' [#lostessosi], appearing some 16 and 9 times respectively as the seventh and twentieth most frequent words in its communication. Both of these make reference to above mentioned 'Decreto Cirinnà' on same sex civil unions, approved by the Italian parliament in early 2016. Given the narrowness of the sub-corpus, word frequency analysis cannot offer further insights.

An overview of the most frequent words in the communication of Monica Cirinnà yields the following impressions. Firstly, the most recurrent word in the corpus is indeed Cirinnà's Twitter handle (196 occurrences) suggesting a re-circulation of her own material in a fashion resembling that of other users scrutinized thus far. There also seems to be an attempt at using Twitter as a way of sharing and re-circulating the content produced by individual politicians and activists that are close to Cirinnà herself. The Twitter handle of Andrea Orlando (runner-up in the primaries for secretary of Partito Democratico in 2017, tweeting as @andreaorlandosp, 97 occurrences, third most frequent), that of Partito Democratico (@pdnetwork, 93 occurrences, fourth most frequent), that of Arcigay's president Sergio Lo Giudice (@sergiologiudice, 51 occurrences, twelfth most frequent), and that of PD and LGBTI rights activist Dario Ballini (@darioballini, 45 occurrences, seventeenth most frequent). Also prominent is the handle of RAI network TV channel Rai 3 (@raitre, 40 occurrences, eighteenth most frequent), perhaps signaling a wish to enter in conversation with TV audiences, possibly in conjunction with one or more TV appearances.

Most of the words occurring more than fifty times on Cirinnà's feed during the timespan under scrutiny are to some extent connected to the law on civil unions, although its approval by parliament pre-dates the timespan sampled for this research. These include the hashtags '#civilunions' [#unionicivili] (122 occurrences, second most frequent) and '#statocivile' (official hashtag of a tv show broadcasting civil ceremonies for same-sex unions, 47 occurrences, fourteenth most frequent). The list also includes the words 'law' [legge] (79 occurrences, sixth most frequent, albeit not in all instances connected to civil unions), 'rights' [diritti] (71

occurrences, ninth most frequent), ‘thank you’ [grazie] (53 occurrences, eleventh most frequent), and ‘civil’ (46 occurrences, sixteenth most frequent).

Temporality seems to have a place also in Cirinnà’s communication. This role, however, is not strictly tied to now-ness as in other cases sampled for this study. ‘Today’ [oggi] does appear quite frequently (79 occurrences, seventh most frequent), and so does ‘now’ [ora] (37 occurrences, nineteenth most frequent). However, other frequent temporal references include ‘after’ [dopo] (36 occurrences, twentieth most frequent), ‘before’ [prima] (35 occurrences, twenty-first most frequent), and ‘tomorrow’ [domani] (33 occurrences, twenty-second most frequent). It might be speculated that, once taken in their totality, these temporal references might suggest that a given event (probably the passing of the law on civil unions) is something taking place in the ‘now’ and marks a ‘before’ and ‘after’ in the political history of civil rights in Italy. However, these speculations would need to find confirmation in more in-depth analysis.

### *Discourse analysis*

In order to ensure comparability, this sub-section will deal with examples that come from the same thematic areas as the ones discussed before for what concerns the European level, namely homophobic/transphobic violence and equal marriage/civil unions/family rights.

### Homophobic/transphobic violence and the production of LGBTI subjectivities therein

Both Arcigay and Monica Cirinnà posted several tweets commenting the situation in Chechnya already discussed in the previous section. Arcigay’s coverage of the issue was somewhat larger, while Cirinnà’s commentary was limited to relatively dry messages such as the following:

Terrible news from Chechnya, Italy and EU should immediately take a stance  
#gay [link to website]<sup>55</sup>  
(@MonicaCirinna, MP, 11 April 2017)

Foregrounded in this sentence are the ‘news from Chechnya’, aptly described as ‘terrible’. The implied action in the first part of the tweet is that this news is ‘coming in’ from Chechnya, thus suggesting some motion from outside towards the inside of a given socio-political space. And indeed, the subjects of the second part of the tweet are Italy and the EU, socio-political spaces that

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<sup>55</sup> Notizie tremende dalla Cecenia, Italia e Ue prendano subito posizione #gay

do not encompass Chechnya. Italy and the EU are here intertwined; a peculiar choice given the mostly national audience of the post (in the Italian language). This intertwining potentially suggests that the two socio-political spaces are inherently connected when it comes to championing human rights and LGBTI rights. Italy and the EU are, however, the subjects of a moral imperative: ‘to take a stance’ vis-à-vis the issue at stake. Thus, the topos of urgency is deployed in this case to prompt ‘Italy and the EU’ towards action.

The coverage of the Chechnyan situation by Arcigay was somewhat larger. Some parts of this coverage are relatively dry like the post by Cirinnà quoted above. In other post, Arcigay covered the situation with posts similar to those of ILGA Europe and Rainbow Rose quoted in the previous section. Given these similarities, I do not analyze these posts in this section. Rather, it was my choice to devote space to Arcigay’s commentary on episodes of homophobic violence on the Italian territory. For example:

After Salento, now also in Romagna: this drifting into homophobia is becoming choking, much worse than the [African] heatwave. [Solidarity with Manuela and her friends.]<sup>56</sup>  
(@arcigay, LGBTI rights group, 22 August 2017)

This post refers to an incident of homophobic harassment directed towards one of Arcigay’s board members and their friends, taking place on the beach in the summer of 2017. The full text of the message is too long for the (at the time) 140-character limit imposed by Twitter. As a matter of fact, the message was originally posted on Facebook and appeared on Twitter because of the connection between the two platforms enabled by Arcigay. Thus, Twitter users would only see the text until the word ‘caldo’ [heat, heatwave] unless they followed the link to the facebook post in object. The truncated message arguably makes sense even without the remaining eight words, although part of the context would go amiss.

The post starts with a geographic reference that hints to the fact that two episodes of homophobic harassment took place in two locations, one in the south and one in the north of Italy. The subject of the action is a generalized ‘drifting into homophobia’, an action in its own

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<sup>56</sup> Dopo il Salento ora anche la Romagna: questa deriva omofoba sta diventando soffocante, molto più del caldo [africano. Solidarietà a Manuela e alle sue amiche.]

right that probably has the whole country as its subject. The drifting is presented as performing action upon itself, that is, transformation. The transformation is from a status of relative ‘normality’ towards a less comfortable status of becoming ‘choking’ [soffocante].

The action of transformation is not only being predicated upon the sliding into homophobia, but also on bystanders, whose breath is now taken away as the necessary implication of the transition. The new status is then compared with the ‘African’ heatwave that invested Southern Europe in the summer of 2017. The adoption of the sensorial metaphor (choking) hints to the embodied character of harassment and also refers to its quasi-unbearability. The comparison with the ‘African’ weather might be a subtle reference to the intertwining of homophobia and racism, suggesting that homophobia is unbearable while African migration is more than manageable. The post is concluded with a statement in solidarity with the victims of the attack. The reader is compelled towards action against the homophobic drift of Italy through the topos of burdening. That is to say, action to change the status quo should be adopted because of the burden it imposes on a given group (in this case, sexual minorities).

This is an excellent example of communication on gender-based violence that conveys a dense amount of meaning without reifying violence and disempowering victims. Most crucially, this example points out that homophobic violence is a structural issue that can take place anywhere if no one takes a stance against the homophobic drift. And indeed, Arcigay is very active in advocating for systemic solutions to homophobic/transphobic violence as an endemic issue. A very clear example of this was posted during pride month and said:

“We’ll go forward until this Country will not avail itself of a law against homophobia and transphobia and of [serious] policies [to tackle discriminations]” here is the speech of Gabriele Piazzoni, national Secretary of Arcigay, from the stage of Milan Pride #ondapride #davedere]<sup>57</sup>  
(@arcigay, LGBTI rights group, 26 June 2017)

As it was the case for the previous example, the message originates as a Facebook post that also embeds a video of the action being represented. Twitter users who do not follow the link to

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<sup>57</sup> "Andremo avanti fino a quando questo Paese non si doterà di una legge contro omofobia e transfobia e di politiche [serie di contrasto alle discriminazioni]": ecco il discorso di Gabriele Piazzoni, segretario nazionale Arcigay, dal palco del Milano Pride #ondapride #davedere]

Facebook can only see the message until the word ‘policies’ [politiche]. In this post, national secretary of Arcigay Gabriele Piazzoni is foregrounded as the speaker of reported speech presented in the form of a relatively large quote. Piazzoni states that a collective ‘we’ (probably made of LGBTI rights advocates) will continue its advocacy until some demands are met, and namely a law against homophobia and transphobia and a set of coherent policies for its implementation. In the truncated part of the quote, the situation is set in the frame of Milan Pride.

The spatiotemporal connotation of the action being represented (‘going forward’) establishes strong links with a narrative of progress. Crucially, this progress is presented as having an endpoint, namely the day in which ‘the Country’, personified and capitalized, will meet the demands of the LGBTI movement. These demands have a concrete part and an aspirational one. The law on homophobia and transphobia to which the post makes reference is stuck in the backrooms of Parliament since 2014, with little hope of seeing the floor any time soon. Thus, Piazzoni is making reference to a specific piece of legislation, however far its approval might be. Conversely, the passing of serious policies to tackle discrimination is a potentially open-ended process that is mostly aspirational in character.

The above example further corroborates the claim that Arcigay tends to be a subject constructing homophobic and transphobic violence as a structural issue that is as pervasive as the weather and demanding structural solutions such as specific anti-discrimination laws and serious policies that are coherent with them. This wide interpretation seems to be shared also by Cirinnà, as confirmed in some of her posts stating things such as the following:

Homophobia and discriminations are to be fought with appropriate communication, education, and culture. Tonight at 23.30 I will be on Matrix on canale 5<sup>58</sup>  
(@MonicaCirinna, MP, 21 February 2017)

This post is a ‘re-tweet with comment’ on another post in which a relatively well-known journalist laments misrepresentation of LGBTI issues and subjectivities in mainstream news. In her own post, Cirinnà foregrounds homophobia as well as other discriminatory practices as the

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<sup>58</sup> Omofobia e discriminazioni si combattono con corretta comunicazione, educazione e cultura. Questa sera alle 23.30 sarò a Matrix canale 5

subject at the receiving end of a passive sentence. These subjects ‘are to be fought’ with measures ‘appropriate’ for their character. These measures are said to include communication, education, and culture. The post is concluded with self-promotion in which Cirinnà is informing her followers of her next appearance on broadcast TV. It is worth noticing that Cirinnà is contributing to the hybridization of the media system by inviting her followers to move from social media to broadcast media in order to see her on screen and, potentially, back again on social media for live or follow up commentary.

In this post, homophobia and discrimination are foregrounded but also passivated. The agentic subject is a collective ‘we’ that potentially encompasses the Italian polity at large. The use of a combat metaphor is not uncommon in this context, as already discussed when analyzing narratives of violence against women. Implicit in this sentence construction is that ‘communication, education, and culture’ are metaphoric weapons for the fight against discrimination. It might be suggested that relatively feminized objects, such as the ones in the list, are masculinized in the context of the metaphor of the fight.

Before moving on to discussion of narratives covering equal marriage and family rights, it is worth mentioning that, as it was the case for their European level counterparts, both Arcigay and Cirinnà took a stance in favor of the women’s movement and its fight against violence.

INTERNATIONAL DAY AGAINST VIOLENCE ON WOMEN [sic],  
ARCIGAY: “US, TOO, IN THE SQUARE TOMORROW TO SUPPORT  
THE VOICE [OF THE VICTIMS”]<sup>59</sup>  
(@arcigay, LGBTI rights group, 25 November 2016)

@Noviolenzadonne Men, you were called out. You ought to change, prove it  
#THISISNOTLOVE<sup>60</sup>  
(@MonicaCirinna, MP, 25 November 2016)

The specific language adopted in these two posts will not be object of closer scrutiny. The point of showcasing them is corroborating the argument that, while being seldom spoken off by

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<sup>59</sup> GIORNATA INTERNAZIONALE CONTRO LA VIOLENZA SULLE DONNE, ARCIGAY: "ANCHE NOI DOMANI IN PIAZZA A SOSTENERE [LA VOCE DELLE VITTIME"]

<sup>60</sup> @Noviolenzadonne Uomini siete stati nominati. Dovete cambiare, dimostratecelo #QUESTONONEAMORE [link to website of SenatoriPD]

their women's rights counterparts, subjects that regularly advocate in favor of LGBTI rights do position themselves within the context of the 'gender equality' discourse, especially when it comes to the issue of violence against women. Also notice that, similarly to what was detected for Valeria Fedeli and Laura Boldrini but differently from virtually every other account scrutinized so far, Cirinnà does not shy away from directly addressing men as potential and actual perpetrators of violence. In her post, men are foregrounded and directly asked to take responsibility for the eradication of violence against women.

### Equal marriage, civil unions, and family rights

The most resonant socio-political events for LGBTI rights advocacy in Italy over the last few years has been, undoubtedly, the passing of Decreto Cirinnà on same-sex civil unions in early 2016. While criticized for not going far enough, the bill was largely celebrated for its progressive character, at least within the Italian context. The bill was approved before the starting of the data-gathering phase for this study, but its momentum kept reverberating throughout the sampled timespan and beyond. For example, the passing of a set of implementing decrees ensuring consistent implementation of the law fueled further celebrations in early 2017.

+++civil unions, implementing decrees approved. Arcigay: "a historical step, society transforms itself" +++ [link to blog post]<sup>61</sup>  
(@arcigay, LGBTI rights group, 14 January 2017)

In this tweet, Arcigay reports on the approval of the above mentioned implementing decrees. The association itself takes the word, as marked by the inverted commas signaling reported speech. In seven words (six, once translated into English), Arcigay conveys a very powerful set of narratives regarding Decreto Cirinnà. The law and its implementing decrees are defined as 'a historical step'. Reference to history is quite powerful and clearly aims at establishing the passing of the law as a major milestone. The spatial metaphor of the step conveys once again meanings associated with movement, and more specifically movement 'forward', probably in a historical flow towards progress.

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<sup>61</sup> +++unioni civili, approvati decreti attuativi. Arcigay: "un passo storico, la societa si trasforma"+++

The law is also defined through the representation of another action by a collective subject termed ‘society’ and presented as ‘transforming itself’. The language of transformation is drenched with meanings associated with the history of LGBTI rights as well as with queer interventions in feminist theory. Linking this discussion back to the general theoretical framework of this dissertation, it can be argued that Arcigay is here constructing a vision of LGBTI rights that passes through legal recognitions and ultimately aims at achieving ‘equality as transformation’.

The discursive construction of Decreto Cirinnà on same-civil union goes well beyond celebration as a milestone in the history of civil rights in Italy. Like every milestone, the law on civil unions is just a landmark along the way towards wider recognition of LGBTI rights. The construction of LGBTI rights as a progression in which the law on civil unions is a necessary first step is quite common in the dataset. A clear example comes from an interaction between a private user and Cirinnà:

Too many #news outlets speak of marriage referring to #civilunions, providing therefore a terrible service. What does @MonicaCirinna think?

@PrivateUser good that equality between families enters the collective imagination, bad since equal marriage is our goal. <sup>62</sup>

(@MonicaCirinna, MP, 9 October 2016)

This example is one of the rare cases in the dataset in which the users sampled for this part of the study do interact with their followers. In a tweet that @mentions Cirinnà’s Twitter handle, a private user describes their interpretation of a social phenomenon. In their opinion, a collective subject made of ‘news outlets’ [organi d’informazione] is allegedly providing a disservice to their audiences in light of the fact that they often slip into the comfortable shorthand of calling civil unions ‘(gay) marriage’. Implied in this consideration is an accurate reflection on the fact that civil unions under the Cirinnà law are not legally equivalent to marriage. Cirinnà is thus summoned to provide her opinion on the issue at stake.

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<sup>62</sup> Troppi organi di #informazione parlano di matrimonio a proposito di #unionicivili, dando così un pessimo servizio. Cosa pensi @MonicaCirinna?  
.@PrivateUser bene che l'uguaglianza delle famiglie entri nell'immaginario collettivo, male visto che il matrimonio egualitario è la nostra meta.

Cirinnà provided a poignant reply that has two components. In her opinion, slippage between ‘civil unions’ and ‘marriage’ is both good and bad. On the one hand, this narrative can have its value because it can support the production of a public imaginary in which family formations enjoy ‘equality’ regardless of sexuality. On the other hand, the narrative might downplay the fact that civil unions are actually not marriages and that the goal of having equal marriage legislation is yet to be reached. This twofold interpretation is, once again, dense with meaning. Cirinnà’s tweets demonstrates awareness of the possibility of achieving social change through the circulation of new narratives that might eventually expand the range of discourses available to people and also widen the range of subject positions that people can occupy therein. Cirinnà’s tweet also shows awareness that discursive slippage might backfire and should therefore be handled with caution.

Cirinnà’s reply also speaks to the above mentioned vision of LGBTI equality as having a trajectory in which civil unions are a necessary step that however needs to be surpassed in order to make room for further civil rights, such as the right to equal marriage, here presented as a ‘goal line’ to be reached. This narrative of movement towards progress is also echoed in other posts in the dataset, as for example this tweet by Arcigay:

Equal #marriage: we resume the run! We do it putting together the voices and the points of view of the most [important #lgbti association and some\* authoritative experts\* that observe the social transformation in our Country. Saturday in #Bologna #can'tmiss #TheSameYes]<sup>63</sup>  
(@arcigay, LGBTI rights group, 12 October 2016)

As in some of the cases scrutinized above, this post was originally posted on Facebook. Therefore, Twitter users who do not follow the link to would only see the message until the word ‘most’ [più]. The truncated message doesn’t fully make sense, but does convey some of the intentions of the post. Equal marriage is foregrounded as the end goal towards which a collective ‘we’ is ‘running’. The run is announced as ‘resuming’, probably after the break to celebrate Decreto Cirinnà. The first new step in the resumed run towards equal marriage is represented to

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<sup>63</sup> #Matrimonio egualitario: riprendiamo la corsa! Lo facciamo mettendo assieme le voci e i punti di vista delle più [importanti associazioni #lgbti e di alcun\* autorevoli expert\* che osservano le trasformazioni sociali del nostro Paese Sabato a #Bologna #danonperdere #LoStessoSì]

be an event in Bologna. In this event, a collective subject made of ‘important’ LGBTI associations and ‘authoritative’ experts will share their points of views on a set of issues. These are defined as ‘social transformations’ that the Country’, personified and capitalized, is currently undergoing.

This example can be said to be consistent with the ones presented thus far. Firstly, it constructs a vision of LGBTI rights that is metaphorically described as a progression towards an ever expanding set of legal tools and societal recognitions from LGBTI subjectivities. This progression is marked by several milestones, some of which have been achieved (for example the law on civil unions) and some of which are clearly in sight as potential next steps in this trajectory (equal marriage). Movement metaphors are crucial to this narrative, and especially metaphors connected with walking (‘step’, ‘run’). Secondly, this example reiterates that the progression towards equal rights for LGBTI subjectivities happens through a ‘transformation’ of society, thus hinting to a vision of ‘equality’ that goes beyond sameness with a hypothetical heterosexual standard or the recognition of the equal value of non-heterosexual diversities.

As it was the case for the European-level users sampled for this chapter, narratives of equal marriage and same sex civil unions are strictly tied to narratives of parenthood rights. A crucial setback in the political process that led to the passing of Decreto Cirinnà was the removal of all adoption rights included in an earlier version of the bill in order to get the support of the so-called moderate (Catholic) right and get the bill passed. As documented in the example below, Cirinnà is still involved in advocating for LGBTI rights to parenthood in the best interest of their children.

Full recognition of genitoriality is the only option for total protection of children #theyareallthesame @FamArcobaleno [link to picture]<sup>64</sup>  
(@MonicaCirinna, MP, 1 March 2017)

In this post, Cirinnà engages in descriptive action that defines an object of knowledge, namely ‘full recognition of genitoriality’ of LGBTI subjects. This object of knowledge is defined in terms of its function, that is, offer total protection to children. Furthermore, it is also defined as ‘the only option’ to achieve this goal, thus framing the issue at stake in terms that exclude other possible solutions. The post is completed with a hashtag that refers to the fact that all children,

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<sup>64</sup> Il riconoscimento pieno della genitorialità unico modo per totale protezione bambini #sonotuttiuguali @FamArcobaleno

including the children of LGBTI families, have the same rights because ‘they are all the same’. It is also complemented by an @mention of the main Italian advocacy group for LGBTI families Famiglie Arcobaleno (‘rainbow families’).

The post clearly refers to the fact that current legislation does not recognize the full parenthood to LGBTI subjects, with the unintended consequence of discriminating against the children of rainbow families in light of the narrower set of rights available to them in comparison to those afforded to their peers growing up in heterosexual families. As it was the case in a similar example at the European level, this post engages in discursive work for the recognition of rainbow families as already existing entities and, therefore, engages in advocacy for the removal of discriminations against them. Appeal to children’s rights might be a strategic move to avoid engaging with the thorny issue of addressing parenthood as a right. While there is probably no widespread consensus around the existence of ‘a right to be a parent’, it is safe to say that there is almost universal consensus that children should be protected by law, at least in principle. Thus, by dodging a particularly controversial issue, this post also attempts to win social acceptance for actually existing rainbow families by establishing a link between LGBTI rights and a universal narrative of children’s rights.

Reference to a wider set of rights that expands beyond a strict focus on LGBTI rights per se is not unique to the above post. A specific example on the timeline of Arcigay is particularly salient in this respect:

people emigrate to marry, to procreate, to take care of themselves, to die. Here is Italy and her right’s tourism. #toread today on la Repubblica [link to newspaper article]<sup>65</sup>  
(@arcigay, LGBTI rights group, 2 March 2017)

This post has a strong affective character and touches upon several issues worth exploring. The action being represented is strongly foregrounded and is that of ‘emigrating’. This representation of social action is probably devised to stand in opposition to mainstream political commentary that sees Italy as a country of immigration rather than emigration. Reference to

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<sup>65</sup> Si emigra per sposarsi, per procreare, per curarsi, per morire. Ecco l'Italia e il suo turismo dei diritti. #daleggere oggi su la Repubblica

emigration also evokes strong images from the recent yet unspoken history of Italian labor migration to the Americas and to Northern Europe. In the action here represented, however, Italians are not emigrating to seek fortune abroad, but to seek a set of rights.

The list includes marriage, procreation, healthcare, and death. The first two items on the list clearly point to cross-border migration for the purposes of accessing equal marriage and medically assisted reproduction services, perhaps including surrogate motherhood. Reference to healthcare might refer to healthcare services that are more friendly towards trans embodiments, but it might just as plausibly refer to access to free and safe abortion or to other healthcare services that are often presented as poorly performed on the Italian territory. Reference to death might refer to a recent case of cross-border migration for the purpose of accessing voluntary interruption of life (the case of ‘DJ Fabo’), but might also be a broader reference to the blurry set of rights in the field of voluntary interruption of life afforded by the Italian law.

After listing these rights, the speaking subject adopts an ironic tone to present ‘Italy’ as a country characterized by its ‘right’s tourism’. Reference to ‘tourism’ is somewhat strident because it trivializes the much stronger images of emigration drawn in the first part of the post. However, irony might be purposefully used to mobilize sweet-and-sour affects. The post is completed with reference to a newspaper article published by Rome-based left-leaning Repubblica (second most broadly circulated newspaper in the country).

Aside from the above considerations, this post clearly aims at defining ‘Italy’ as a socio-political space where a wide range of rights are unavailable. In this context, LGBTI rights are powerfully linked to other rights that interest all members of society regardless of their sexuality. Through this link, the speaking subject is building the case that supporting LGBTI rights as well as other rights concerning reproduction and life itself is actually in the interest of society at large. The topos deployed is probably that of burdening, insofar as action is presented as necessary in order to relieve the ingroup ‘Italians’ from the burden of having to migrate to access rights.

### *Section summary*

In this section, I summarized the tweeted narratives of the national level users sampled for this part of the study, namely Arcigay and Senator Monica Cirinnà. In line with my argument thus far, the first part of the section focused on vertical contextualization and its role in shaping what

the users under scrutiny are able to say as subjects of discourse. I thereafter re-stated that being subjects produced in discourse does not prevent these users from speaking through the discourses available to them to achieve their political objectives. Analysis highlighted overlaps between the narratives of the users sampled for this chapter and reveals continuity with the narratives of the users analyzed in previous chapters.

In particular, I focused on the importance of homo-/transphobic violence and family rights to LGBTI rights, its location in a discursive field that mostly refers to civil rights/human rights, and its relation to gender equality as an issue that appears to be adjacent and only partially overlapping. In this sense, these users can be said to speak from the margins of the gender equality discourse, despite being relatively hegemonic in terms of their positionality in the LGBTI rights milieu. For what concerns language, these users commonly adopt moral arguments and rights-based narratives to advance their claims. In this sense, moral legitimization and the topos of burdening are substantially more common than the topos of number or theoretical rationalization. What follows will draw links between these findings and those outlined in the previous section.

### **Comparative discussion**

Based on the above this chapter contributes to my wider argument in the following ways. Firstly, the case studies presented in this chapter seem to converge with the other ones discussed thus far, offering corroborating evidence to claim that social media users can be understood in their broader context as subjects constructed in discourses and practices. This is not to say that they cannot use the discourses available to them in order to achieve their preferred policy goals. However, these goals, the discourses available to these users, and their subject positions are here interpreted as the product of a defused network of discursive practices in which objects and subjects of knowledge co-construct each other. Secondly and coherently with one of the read-threads of this dissertation, the users sampled for analysis in this chapter can be said to be both resistant and hegemonic subject of the discourses they inhabit. The sampled LGBTI rights users were said to speak from a position that is peripheral vis-à-vis a mostly heteronormative surrounding environment. However, these users were presented as having a good degree of professionalization and preferential access to resources that, in turn, afforded them visibility beyond that of other groups in the LGBTI rights milieu. In this sense, these users are in their own right hegemonic when it comes to define ‘LGBTI equality’ as a political goal.

Thirdly and perhaps unsurprisingly, these users do not have ‘women’ as the main subject of their narratives as it was the case in previous chapters of this work. Rather, LGBTI rights organizations make reference to a number of collective subjects that spans across sexual and bodily minorities and also encompasses other collectivities (e.g. rainbow families). The effect, however, is not that of a displacement of women as the main subject of the gender equality discourse. This is because the narrative here scrutinized only partially overlaps with the gender equality discourse and makes much wider reference to discourses of civil rights and human rights. In this sense, the rights of sexual and bodily minorities seem to be object of contestation not within the context of ‘gender equality’, but rather in the context of ‘human rights’ as an adjacent yet different set of discourses. Of course, these two overlap, but perhaps not as much as one would intuitively think.

The above does not mean that the users here scrutinized do not articulate their vision of ‘equality’ in terms that have an influence on the way in which ‘gender equality’ is broadly understood. Indeed, the example examined in this chapter mostly outline a vision of equality through socio-legal transformation. Thus, achieving equality seems to pass through a set of legal provisions gradually accompanied by cultural change with the purpose of transforming society in such a way as to make it inclusive towards sexual and bodily minorities. In this sense, the language of ‘equality as transformation’ is very much associated with proposals for measures that mostly refer to ‘equality as difference’. This trend is not unique to the cases here scrutinized. For example, discussion in Chapter 5 pointed out that women’s rights users do adopt the language of systemic transformation but also do so from the subject position of a collective us made of women and for the purpose of achieving recognition for the equal value of women’s subjectivities.

Fourthly, narratives at the European level and at the national level were found to be overlapping both in terms of topics treated and in terms of language adopted. This might hint to the existence of some behind the scenes coordination between LGBTI advocacy groups or, to the very least, to the existence of a broad coalition of LGBTI advocates that re-circulate each other’s claims and similarly frame their messages. The language referring to the broad semantic fields of ‘rights’, ‘progress’, and ‘love’ were found to be broadly shared by all the users here scrutinized. I interpret the use of the language of rights as a strategic necessity dictated by the need to have a shared vocabulary with the institutions that these groups lobby in their advocacy work (mostly, ‘human rights’ or ‘equal rights’ institutions).

The language of progress was mostly detectable because of widespread use of metaphors of movement through space-time towards a future of full equality for LGBTI subjectivities. The language of love was mostly tied to equal marriage and featured also the use of shared hashtags (e.g. #loveislove) in what resembles a loosely organized connective action. The topos of burdening is often deployed in fairly affective terms to demand mobilization for the removal of discriminatory practices of the establishment of anti-discrimination norms. The topos of reality is also deployed to foreground the fact that LGBTI subjects and rainbow families literally exist in real life and, therefore, should be endowed with equal rights. In all of these cases, affective language is widely used to gather momentum and support for the claim to LGBTI equality.

## **Conclusions**

In this chapter, I sketched an overview of the tweeted narratives of the user sampled for this study taking into consideration their advocacy work for LGBTI rights. I interpreted these users as occupying a dual position that is both resistant and hegemonic vis-à-vis the discursive environment in which they operate and are produced. For what concerns the European level users, I argued that they operate with an eye to the EU as their main space of reference, but also stretch beyond EU borders into ‘broader Europe’, including Council of Europe and ESCE member states. For what concerns the Italian level users, I argued that they frequently make reference to events that happen outside of the national boundaries, often with the intention of conveying information about events happening abroad to a public that is mostly national in character. I also argued that these users mostly work at the margins, or even ‘outside’, of the gender equality discourse. As a matter of fact, their narratives make much more frequent reference to ‘human rights’, ‘civil rights’, or ‘minority rights’. This is detectable because of a somewhat different vocabulary as well as a different set of institutional points of reference (e.g. not EIGE but FRA).

This is not to say, however, that the advocacy work of these subjects does not participate in the discursive production of gender equality as an object of knowledge and of subjects of the gender equality discourse. Indeed, the advocacy of these groups contributes to a vision of equality for sexual and bodily minorities that mostly adopts the language of transformation but actually advocates for ‘equality as difference’. This is visible in their advocacy for legislation recognizing the right to life free from discrimination for LGBTI subjects. I suggested that this narrative

resembles that of women's rights users, who argue for large scale social transformation in order to achieve women's liberation from patriarchal discrimination.

Arguments were mostly built around three key themes, namely those of rights, progress, and love. The claims advanced therein were found to be conveyed via calls to change the status quo that make frequent use of the topos of reality, the topos of burdening, moral legitimization, spatial metaphors, and highly affective language. LGBTI subjects were foregrounded as agentic, afforded a voice of their own, and presented as actually existing individuals who are currently burdened by discriminatory legislation or the lack of anti-discrimination measures. I argued that these advocacy efforts are undoubtedly political in character, despite the fact that reference to the legal system might give the impression of them being a 'technical' and therefore non-political matter. Nonetheless, the arguments advanced are clearly value-based ones, thus countering the interpretation that LGBTI equality could ever be a merely technical issue.

## 7. Pro-equality Men's groups

### Introduction

So far, I engaged with discourses that were voiced by a number of users involved in gender equality advocacy from the subject positions of either gender equality institutions, women's right groups, or LGBTI rights organizations. While vocal on a wide range of issues, the discourses analyzed so far consistently avoided talking of straight men as potential subjects of gender equality. This chapter aims at offering some reflections on what is gained and what is lost by excluding 'men' as subjects of the gender equality discourse. To do so, I address the following. Firstly, I offer some quantitative measures of the under- or non-representation of men in the corpus of data under scrutiny. Secondly, I review some of the ways in which men are presented in those rare cases in which they are actually mentioned in the dataset. Thirdly, I review some information obtained in two interview with members of pro-equality men groups operating at the European and at the Italian level respectively.

### Subjectivation in the equality discourse: Foregrounding women, backgrounding men

The analysis offered so far pointed out that 'women' are by far the most prominent subject category in the corpus of data under scrutiny. As a matter of fact, 'women' is the most frequent word used by virtually all of the users scrutinized in Chapters 4 to 6, appearing a cumulative total of 1,665 times in the posts of the users sampled for the European level and 1,139 times [donne] in the posts of the users from the Italian component of the sample scrutinized so far. It is possible to add to this some 249 and 251 mentions for #women and #donne respectively, some 233 mentions of 'girls' at the European level, and some 70 and 225 mentions for 'woman' and 'donna' (in the singular) respectively. By comparison, men are virtually non-existent in the discourses sampled for this study. The word 'men' and 'uomini' appear some 116 and 96 times at the European and Italian levels respectively. The adjective 'male' appears some 31 times at the European level, while 'maschile' appears 62 times at the national level. The word 'man', in the singular, does not appear in the 1,000 most frequent words in the European level part of the corpus, while 'uomo' appears 34 times in the Italian part of the user-based sample.

Discussion in previous chapters highlighted how discourses that foreground 'women' and background 'men' are especially common at the European level and slightly less common at the

Italian national level. For example, Chapter 4 pointed out that discourses of violence against women produced by gender equality bodies at the European level tend to background men as the implicit perpetrators of violence without directly mentioning them, while Italian level users are somewhat more inclined to address men as possible allies for the eradication of violence against women. Along different lines, the example of Non una di meno in Chapter 5 pointed out that the Italian feminist network defines its own mobilizations as part of fight against ‘male perpetrated violence against women’, foregrounding men as the subjects responsible for the problem of violence. Despite these examples, however, the role of ‘men’ in the equality discourse is negligible at best.

Not without irony, one of the few posts directly addressing the issue of men’s under-representation in the equality discourses sampled for this study reads as follows:

#Genderequality discussions often engage women, but men have a crucial role to play. Read more [link to website]

Figure 16 - picture embedded in the tweet above



(@eurogender, European institute for Gender Equality, 10 October 2016)

In this post, EIGE wishes to highlight that equality discussions should not neglect the role of ‘men’; a role that is defined as ‘crucial’. Despite the explicit intent of the post, men are nonetheless backgrounded, while women are foregrounded as the most salient subject of gender equality discussions. The post is complemented with a picture of a man (presumably a father) who is on the phone while wearing rubber gloves and simultaneously holding a young child. His pose

is obviously implausible. For example, smartphones cannot be operated while wearing rubber gloves. However, it does resemble common representations of women who ‘multitask’ their way through domestic chores.

All in all, the composition of text and image suggests that women are the protagonist of gender equality discussions and that men’s ‘crucial role’ is to take care of reproductive labor with little or no success. Arguably, the post by EIGE trivializes a potentially powerful argument: men’s role in gender equality probably does entail a larger male participation in reproductive labor. Nonetheless, its perhaps involuntarily ironic character poses a provocation that can be used as a starting point to think of what is gained and what is lost in making men unspoken subjects of gender equality. This discussion is developed in the next section.

### **Foregrounding women, backgrounding men: What is gained and what is lost?**

For best or for worse, the gender equality discourses sampled for this study are strictly tied to the gender binary. That is to say, its subjects are ‘women’ and ‘men’, with no opening towards other gendered identities. In a gender equality discourse that is strictly binary, backgrounding men almost necessarily implies foregrounding women, with a wide range of advantages for the point of view of equal representation. Firstly, foregrounded women tend to be represented as agentic, to speak in their own right, and with their own voice. While this is not universally true (women are sometimes passivated even within equality discourses) it is nonetheless safe to state that their representation is far more positive in equality discourse than in other fields, as testified by countless studies referring to politics (e.g. Shoaf & Parsons, 2016), business (e.g. Baxter, 2017), and sports (Ponterotto, 2014; Bruce, 2016), just to mention a few areas of possible interest.

Secondly, over-representing and foregrounding women in equality discourses can be said to compensate for the under-representation and backgrounding of women in the discourses other than gender equality such as the ones mentioned above. Men already enjoy broad visibility in public discussions; a visibility that largely overshadows that of women, as documented in a burgeoning corpus of literature (Byerly and Ross, 2008; Ross & Carter, 2011; Ross, 2011; Shor, van de Rijt, Miltsov, Kulkarni, & Skiena, 2015; Ross, Boyle, Carter, & Ging, 2018). Accepting the proposition that one of the functions of gender equality discourses is to reduce the power imbalance between women and men, the case for over-representing women therein is rather compelling.

Thirdly and crucially, men do not need to be represented in gender equality discourses in order for them to engage in the struggle for gender equality. In her seminal book on masculinities, Connell (2005, see also Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) pointed out that men can and should participate in the demise of patriarchy through their involvement in political battlefields other than the gender equality one. Indeed, labor unions, civil rights movements, environmentalist groups, and other progressive platforms already pose a threat to the patriarchy without necessarily having to call themselves 'feminist'. Men's involvement in feminist spaces actually bears the risk of diverting the discussion away from women's claims for equality, thus hindering rather than supporting the quest for equality. As discussion offered below shows, the members of groups of men in favor of gender equality interviewed for this study seem to agree that men should take a stand in those space where they already enjoy visibility and make those spaces feminist rather than colonizing feminist spaces with their claim to visibility.

In light of the above, it seems that there is much to gain and little to lose from a gender equality discourse in which men are backgrounded into quasi-irrelevance. This does not mean, however, that nothing of value is lost in the process of making men unspoken subjects of the gender equality discourse. In her popular methodology for the study of gender equality policy, Bacchi (1999, 2009) argues that policies are productive of the 'problems' they wish to solve and also perform discursive work to produce the subjects of their own discourses. Within this framework, a gender equality discourse that consistently backgrounds 'men' necessarily implies that 'men' bear no responsibility for gender inequality. In turn, this prevents the articulation of political solutions to the problem of gender inequality that address men as their subjects. The result is a gender equality discourse in which women are defined by their disadvantaged position vis-à-vis an un-named 'other' and simultaneously charged with the responsibility of lifting themselves out of their unprivileged position. Conversely, directly addressing men as possible subjects of the gender equality discourse can unlock the possibility of making them responsible for some aspects of gender *inequality* and therefore also charging them with responsibility for its eradication.

Furthermore, a feminism that makes of inclusivity one of its decisive features can hardly shrug its shoulders in the face of those men who want to enter its ranks. While absorbing this demand might be a challenge, it is perhaps necessary in order for feminism to avoid falling into contradiction with its propositions. This in no way implies that feminist communities need to

radically undo their practices. For example, inclusion might take the form of an extended feminist ‘us’ that encompasses all disenfranchised ‘others’ along the lines suggested in Butler’s (2015) politics of cohabitation. That is to say, feminism can be inclusive towards disenfranchised men (e.g. migrant men, precariously employed men) as long as their inclusion is grounded in a wish to build network of solidarity among abjected subjectivities.

### **Unspoken subjects of feminism: The voice of pro-equality men’s groups**

Based on the above, I contend that ‘men’ are mostly unspoken subjects of the gender equality discourse. This unspoken-ness is also detectable on social media platforms, insofar as the voice of pro-equality men’s groups is hardly audible within tweeted gender equality discourses. At the end of the preliminary phase of this study, I gave up on finding ‘the most visible’ Twitter accounts of pro-equality men’s groups at the two levels. Rather, it was my decision to focus on the relative invisibility of fairly successful network of men in favor of gender equality at the European and Italian level respectively. That is to say, the focus shifted from finding the voice of men in favor of gender justice and was redirected towards detecting potential causes for their unspoken-ness. Thus, the cases of Men Engage Europe and Maschile Plurale were selected for this study. At the present time, Men Engage Europe does not have an official Twitter account. Maschile Purale does have one, but its follower base is rather limited: just above 900 followers. The data reported below was gathered during two semi-structured interviews with members of Men Engage Europe and Maschile Plurale. The interview with an activist from Men Engage Europe was carried out on Skype and lasted approximately 90 minutes. The interview with an activist from Maschile Plurale was carried out in person and lasted approximately 63 minutes.

Men Engage Europe is the European regional chapter of the global umbrella organization Men Engage, a global network of men working in support of gender justice. Particularly successful in sub-Saharan Africa, Men Engage did not have a European chapter until fairly recently. Men Engage Europe kicked off its work with a regional consultation in Stockholm in January 2009 featuring the participation of some 80 delegates representing around 40 organizations from 25 European countries (including delegates from states that are not EU members). The meeting was hosted by Men for Gender Equality Sweden and Save the Children Sweden and enjoyed some financial support provided by the EU. Since then, Men for Gender Equality has been leading the activities of the new found network of Men Engage Europe. However, notice that to this date Men

Engage Europe does not have a formal structure, i.e. it is not registered as an NGO at the EU level nor in any of the EU member states.

Men Engage Europe defines itself as ‘an important resource for organisations and individuals working with men and boys to achieve gender equality, end violence, and promote health for men, women and children in Europe’. It is therefore unsurprising that one of the very first activities of Men Engage Europe was a mapping of the individuals and organizations working with men in the EU member states conducted on behalf of EIGE and published in 2012. Follow up meetings in Amsterdam (in 2013) and Oxford (in 2014) established a provisional Steering Committee and produced a ‘strategic plan’ that aims at progressively expanding the activities of the network and eventually formalizing its structure by 2020.

The strategic plan outlines the vision, mission, and objectives of the network, further articulated in short-, mid-, and long term objectives. These can be summarized as follows. Men Engage Europe wishes to contribute to the achievement of gender justice in Europe and beyond by working with partners at different levels to engage men and boys to promote gender equality, health and wellbeing, and the elimination of all forms of violence. In their view, this involves fostering positive masculinities centered around care at the individual and community levels as well as addressing structural inequalities at the institutional level. Men Engage explicitly addresses men as subjects of policy problems that make them responsible for gender inequality and its eradication. Furthermore, Men Engage Europe makes of accountability to the women’s rights movement one of its key principles. That is to say, Men Engage Europe explicitly aims at mobilizing within the field of gender equality without foregrounding their claims to the expenses of those of women.

Maschile Plurale is a nationwide network of organizations working on different aspects of masculinity issues on the Italian territory with activities spanning from small discussion groups for self-awareness to government-sponsored anti-violence campaigns. The organization formalized its structure for the purpose of having a legal status allowing their participation in national and international funding schemes in 2007. However, its origins can be traced back to the early 1990s with first attempts at coordination between Italian groups of men engaged in equality work. To this date, Maschile Plurale remains a loosely organized network of groups scattered across the Italian peninsula that makes of its horizontality and flexibility its key strengths.

The main institutional objectives of Maschile Plurale are the following. Firstly, Maschile Plurale aims at promoting personal and collective reflection among all men on their subjectivity, aiming at fostering cultural change in the way men understand relationships between women and men. Secondly, Maschile Plurale aims at engaging publically as an organization and personally via its individual members in the eradication of all forms of gendered violence. Thirdly, Maschile Plurale wishes to support momentous change in the everyday behavior of individual men, with the final aim of achieving a bottom-up production of new subjectivities that are mindful of diversity and are willing and able to support equality in every aspect of life. Maschile Plurale is engaged across several fields in the broader context of gender equality, with its key activities revolving around the production of political statements on masculinity issues and broader gender issues, the regular organization of seminars and dissemination events at the local level, direct engagement in schools for gender sensitive education, active collaboration with anti-violence shelters, and activist-led research for the development of strategies for the re-entry in society of men perpetrators of violence.

### **Bottom-up convergences across the supranational-national divide**

Men Engage Europe and Maschile Plurale show strong elements of similarity in the narratives they have about themselves, their work, and their role in the broader ecology of feminist mobilization. Out of the topics discussed in interview setting with individual activists from the two groups, I selected three main topics for presentation in this chapter. These are accountability to the women's rights movement, introspection as the starting point of male mobilization within feminism, and engagement with men to prevent violence against women. Discussion below attempts to outline the key elements of each of these topics for the two groups under scrutiny, highlighting elements of similarity between their narratives.

#### *Accountability to the women's rights movement*

Men Engage Europe and Maschile Plurale share a strong wish to make sure that their actions are supportive to the women's rights movement in a framework of accountability. That is to say, both groups start from a recognition of their own male privilege as a factor that potentially impedes their participation in feminism. Therefore, these groups strive to find their place in the context of feminism by stressing their accountability towards those that more clearly have a stake in feminist mobilization, i.e. women. In the words of one activist from the Men Engage network:

from the very start we have had the principle as Men Engage Europe, or as Men Engage global that we are accountable to the broader women's movement in plural, women's movements. And we have a complete document on accountability. As Men Engage global to the women's movements. (James, Activist, Men Engage Europe)

Indeed, the global Men Engage network published in 2014 a 42-page document outlining and operationalizing what they mean by 'accountability'. The document stresses that the work of Men Engage follows in a feminist tradition that has its roots in the mobilization of women-led groups and that, therefore, accountability to these groups is a necessary element for the production of collaborative and equitable partnerships within feminism. In this sense, Men Engage defines 'accountability' in terms of acknowledging male privilege, being open to criticism, striving for personal action in all settings, respecting and supporting women's leadership in the gender equality movement.

Crucially, accountability to women's movements is also operationalized in terms of ensuring that no resources are taken away from their activities. In the words of the interview partner from Men Engage Europe:

we feel, as the EU Men Engage movement, we should prevent taking money from the Women's movement [...] because of the enormous gap of power positions. At the same time, we want to help address the issue of funding from a different angle by bringing new founding from new sources. (James, activist, Men Engage Europe)

As shown above, the issue of accountability has a very material aspect and a clear focus on preventing the diversion of resources away from issues that are recognized as having priority.

While accountability to the women's movement was not as crucial in the interview with the activist from Maschile Plurale, this does not discount the fact that the association operates in a framework that necessarily demands engagement with women's rights groups along feminist principles. Coherently with this, Maschile Plurale defines itself as 'National association serving the Network for the change of sexist, misogynist, and patriarchal [cultural] models'.<sup>66</sup> While

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<sup>66</sup> Associazione Nazionale a servizio della Rete per il cambiamento dei modelli sessisti, misogini e patriarcali

Maschile Plurale does not have a document clearly stating their commitment to accountability to the feminist movement, the relationship of the organization vis-à-vis the feminist movement is one of the crucial elements of their work.

An example came in a communique issued in the immediate aftermath of the first nationwide mobilization of the Non una di meno feminist network in November 2016. The text was published on the website of Maschile Plurale and circulated to its follower base on Twitter with the following post:

Text by some men of the Maschile Plurale network #nonunadimeno  
#beforeviolence [link to website]<sup>67</sup>  
(@maschileplurale, Pro-equality men's group, 27 November 2016)

The communique is informally called 'text', therefore taking the edge off of any official or institutional façade it could appear to have. The text is published by 'some men' of the network, thus hinting to the fact that the text does not aim at conveying the voice of Maschile Plurale in its totality and plurality. The post is complemented with the hashtag of the Non una di meno mobilization, signaling that the new feminist network is the topic of the 'text' in object. The other hashtag, 'before violence', refers to a set of actions (mostly workshops) run by Maschile Plurale that engage with men and boys to prevent violence against women.

In the communique, 'some men' from the network stated that

'the organization of the [Non una di meno] rally was paralleled by a public discussion on the modes for male participation therein, in which its very appropriateness was questioned. We believe that what is right is that women get to decide on this matter. However, the initiatives of the 26th and 27th were presented by the organizers [female suffix] as open, and we felt committed to participate... we do not believe that it is useful to have a formal male presence [within Non una di meno], nor any courtesy of sort. Our participation in this

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<sup>67</sup> Testo di alcuni uomini della rete Maschile Plurale #nonunadimeno #primadellaviolenza

process of transformation makes sense only if it can give voice to a male desire for change.<sup>68</sup>

This is just one example among many in the communication of *Maschile Plurale* stressing that the organization does not wish to overshadow women by taking over women's spaces and colonizing them with male bodies. This notwithstanding, the communicate clearly states that a male presence can make sense within those feminist spaces that women's rights groups define as 'open' to the participation of everyone, including men. Thus, while clarifying the wish to take a backseat, *Maschile Plurale* is also pointing out that men's participation in feminism might have advantages worth considering.

### *Introspection as the starting point*

Regardless of how explicitly the two organizations address their relationships with women's groups, it can be argued that they carved for themselves a niche within the broader ecology of feminist interventions. Both groups have a very strong emphasis on bottom-up approaches and a belief in change at the individual level as crucial in order to achieve political transformation. In the words of the interview participant from *Men Engage Europe*:

The personal is political, and the political is personal. And that goes as much in this movement. Because otherwise we tend to run the risk of being nice on the outside in the campaigns but we still miss out on our caring at home, or our division of task at home or bring up our kids. [...] And that's because patriarchy is broader than what we are, but we have to really unlearn, really unlearn and transform ourselves, and that's a long way. We can't expect that to happen overnight. That's also more so why the women's groups feel "you men, you still remain in power. In charge". And to some extent they are right. And that also meant that we actually have to ask them to keep challenging us, don't stop challenging us. (James, Activist, *Men Engage*)

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<sup>68</sup> La manifestazione è stata accompagnata da una discussione pubblica sulle modalità di una presenza maschile e sulla sua stessa opportunità. Noi pensiamo che sia giusto che siano le donne a decidere su questo. Le iniziative del 26 e 27 però sono state presentate dalle organizzatrici come aperte, e ci sentiamo impegnati a partecipare... Non crediamo sia utile una presenza maschile formale, né un omaggio di maniera. La nostra partecipazione a questo grande processo di trasformazione ha senso se sarà in grado di dare voce a un desiderio maschile di cambiamento.

Along very similar lines, the interview partner from Maschile Plurale stressed at several points during the interview that his organization mostly focuses on change at the individual level. In his words:

The issue of introspection is the founding element of this, for what concerns me at least. [...] firstly, because a lot of things are inside of you. and it is not only violence [that I am speaking of]. You have logocentrism inside of you, you have a competitive notion of knowledge [...]. To simplify all of this, to go to the root, the only thing... or to the very least the key was to say ‘ok, now stop talking about the world, and start talking about yourself. Stop to decode the world through politics, sports, motorsports... you get it? Economics... and all of that. Now, start doing it through your lived experiences. To me, the keyword is narrative. It is narrative. [...] create free spaces of mutual listening and narrative. This is the baseline.<sup>69</sup> (Giovanni, Activist, Maschile Plurale).

Introspection is surely a key issue for Maschile Plurale, insofar as many of its local groups base most of their activities on a regular schedule of self-awareness sessions. Many of the tweets by Maschile Plurale gathered for this study make reference in one way or another to this issue. For example, some of these tweets advertise one of the online initiatives of the network, namely ‘Friday’s notebooks’ [i quaderni del venerdì]. These are a series of blog posts in which members and sympathizers of the network reflect on their own masculinities in connection with currently unfolding political events at any level. The result is a window on the practice of self-awareness of the group that is made available to the public at large via its website.

The examples above do not do justice to the complexity in which the two activists spoke about the relevance of action at the individual level in order to achieve feminist change that is politically momentous. It is fair to say that, in the work of both organizations, individual change is just as relevant as public advocacy, if not more relevant. With reference to the commonplace statement that feminism is about negotiation at the dinner table (i.e. about micro-politics), both

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<sup>69</sup> il discorso dell'introspezione e' il discorso fondante della questione, per quanto mi riguarda. [...] Primo, perche' tante cose ce le hai dentro. E non e' soltanto la violenza. C'hai dentro il logocentrismo, c'hai dentro un'idea competitiva del sapere [...]. Per semplificare tutto questo, per andare alla radice, l'unica cosa... o quantomeno la chiave di lettura e' stata di dire 'ok, adesso smetti di parlare del mondo, e inizia a parlare di te'. Smetti di decodificare il mondo attraverso la politica, lo sport, i motori... hai capito? l'economia... e tutto. Adesso lo fai attraverso il tuo vissuto. Il narrato. Per me la parola chiave e' narrazione. E' narrazione. [...] Creare spazi liberi di ascolto e di narrazione. Questa e' la base.

organizations would argue that change in public perceptions of gender equality cannot go very far without changing in individual conduct. Connectedly, both organizations make of intervention at the level of the individual the key pillar of their work, prompting men towards reflection on their own masculinities and ideally affecting change.

Once again quoting the seminal work on masculinities by Connell (2005), it is clear that Men Engage Europe and Maschile Plurale are caught in a common conundrum affecting all men wishing to engage with feminism. Connell brilliantly outlines how change at the individual level can undo the patriarchal masculinities of some men, but can hardly undo patriarchy as a system of political oppression. Conversely, involving men in a serious political challenge to patriarchy in the form of alliance politics can be successful without necessarily implying that all the men involved undo their individual masculinities. As a matter of fact, undoing individual masculinities without challenging patriarchy as a structure can lead to political paralysis at the macro-level while courting self-annihilation for the individual men involved in the process.

Men Engage Europe seems to be navigating the conundrum more skillfully than Maschile Plurale, perhaps because of the opportunity structures that were made available to them through the EU architecture. Indeed, recognition by EIGE and endorsement by the European Union clearly legitimize their participation in feminist advocacy at the macro-level, partially fending off the risk of focusing too narrowly on the individual level. Furthermore, the relatively static realm of political mobilization at the EU level offers opportunities for advocacy that are somewhat less challenging than those at the national or local level.

Conversely, Maschile Plurale seems to favor a strict focus on the individual level grounded on a firm belief that individual change has political repercussion at the meso- and macro-level. This might be once again a choice determined by the opportunity structures available to the organization. While Maschile Plurale is often consulted by the Italian government on issues of gender equality, its position within the national ecology of feminist mobilization seems to be somewhat more precarious, probably because of the more turbulent character of national politics when compared to European supranational political debates.

### *Addressing men to prevent violence*

In light of the importance of violence against women and gender based violence in the narratives of all the Twitter users sampled for this study, it was inevitable for this topic to be central also in the somewhat unspoken narratives of the pro-equality men group. Both interview partners spoke extensively about violence against women as a crucial topic to the work of their organizations. For example, the activist from Men Engage Europe focused on the need to work with men to prevent gender based violence. In his words:

So violence has different forms and different ways, and I think we really should address the causes of the violence rather than only addressing the violence after it happened. That's too late. Some like Frank in Men for Equality have been giving a lot of trainings to young boys in schools, secondary schools, on how to handle your anger in a different way. And if you don't learn that, you think that beating is the only way. [...] So we feel that ... gender based violence needs to be addressed at its core. Addressing the reasons why we use it. Domination. Ignorance. Insecurity. And all of that. (James, activist, Men Engage Europe)

The activist from Maschile Plurale commented on strikingly similar lines and referred to his own work in the field by stating that:

We started with... with... a communique in 2006 that was called 'violence is [also] our business'. And it is all there... it is all there. [...] you won't eradicate violence if you don't eradicate the man who treats woman as an object, the man who doesn't understand his shortcomings, or [men that] don't do a little work [on themselves]. And I see it with kids, because with male kids, when you start talking about this, honestly, sincerely, even those whom you think would have more resistances, even those whom you think have more machist models, they recognize these things in your words. They tell you 'it's true'. 'It is true'. Then they might not be capable of behaving otherwise. That's ok. Meanwhile, they

get to see it [a different model]. That's what we ought to do, don't we? Facilitate the possibility of seeing these things.<sup>70</sup> (Giovanni, activist, Maschile Plurale)

Indeed, the issue of violence was central to the relatively small corpus of tweets published by Maschile Plurale. The tweet below to some extent echoes the words of the interview partner by stating that:

I'm not a violent man. Nonetheless, violence on women is my business  
#Fridaysnotebooks #beforeviolence [link to website]<sup>71</sup>  
(@maschileplurale, pro-equality men's group, 28 October 2016)

In this short post, a member of the network takes the word to present himself as a 'non-violent men'. The speaker, however, tells the reader that violence against women is 'his business' anyways, regardless of the fact that he declaredly never practiced it. This short message can be interpreted as a claim to be subjectivated in the discussion of violence against women. This request is voiced in the first person by one individual men, but can be said to be representative of a collective request by 'men' at large. This man is claiming that his subjectivity belongs in discussions of violence against women, regardless of the fact that he never personally exerted it.

This statement might be controversial in its own right, but it is nonetheless worth considering in light of its possible upsides. These include the possibility of charging men with responsibility for violence and, therefore, also with responsibility for its eradication. The post is complemented with two hashtags, one referring to the Friday's notebooks and signaling that the linked webpage probably offers a personal reflection of the individual men who is speaking in the tweet. The other hashtag refers again to the 'before violence' campaign for prevention run by Maschile Plurale.

Once again, these examples cannot do justice to the level of nuance addressed by the two interview partners during discussion, nor that practiced by the two networks in their broader work.

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<sup>70</sup> Noi siamo partiti con un... con un... appello nel 2006 che si chiamava "la violenza ci riguarda". E la' stiamo... la' stiamo... [...] Tu non riuscirai ad estirpare la violenza se non estirperai l'uomo che tratta come oggetto la donna, l'uomo che non capisce le sue tare, o che non fanno un minimo di lavoro. E io coi ragazzi lo vedo, perche' coi ragazzi maschi, quando tu comincia a parlare di questo, onestamente sinceramente, anche quelli che tu credi che abbiano piu' resistenza, anche quelli che tu credi abbiamo piu' modelli machisti te le roconoscono le cose. Ti dicono e' vero. E' cosi. Poi non sono in grado dif are diversamente. Va bene. Intanto l'hai visto. Noi questo dobbiamo fare, no? facilitare la visione di queste cose.

<sup>71</sup> Non sono un uomo violento. Eppure la violenza sulle donne mi riguarda #iquadernidelvenerdi #primadellaviolenza

However, both organizations seem to share support for the following propositions. First and foremost, engaging with men to prevent violence against women and gender based violence is of primary importance. Through slightly different frames, both organizations seem to argue that addressing men as potential perpetrators of violence is a valuable strategy to go beyond emergency-based approaches and post hoc assistance to victims. In their view, the eradication of violence to a large extent requires addressing men and clearly stating that ‘violence is their business’, i.e. outing them as perpetrators and making them responsible for the achievement of political solutions.

Secondly, both organizations seem to agree that violence finds its roots in the socialization that is imposed on male subjects in the process of producing them as ‘men’. In particular, there seems to be an understanding that violent masculinities are embraced and performed by male subjects because alternative models of non-violence masculinities are virtually non-existent in the discursive/performative repertoire to which young men are exposed. Thirdly, both Men Engage and Maschile Plurale seem to agree that at least part of their work must revolve around presenting these alternative models to boys and young men via targeted educational interventions.

## **Conclusions**

In this chapter, I dwelled on the uneasy relationship of feminism with those men who wish to join its ranks. It seems to be the case that this uncomfortable ambiguity vis-à-vis self-identifying feminist men results in an unspoken-ness of men in gender equality discourses. I attempted to offer an overview of what is gained and what is perhaps lost in the process of backgrounding men into quasi-invisibility in the gender equality discourse on all platforms, including Twitter. I suggested that, while there seems to be a lot to be gained from making men unspoken subjects of the equality discourse, something is lost nonetheless. Consequently, I cautiously argued that explicitly foregrounding men in some parts of the gender equality discourse might have benefits worth considering. In particular, explicitly addressing men as potential perpetrators of gender based violence might have the positive effect of charging them with responsibility for action towards its eradication.

Following up on the insight that backgrounding men has the effect of excluding those men who want to participate in gender equality, I then presented the work of two groups of men working on equality issues at the European and Italian level respectively. In light of their marginality in

tweeted discussions of gender equality, I argued that this invisibility is one of the manifestations of the unspoken-ness of men as subjects of the equality discourse. Thereafter, I dwelled mostly on data gathered during interviews from activists participating in their work and their respective websites and written political statements.

I found that accountability to the women's movement and a strong focus on action at the level of the individual were crucial to the work of these organizations. Arguably, a combination of these two factors could explain at least in part the backgrounded position of men in gender equality discourses. That is to say, a declared wish to let women speak as the privileged subjects of feminism and a focus on micro-level interventions can contribute to explain the quasi-complete absence of their men voices from gender equality discourses. While explaining the absence of male voices, however, this does not explain the absence of men as subjects of the gender equality discourse. This explanation would have to be found elsewhere, perhaps in a wish to mostly focus on women's issues (with its upsides and downsides) and also a wish to avoid antagonizing men by calling them out as possibly responsible for gender inequality.

Finally, I argued that Men Engage Europe and Maschile Plurale carved for themselves a field of intervention that follows a feminist ethos despite their unspoken-ness as subject of feminist and gender equality. Indeed, these organizations perform work with men and boys across several different areas of intervention, contributing to equality by supporting alternative ways of performing masculinity, especially at the individual level. In this sense, these organizations are working towards overcoming men's unspoken-ness in the equality discourse. By clearly stating that equality and gender-based violence are men's business, these organizations are producing men as subjects of the equality discourse, thus unlocking the possibility of involving them in the production of systemic solutions.

## **Part III**

## 8. Anti-violence hashtag campaigns

### Introduction

In Part II, I pointed out that gender based violence is probably one of the most crucial areas in the struggle for the achievement of gender equality as well as one of the most ubiquitously mentioned one. Discussion of gender based violence is both frequent, in the sense that it reaches the attention of the public often, and recurrent, in the sense that there are key dates in the Western calendar when special attention is devoted to the issue. The International Day for the Eradication of Violence Against Women (IDEVAW, 25<sup>th</sup> of November every year) is possibly the occasion in which violence against women and gender based violence are most broadly discussed.

In this chapter, I discuss two instances of aggregated conversation via hashtags that emerged in the context of IDEVAW 2016 and that launched campaigns that were meant to be open ended. These hashtags are #saynostopvaw for the European level and #nonunadimeno for the Italian national level. The former is the official hashtag of a campaign launched by the European Commission to raise awareness and advertise the availability of funding for local implementers. The latter is the hashtag launched by the Italian feminist network Non una di meno to advertise its first national rally in Rome for IDEVAW 2016. This chapter is organized in a fashion that mostly resembles that of the chapters in Part II. Each of the two case studies is analyzed separately, with comparative discussion and conclusions following thereafter.

### **Say No! Stop violence against women!**

In this section, I offer an analysis of #saynostopvaw that mostly resembles that presented in the previous chapters. I start with a presentation of the sub-sample with some broad indications of its size and scope, moving then to word frequency analysis and critical discourse analysis thereafter. After a short summary, discussion in the next section turns to #nonunadimeno.

#### *Presenting the sub-sample*

Ahead of IDEVAW 2016, the European Commission launched a campaign titled ‘Say no! Stop violence against women’ to advertise the year 2017 as ‘a year of focused action to combat violence against women’.<sup>72</sup> The official launch of the campaign was announced on Commissioner

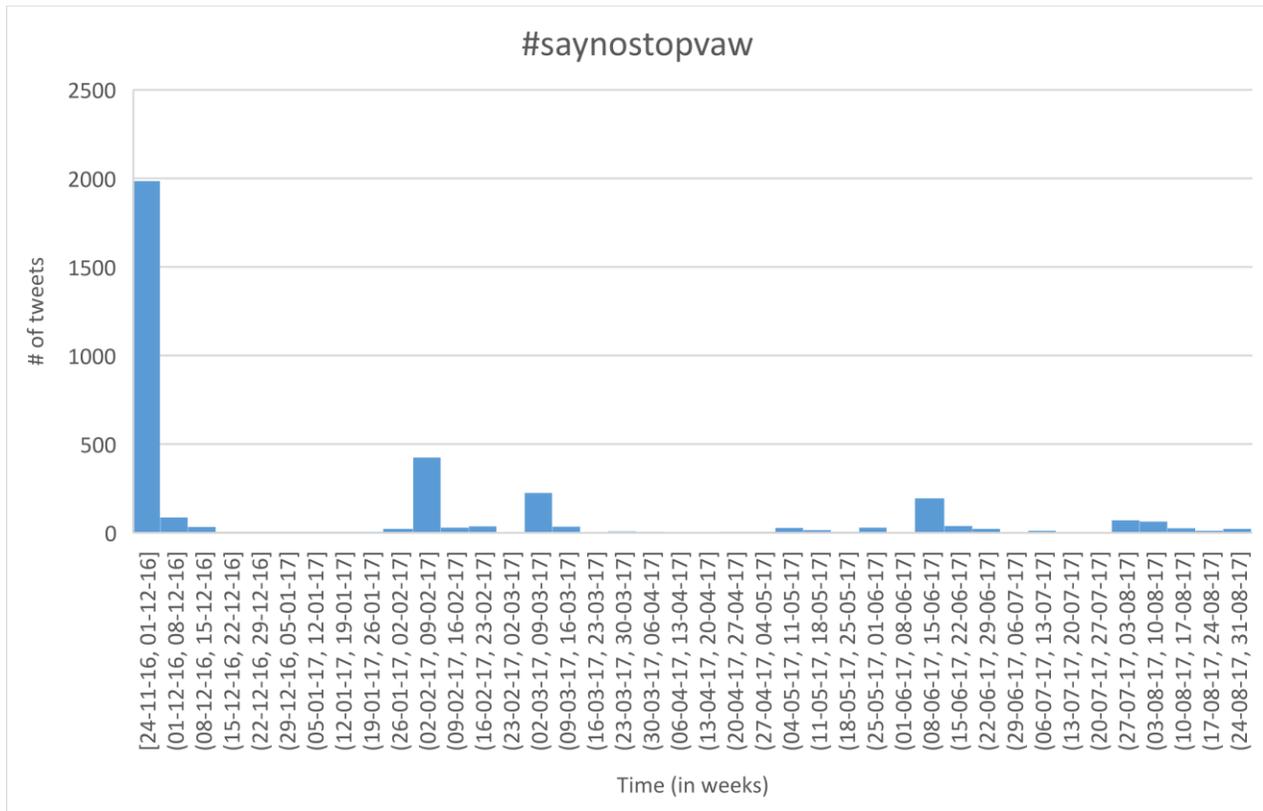
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<sup>72</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/justice/saynostopvaw/>

Věra Jourová, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of November, 2016. The campaign was mostly led by Commissioner Jourová in collaboration with the Directorate General for Justice and Consumer Rights (DG Justice). In interview setting, it was uncovered that the campaign was designed with the twofold objective of giving visibility to the actions that local implementers are undertaking to tackle violence against women with the financial support of the European Commission as well as advertising the availability of further EU funds for other perspective implementers. ‘Say no! Stop violence against women’ also attempted to achieve wider public visibility by adopting an official social media hashtag: #saynostopvaw. For the purposes of this research, I retrieved Twitter data from #saynostopvaw from its launch (24<sup>th</sup> of November 2016) until the end of the data gathering phase (31<sup>st</sup> of August 2017). The dataset comprises some 3,460 between tweets and retweets.

A feature of the data gathered from #saynostopvaw that could hardly go unnoticed is the low level of public engagement with the campaign. Despite the wish for #Saynostopvaw to remain visible throughout the year of focused action to combat violence against women, most of the tweeted activity took place during the launch phase. As many as 1,985 out of the 3460 tweets gathered were tweeted within one week from the launch of the campaign (around 57%). Activity on the hashtag peaked three more times during the year, always in conjunction with the tweeted calendar of equality mentioned in chapter 4 or with the political cycle. Peaks were registered in conjunction with International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation (6<sup>th</sup> of February every year), with International Women’s Day (8<sup>th</sup> of March every year), and with the EU accession to the Istanbul Convention on the 13<sup>th</sup> of June, 2017 (see Table 4 below).

Table 4 - #saynostopvaw, number of tweets over time (weeks)



A second characteristic pertains the most active and most visible users within the sampled dataset. As Table 5 (below) shows, The European Commission itself produced the two most retweeted tweets in the dataset, amounting to more than 25% of the material gathered. All the users who got retweeted more than 60 times were institutional figures. These include Commissioner Jourová herself, Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, German MEP Terry Reintke (Greens), and an array of political institutions such as the UN Women office in Brussels, the European Council, and the Directorate General for Justice of the European Commission. Expanding the focus, the whole 3,460 tweets gathered for this part of the study were produced by as few as 435 users. Overall, the campaign did not achieve large public visibility nor substantial public engagement. Discussion was essentially dominated by institutions or publicly visible users, making its impact debatable at best.

Table 5 - #saynostopvaw, users producing the most retweeted tweets

<b>Username</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b># RTs</b>
<b>EU_Commission</b>	European Commission	449
<b>EU_Commission</b>	European Commission	437
<b>tsipras_eu</b>	Prime Minister of Greece	112
<b>unwomenEU</b>	UN Women’s office in Brussels	110
<b>VeraJourova</b>	EU Commissioner for Justice, Consumers, and Gender Equality	102
<b>VeraJourova</b>	EU Commissioner for Justice, Consumers, and Gender Equality	84
<b>VeraJourova</b>	EU Commissioner for Justice, Consumers, and Gender Equality	79
<b>TerryReintke</b>	Member of the European Parliament (DE - Green)	67
<b>EUCouncil</b>	European Council	66
<b>EU_Justice</b>	EU Commission Directorate General for Justice and Consumers	62

*Word frequency analysis*

A cursory look at the most frequent words in this part of the corpus can already provide some preliminary insights on the language broadly adopted at #saynostopvaw. With the risk of stating the obvious, the most frequent word in the corpus is #saynostopvaw, necessarily appearing in all 3,460 tweets. Aside from that, the words ‘violence’ and the word ‘women’ are the most frequent ones, appearing 1,470 and 1,435 times respectively. The slight discrepancy might hint to the fact that in a minority of cases ‘violence’ is used as part of the cluster ‘gender based violence’ rather than ‘violence against women’.

A second characteristic of the corpus is the recurrence of other hashtags used in conjunction with the one under scrutiny. For example, a set of hashtags in the corpus jointly reinforce a

reference to violence against women beyond the campaign in object. These include #violenceagainstwomen (appearing 421 times) and #vaw (appearing 143 times). Another group of hashtags seem to establish a link between the campaign in object and UN-initiated campaigns in the context of IDEVAW. These include #orangetheworld (375 occurrences), #16days (203 occurrences), and #16daysofactivism (110 occurrences). As mentioned in the discussion of the timeline of #saynostopvaw, there was a surge in activity around IDW and around the signing of the Istanbul Convention by EU representatives. This is also detectable in the corpus, with #IWD2017 appearing 112 times and #istanbulconvention appearing 348 times.

Thirdly, there is frequent reference in the corpus to the Twitter handles of various EU affiliated bodies, appearing a combined total of 1,145 times (the one of the Commission appears 610 times, the one of DG Justice 509 times). Similarly, the handle of Commissioner Jourová appears 532 times in the corpus, hinting to a strong emphasis on addressing these institutional users or recirculating their content. Finally, it is worth reporting that there was frequent mention in the corpus of #EU (283 occurrences), perhaps to reiterate the European character of the campaign despite the fact that it does not include reference to Europe in its official name.

### *Critical discourse analysis*

Before starting the analysis of #saynostopvaw, it is necessary to mention that this part of the dataset presented a surprising paucity of topics treated. Most of the tweets gathered simply stated support for the campaign. With the exception of the tweets coming from the official outlets of the Union, most material stopped short of offering clear interpretations of or solutions for the issue at stake. In light of this, clustering observations for analysis and presentation proved to be remarkably challenging. For the purposes of presentation in this chapter, I organized the material in three categories. A first sub-section refers to those tweets launching the campaign in the context of IDEVAW 2016. A second sub-section analyzes those tweets that aimed at endorsing the campaign and linking it to other IDEVAW campaigns. A final sub-section analyzes the tweets referring to one of the main tools of legitimization that the campaign used, namely Eurobarometer statistics reporting on attitudes regarding violence against women in the EU.

## Launching the campaign

‘Say no! Stop violence against women!’ made its debut on Twitter with a set of messages by Commissioner Jourová on November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2016. A first tweet by Jourová did not include the official hashtag, but announced her upcoming statement on IDEVAW and included a link to the live webcasting on the website (now dormant). The first message was followed by another tweet presenting the new hashtag and stating:

We start today a Year of focused actions aimed at raising awareness & fighting  
#ViolenceAgainstWomen #saynostopvaw.

[embeds picture of Jourová delivering a speech that will not be analyzed here]

(@VeraJourova, EU Commissioner, 24 November 2016)

As already mentioned, ‘Focused action to combat violence against women’ is the denomination chosen by the Directorate General for Justice of the European Commission for its policy actions in the year 2017. The second tweet by Jourová present the following noteworthy features. There are two social subjects mentioned in it, namely a relatively unspecified ‘we’ and collective category of ‘women’. The collective ‘we’ is foregrounded and agentic. If narrowly interpreted, it could make reference to the European Commission and its emanations. If broadly interpreted, it could be said to make reference to an overarching European ‘us’ encompassing all EU citizens. Women are passivated as the object upon which violence is predicated following a trend that has already been described multiple times in this work.

The representation of social action is also interesting insofar as it points to several contradictions in the narrative advanced by the Commission on the topic of VAW. The above mentioned collective ‘us’ is represented in the act of starting a non-specified ‘action’, that is qualified as ‘focused’. This actions will serve the purpose of raising awareness and fighting VAW. Noticeably, raising awareness comes first in the list. This might be because of a logical progression from being aware of violence before being able to fight it. However, it might also be due to a preponderance of awareness raising in the actions that are planned in the context of the campaign.

The combat metaphor (to fight) is probably deployed to convey a feeling of urgency and of zero tolerance. The social representation of time is also noteworthy. Action is starting ‘today’, conveying a feeling of now-ness and novelty that was already detected in other parts of this study.

Furthermore, action is presented as extending for a year, to some extent producing the impression that violence against women can be tackled within some degree of success within that time span.

Endorsing the campaign and linking it to neighboring ones

The same narrative is echoed in several other popular tweets in the campaign. The official Twitter handle of the European Commission (@EU\_Commission) tweeted out a very similar message:

On the International Day to End Violence against Women we say: enough is enough. #saynostopvaw – [link to website] - #orangetheworld

Figure 17 - picture embedded in the tweet above



(@EU\_Commission, European Commission, 25 November 2016)

The social subjects represented in the tweet are a collective 'us', agentic and foregrounded, and a collective category of 'women', passivated and backgrounded on the receiving side of VAW as a social process. IDEVAW is the 'today' when the collective 'us' starts its unspecified set of actions. The locutionary gesture of saying 'enough is enough' conveys a feeling of urgency and to some extent reproduces the setting of a heated debate or a combat situation. The tweet embeds a

picture with the word ‘no’ in three forms (‘no’, ‘non’, and ‘nein’) in black font over orange background, complemented with the campaign’s logos as well as the Commission’s logos.

The tweet also embeds a link to the joint statement that a few members of the European Commission issued in support of the campaign.<sup>73</sup> In slightly less than 600 words, the joint statement offers its framing of VAW as a policy problem, presents some preferred solutions, and concludes with a call for concerted action between the Union and its member states in the interest of women worldwide. Interestingly, its territorial focus is more global than European. This could be interpreted as a move to acknowledge the global dimension of the phenomenon, but also a strategy to diffuse responsibility for action. The statement reproduces many of the trends detected so far in EU-produced narratives of equality. In this case, the most evident ones are the endorsement of the ‘business case’ for the reduction of VAW and the production of women as a passivated group of policy subjects (Trillò, 2017).

The tweet also uses one further hashtag: #orangetheworld. This can be considered as an attempt to link ‘Say no! Stop violence against women!’ to the UN sponsored campaign ‘Orange the world’. The discursive production of a link between the two campaigns in the context of #saynostopvaw was already detected in the word frequency analysis. Further examples of this endeavor include the recurrence of tweets showing pictures of EU headquarters in Brussels lit in orange as well as tweets by male EU representatives stating that they would be wearing orange apparel on IDEVAW as a sign of their endorsement for the cause. To some extent, this endeavor can be said to have succeeded, insofar as it enjoyed the tweeted recognition of the UN Women offices in Brussels and New York City, with two post, respectively stating that:

Setting an example. @EU\_Commission launches year of focused actions to combat violence against women: [link to website] #saynostopvaw  
[embeds a picture identical to Figure 19]  
(@unwomenEU, UN Women office in Brussels, 25 November 2016)

Strongly committed to #orangetheworld, @EU\_Commission announces year of focused actions to combat VAW: [link to website] #saynostopvaw

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<sup>73</sup> Full text of the statement available at: [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_STATEMENT-16-3945\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_STATEMENT-16-3945_en.htm)

(@UN\_Women, UN Women headquarter in New York City, 25 November 2016)

The European Commission is in these tweets identified as the ‘we’ who is performing the action of launching an anti-violence campaign. The Commission is presented as ‘setting an example’, possibly for other regional IGOs elsewhere or for governments worldwide. The Commission is also presented as ‘strongly committed to’ Orange the world, in this case used as a synonym for a globalized fight against VAW. The endorsement ‘Say no! Stop violence against women!’ by UN Women confirms the link between a localized anti-violence campaign and VAW as a global phenomenon that the joint statement of the Commission attempted to produce.

Despite the endorsement of a few national and local politicians (most remarkably, Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras), much of the conversation of #saynostopvaw looked up at the global rather than down to the local. This trend is somewhat strident with the intended focus of the campaign: advertise funding opportunities for local implementers of anti-violence actions. In interview setting with officers of Jourová’s cabinet, it emerged that the informal rules of communication for EU sponsored initiatives make it very hard to actually speak of local realities. That is mostly because EU institutions have to project ‘neutral’ vis-à-vis their member states. Therefore, it logically follows that making reference to global campaigns rather than local initiatives happens to be a much more viable discourse for those who orchestrated conversation on #saynostopvaw.

### The Eurobarometer survey

The launch of ‘Say no! Stop violence against women!’ heavily relied on a series of infographics as a source of legitimization. These infographics report on the findings of a Eurobarometer survey specifically produced for the occasion as well as on some data from a survey conducted by FRA in 2014. Three main key statistics figured particularly prominently in the dataset. The first one comes from the 2014 FRA survey, and offers ground for Jourová to announce that EU citizens will not tolerate gender based violence:

An Eurobarometer survey shows that gender based violence is unacceptable for 96% of population #Saynostopvaw [link to website]  
(@VeraJourvoa, EU Commissioner, 25 November 2016)

In this tweet, the existence of a European ‘us’ that does not approve of gender based violence is produced through reference to supposedly objective ‘knowledge’ gathered for the occasion. In this sense, the Eurobarometer and the other statistics mentioned in the context can be said to be ‘apparatuses’ or technologies of power that produce the objects and the subjects they speak of. Through these statistics, violence against women is produced as a quantifiable and discreet object that can be targeted via ‘focused action’ (theoretical rationalization). Legitimacy for this action is also therein constructed: statistics themselves show that Europeans care about VAW (topos of numbers).

A second narrative complements the statistics deployed for the campaign in object. This narrative presents violence against women as an endemic problem that invests many more women than the European public imagines. For example, a small text box at the top-right corner of the first page of the document reports that 22% of European women experienced physical and/or sexual violence by a partner since the age of 15. A similar text box on the following slide reports that one in three women has been victim of physical or sexual violence (by anyone) since the age of 15 (DG Justice and Consumers, 2016). These figures were largely used as reference for messages tweeted at #saynostopvaw by other EU institutional users such as the think tank of the European Parliament or some European Commissioners:

1 in 3 women experienced physical and/or sexual violence since the age of 15  
[link to website] #saynostopvaw @AnnaMariaCB @cdallonnes  
(EP\_ThinkTank, European Union Research Services, 25 November 2016)

One in three women in the EU has experienced physical and/or sexual violence  
since the age of 15. Не на насилието срещу жените #saynostopvaw  
(@KGeorgieva, EU Commissioner, 25 November 2016)

Stop it! Violence against women: In EU 1 in 3 women has experienced sexual  
and/or physical violence! [link to website] #saynostopvaw  
(@Vestager, EU Commissioner, 25 November 2016)

The fact that one in three European women have experienced violence since the age of 15 is hard to reconcile with a European public that almost unanimously (96%) claims that violence against women is ‘always wrong’. However, the contradiction between the two narratives does

make some sense in light of the social reality that they attempt to produce. ‘Say no! Stop violence against women!’ attempts to build its legitimacy on a combination of value-based arguments (European care about equality, moral legitimization) as well as a claim for the urgent need to stop VAW because of its endemic character (topoi of threat, urgency, or numbers are alternated and mixed in this second narrative). These two narratives are, however, hard to reconcile, producing statements that are at times paradoxical. For example, the same Eurbarometer survey mentioning that Europeans believe that VAW is always wrong also reports that around 27% of Europeans believe that rape is justifiable in certain cases (DG Justice and Consumers, 2016).

### *Section summary*

In this section, I offered a description of #saynostopvaw as an instance of aggregated conversation that was meant to last from its launch in late 2016 until the end of 2017. Activity, however, peaked during the first months of the campaign and then remained minimal with the exception of two key dates in the calendar of gender-related commemorations. I found discussion to be scarce, centralized, and relatively vague. Institutional users largely dominated the corpus of data under scrutiny with their narratives. In turn, their posts mostly expressed endorsement for the campaign without further qualifying it. Exploring text beyond Twitter did offer some information that could articulate these statements. I therefore argued that Say No Stop VAW carries a twofold narrative that attempts to draw its legitimacy from a value-based argument (Europeans care about equality) and a number-based argument (violence against women is endemic in the EU). These two narratives are necessarily contradictory, producing uncomfortable paradoxes in the overall message of the campaign.

### **Non una di meno!**

Along the lines adopted thus far in this work, this section presents an overview of the discussion tweeted at #nonunadimeno during the sampled timespan. After a broad description of the sub-sample of data under scrutiny, I sketch broad guidelines through word frequency analysis and then expand on the in the critical discourse analysis to follow.

### *Presenting the sub-sample*

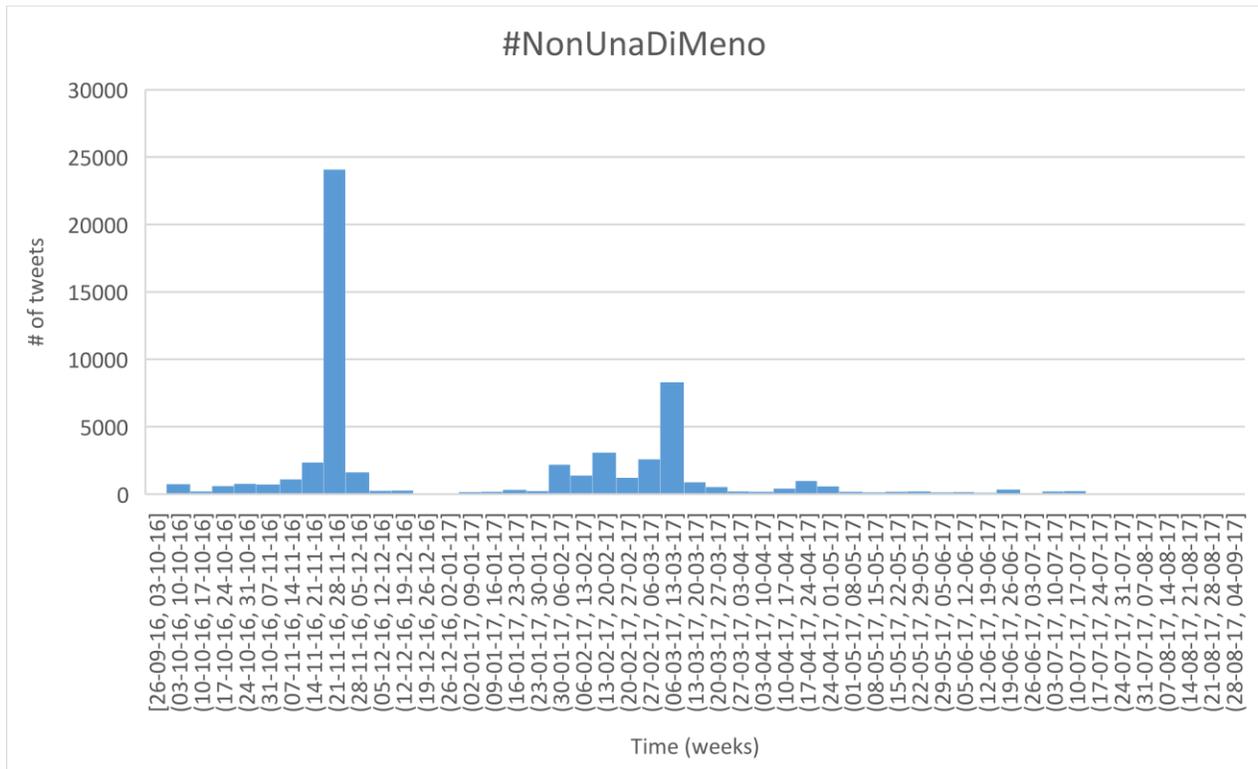
As already mentioned in Chapter 5, The Non una di meno feminist movement went public after a national assembly in Rome on October 8th, 2016. At the assembly, a coalition of Italian

feminist organizations decided to mark the 2016 edition of IDEVAW with a rally to be held in Rome on Saturday, November 26th. The movement was prompted by the initiative of three key organizations, namely 'Rete io decido' (roughly, 'network I decide', focusing on sexual and reproductive rights), Di.Re. (national network of anti-violence shelters), and Unione Donne Italiane (UDI – Union of Italian Women). The campaign that followed the first national assembly was advertised with a manifesto/call to action (Non una di meno, 2016) circulated via a newly created webpage on WordPress and on commercial social media through the hashtag #nonunadimeno. The rally on November 26<sup>th</sup> was followed by several initiatives at the local as well as national levels. At the present time, the movement is still active and enjoys broad popularity within Italian feminism and broader progressive circles.

While Non una di meno was already emerging as a feminist network in June 2016, its existence did not come to my attention until late September, a few weeks after the beginning of the data gathering phase, mostly because of the active social media engagement of the movement in the launch of its rally for IDEVAW 2016. For the purposes of this research, I followed the hashtag #nonunadimeno for from 29<sup>th</sup> September 2016 until the end of the data gathering phase (31<sup>st</sup> of August 2017). The dataset comprises 58,488 tweets and retweets.

Non una di meno regularly complements its actions with extensive online actions on social media platforms. This is visible in the temporal distribution of the tweets posted at #nonunadimeno. As Table 6 (below) shows, the main peak of activity coincided with the IDEVAW 2016 rally in Rome (November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2016). During that week, as many as 24,086 messages were gathered from the hashtag of the movement (around 41% of the dataset). Activity suddenly dropped henceforth, to pick up again in early February with the live reporting from the assembly of the movement in Bologna (February 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017), followed shortly by an extensive social media campaign for a non-sexist Valentine's day (14<sup>th</sup> of February every year) and, soon thereafter, by the campaign for the women's strike on IWD (8<sup>th</sup> of March every year).

Table 6 - #nonunadimeno, number of tweets over time (weeks)



In a fashion that is remarkably similar to what was found for #saynostopvaw, discussion was largely dominated by pre-existing opinion leaders. To begin with, out of the 58,000+ tweets gathered from the official hashtag of the campaign, as many as 6,754 were originally circulated by the official handle of the movement @nonunadimeno (around 11.5% of the dataset). The most retweeted tweets are also relatable to #saynostopvaw in terms of their origin. Five out of ten of them were in fact produced by the official account of the movement. The other most retweeted accounts are fairly recognizable Twitter handles that can be traced back to key entities within the movement. These include one individual activists/bloggers (@CogitaBionda), a self-identifying ‘Pop Surrealist Artist’ (@Bafefit), the activist/lawyer who founded the GayLex network of attorneys working to help sexual minorities claim their civil rights (@CatLatorre), one (at the time) member of parliament (@civati), and the official handle of public radio broadcasting channel Radio 2 (@RaiRadio2) (see Table 7 below).

Table 7 - #nonunadimeno, users producing the most retweeted tweets

Username	Description	#RTs
<b>CogitaBionda</b>	Blogger/activist	652
<b>Bafefit</b>	Pop surreal artist	421
<b>Catlatorre</b>	Lawyer/activist	384
<b>Nonunadimeno</b>	Feminist social movement	377
<b>Nonunadimeno</b>	Feminist social movement	324
<b>RaiRadio2</b>	Public radio broadcasting service	243
<b>Civati</b>	Progressive member of parliament	223
<b>Nonunadimeno</b>	Feminist social movement	186
<b>Nonunadimeno</b>	Feminist social movement	182
<b>Nonunadimeno</b>	Feminist social movement	170

Despite its relatively large public appeal and visibility, the resonance of #nonunadimeno on Twitter should not be overstated. Once again, the 58,000+ tweets gathered for this study were produced by as few as 4,499 users, and only 2,544 users figure in the dataset twice or more. However, when compared with that of #saynostopvaw, it can be stated that the conversation at #Nonunadimeno is less centralized because the movement itself and its activists do not come from the milieu of mainstream politics. Following one of the red-threads of this dissertation, Non una di meno and its key activists can be said to be resistant vis-à-vis the mainstream political scene as well as resistant towards an institutionalized understanding of gender equality. This notwithstanding, their voices happen to be the hegemonic ones in their own circles, with other voices existing at the margins of discussion within the movement itself.

#### *Word frequency analysis*

For what concerns word frequency, much of what was discussed for #saynostopvaw was found again in a relatable fashion in the case of #nonunadimeno. The hashtag of the initiative was

the most frequent word in the corpus, appearing in all 58,488 cases. Aside from the hashtag itself, the word ‘women’ [donne] is the most frequent one in the corpus, appearing 10,880 times. It would not be a stretch to speculate that many of these occurrences of the word ‘women’ are in a cluster with the words ‘violence’ [violenza] and ‘against’ [contro], since these words appear 7,059 and 5,563 times respectively. However, the discrepancy between the number of occurrences seems to suggest that the focus on ‘women’ is more extensive than a strict focus on violence, despite violence being the central theme of the Non una di meno mobilization.

As it was the case with #saynostopvaw, a second characteristic of the Non una di meno part of the corpus is the use of other hashtags alongside the one in object. For example, the hashtag #siamomarea (literally, ‘we are a sea tide’) was consistently used throughout the campaign and appears in the corpus 4,983 times. In spoken Italian, the metaphor of ‘the tide’ [marea] is frequently used to make reference to a multitude. In interview setting with Non una di meno activists, it was suggested that the metaphor was borrowed from the Argentinian ‘Ni una menos’ movement that regularly uses its Spanish language translation (somos marea), although the origin of the slogan can be traced back to labor mobilization in Mexico in 2015. The connection with the Argentinian movement is also detectable because of the use of their own Spanish speaking hashtag (#niunamenos) relatively frequently in the corpus (1,781 occurrences).

Further hashtags appearing alongside #nonunadimeno include reference to various phases of the mobilization. For example, hashtags launching the women’s strike on IWD figure prominently in the corpus. #lottomarzo appears as many as 10,224. The hashtag is a play on words exploiting the similarity between ‘lotto’ [I fight] and ‘l’otto’ [the eighth (day of the month)] to suggest that IWD is an occasion to fight back. Other IWD hashtags are very prominent. #8marzo appears 2,269 times, #feministstrike appears 1,702 times, and #8M appears 1,410 times. Similarly, #26N and #26novembre, making reference to the IDEVAW mobilization on November 26<sup>th</sup>, appears 3,735 and 1,478 times respectively in the corpus.

Finally, #sanvalentino2017, a general hashtag referring to Valentine’s day, appears 1,815 times in the corpus. In the interview, it was revealed that the predicted visibility of this hashtag was used as a springboard to launch the dissemination campaign for the women’s strike on IWD soon thereafter. Alongside all of these hashtags and in connection with them, the corpus shows a strong focus on mobilization. Words like ‘square’ [piazza] (3,551 occurrences), ‘strike’ [sciopero]

(3,308 occurrences), ‘rally’ [corteo] (2,969 occurrences), and ‘public gathering’ [manifestazione] (2,916 occurrences) are by far the most frequent in the corpus.

Once again in a fashion that resembles that of #saynostopvaw, it was noticed that the Twitter handles of key figures within or around the movement featured prominently in the corpus. It can hardly go un-noticed that the official handle of the movement appears as many as 10,286 times in the corpus. That of alternative news outlet DinamoPress (@DinamoPress) appears 2,494 times. The Cattive Maestre collective of feminist school teachers (@cattivemaestre) appears 1,245 times. The left wing newspaper Il Manifesto (@ilmanifesto) appears 905 times. Activist and blogger Carlotta Lotti (@lotticarlotta) appears 889 times. In sum, a certain tendency to clustering around visible figures is confirmed. However, it is not as marked as in the case of #saynostopvaw.

### *Critical Discourse analysis*

As already hinted in Chapter 5, the Non una di meno network organized its work during the first year of its existence around eight thematic areas. These are, respectively, exit strategies to escape violence, sexism in the media, sexism in the healthcare sector, sexism in education, sexism in the labor market, sexism in the legal system, sexism in movements, and migrant feminism. When scanning the most popular tweets in search for key topics of conversation on #nonunadimeno, I noticed that a wide majority of the content circulated therein did not explicitly mention any of the fields listed above. Rather, much of the content gathered from #nonunadimeno expresses support for the network in its broadest sense or includes instances of reporting one’s own participation in the initiatives of the movement. Among the topics that are indeed touched upon, those of sexism in the media and sexism in the healthcare sector are the most commonly circulated ones. In what follow, I start my analysis with an overview of those tweets that to some extent define the characteristics of the movement and then move on to analysis of those tweets covering sexism in the healthcare sector and sexism in the media.

### Defining the movement

As mentioned several times in this work so far, Non una di meno entered public eye as an organic social movement with a manifesto/call to action issued to mobilize people for the rally in Rome on the occasion of IDEVAW 2016. The manifesto/call to action was circulated widely on Twitter with the hashtag of the movement. The document contains a short (527 words, excluding

the title) political statement followed by a list of the lead organizers, of the organizations joining the cause, and of the individuals offering their personal endorsement.

The call for action opens with a reference to IDEVAW and, in its first paragraph, invites all women (implied in the use of the sole feminine form) to join the rally in Rome in order to ‘scream our anger and voice our wish for self-determination’ (Non una di meno, 2016). The text continues by arguing that widespread violence against women is not an emergency but a structural phenomenon that deserves more than temporary measures. Anger is mostly aimed at political institutions (‘la politica’) for playing blind despite the growing number of femicides in the country. The document continues by arguing that the state apparatus is essentially oblivious to the vulnerable position in which women are forced by the shortcomings of its national anti-violence plan, opposition to gender sensitive education, absence of training for health professionals, and a slow and gender insensitive bureaucracy.

The manifesto/call for action makes it very clear that, in Non una di meno’s view, violence against women is political in character and is structurally embedded in the fabric of patriarchal society. These points are often reiterated by the movement itself as well as by its adherents. In particular, the leadership of the network was quite eager to establish Non una di meno’s positionality outside of ‘politics as usual’, avoiding capture by any of the political formations of the so-called establishment. In a thread tweeted on the 16<sup>th</sup> of November, it was clarified that:

Nonunadimeno was born as a bottom-up process organized by the self-administered entities that fight against machist violence in the field everyday  
Starting with the call to action [link to the call] we chose that our decisionmaking and logistic structure would be based on local assemblies  
These are creating paths that started at the national assembly of 8/10 [link to the report of the assembly]  
An assembly featuring the participation of hundreds of women who shared their local experiences and jointly produced the call to action for the #26N  
The call to action for the #26n [link to the call] is the official one that came out of the joint effort of those partaking in the process  
The call to action coming out of the assembly states that we do not accept the endorsement nor the interference of parties/unions/institutions

Nor in the form of flags or symbols at the rally, nor in the form of public declarations replacing the voice of the assemblies<sup>74</sup>  
(@nonunadimeno, feminist social movement, 16 November 2016).

The message is clear, and echoes what was discussed regarding the character of Non una di meno in Chapter 5. Non una di meno is a non-affiliated political movement comprised of a collective ‘us’ made of ‘women’ who stand in opposition to any possible manifestation of a collective other made of ‘institutions’. The movement clearly presents itself as having a central structure articulated in several local hubs that gather grassroots inputs and feed them back into the overall narrative of the national movement. From an argumentative standpoint, the narrative of these posts deploys the topos of threat. That is to say, the narrative makes reference to action that must be undertaken because of a clearly identified danger. In light of the (real or perceived) risk of institutional capture, adherents to Non una di meno must constantly voice their wish for grassroots autonomy.

### Violence in the healthcare sector

A fairly large amount of the material circulated through the hashtag #nonunadimeno made reference in one way or another to the need of advancing a feminist demand for better reproductive health, and especially safe abortion for all women on the Italian territory. In light of discussion of the historical relevance of reproductive rights for second wave feminism in Italy, this is perhaps unsurprising. Ever since the referendum on abortion laws in the late 70s, lamenting patchy implementation of abortion legislation has been one of the key areas of feminist advocacy in Italy (Marchesi, 2012). To this day, access to abortion is still limited due to a provision allowing medical staff to refuse to perform an abortion based on ‘conscientious objection’ to the practice. Access to abortion services is particularly problematic in the Southern part of the country, where a wide majority of doctors are objectors.

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<sup>74</sup> Nonunadimeno nasce come percorso dal basso delle realtà autorganizzate sui territori che ogni giorno lottano contro la violenza machista / partire dall'appello [link] ci siamo date come modalità organizzative e decisionali le assemblee territoriali / Percorsi che stanno costruendo la partecipazione a partire dall'assemblea nazionale dell'8/10 [link] / Assemblea partecipata da centinaia di donne dei territori che si sono confrontate e dalla quale è uscito un appello condiviso per il #26N / L'appello per il #26n [link] è l'appello ufficiale uscito dal confronto tra le partecipanti al percorso / Nell'appello uscito dal confronto assembleare si ribadisce che non accettiamo patrocinii né ingerenze di partiti/sindacati/istituzioni / Né sottoforma di bandiere e simboli alla manifestazione né come presa di parola al posto delle assemblee

In mid-October, 2016, a young woman died in Catania, Sicily, due to pregnancy complication and the unavailability of abortion services because all doctors in her proximity were conscientious objectors. The tragic event took place just a few days after the launch of the #nonunadimeno campaign and fueled a large part of its communication for the elimination of violence against women.

#notoviolenceagainstwomen we must say it every day in the hospitals that are  
in the hands of objectors and the Vatican. My body my choice #Idecide  
#nonunadimeno<sup>75</sup>

(@nonunadimeno, feminist social movement, 25 November 2016).

In the above example, a collective ‘we’, presumably made of ‘women’, is foregrounded as the subject speaking a markedly political ‘no to violence against women’. The message is further highlighted by making it into a hashtag, thus linking it to other discussions on the topic outside of the domain of #nonunadimeno. The call to action is explicit and in the imperative form. It also makes reference to a specific social space: that of hospitals. These are, in turn, represented as the place where reproductive health services are denied to women because of the negative influence of two collective subjects: conscientious objectors and the Vatican. The former group is literally produced by the law on abortion that currently allows some gynecologists to opt out of performing abortions. The latter refers to a foreign entity that is presented as hostile to women’s rights.

The second sentence in the tweet is uttered by the collective ‘we’ of Non una di meno, now sublimated in a single entity that speaks in the singular and affirms its right to bodily self-determination. The hashtags closing the tweet hint to the fact that Rete io decido was to some extent behind the production of this message and also sets the tweet in the context of the Non una di meno campaign. The argumentation provided in this tweet is probably connected to the topos of threat and moral legitimization. Indeed, objectors and the Vatican are presented as a threat to women’s bodily integrity, thus demanding action. Connectedly, the right to bodily self-determination is presented as a moral imperative, the denial of which demands immediate action.

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<sup>75</sup> #noallaviolenzasulledonno diciamolo ogni giorno negli ospedali in mano agli obiettori e al vaticano. Sul mio corpo #iodecido #nonunadimeno

Some of the feminist groups adhering to the movement also picked up on the theme. For example, the trans-feminist and queer group Cagne Sciolte (literally, ‘unleashed bitches’) prepared some graphics that became popular and were displayed on multiple banners during the IDEVAW 2016 rally in Rome. One of the most popular ones spelled ‘obietta su sta fregna’ (literally, ‘object on this pussy’). In vernacular Italian, it is fairly common to delegitimize an opponent during an argument by telling them to do something ‘on this dick’. The original formulation is meant to signal that a given action by the opponent is not worthy of attention or respect. The expression ‘object on this pussy’ operates a subversion of street culture by substituting male genitalia with female genitalia and also draws a link between conscientious objection and male mainstream culture. The outcome is a powerful slogan suggesting that, like the idiom, the culture producing conscientious objection should be subverted.

Figure 18 - picture by Cagne Sciolte, embedded in several tweets in the corpus



A wide number of feminist groups within Non una di meno contributed to the discursive production of a link between conscientious objection and gender based violence, mostly phrased in terms referring to the ‘my body my choice’ message. It is fairly safe to say that the healthcare system was identified by Non una di meno and its adherents as one of many institutions that works to keep in place a patriarchal social order that disempowers and ultimately kills women. Aside from the historical reasons mentioned above, attention to sexual and reproductive rights can also be said to have originated in a combination of organizational practices within the movement and unexpected political developments.

For what concerns the former, the leading role of Rete io decido as one of the organizations initiating Non una di meno doubtlessly facilitated a prominent position for sexual and reproductive

rights in the narrative of the network. This was confirmed to be the case by the activist interviewed for this study, who also hinted to the fact that *Io decido* might take up a larger share of the organizational burden, possibly facilitating further prominence for sexual and reproductive rights as a key element in the work of *Non una di meno* going forward. Furthermore, other groups within *Non una di meno* were particularly active on the issue during the sampled timespan. In early 2017, some of the Pisa-based collectives adhering to *Non una di meno* launched a crowd mapping initiative called ‘*obiezione respinta*’ (‘objection rejected’). The initiative aims at gathering the stories of women who experience systemic violence at the interface with the healthcare sector.<sup>76</sup>

For what concerns the latter, sexist violence in the healthcare sector also happened to be object of attention by broadcast media agencies during the timespan under scrutiny. For example, in September 2016, the Italian Ministry of Health launched a pro-natalist campaign that summoned a full-fledged media storm because of its sexist framing and because of its lack of appreciation for the link between widespread precarity and low birth rates in the country (Trillò, 2018b).

### Violence in broadcast media

*Non una di meno* identified the media industry as another important site for the reproduction of a culture that de facto disempowers women and at the same time legitimizes a patriarchal order of society. The focus on the media might have been once again connected with an event achieving public relevance during the timespan of the campaign. This sub-section focuses on one example that is particularly powerful in summarizing *Non una di meno*’s stance vis-à-vis mainstream media agencies.

On the occasion of IDEVAW 2016, public television outlets RAI circulated a spot featuring some children around the age of ten speaking to the camera, playfully stating their plans for the future (e.g. when I grow up, I’d like to be a police officer).<sup>77</sup> The spot is closed by a blond girl saying with the same tone as the others that when she grows up she will end up in the hospital because her husband will beat her up. The movement contested both the message in itself as well

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<sup>76</sup>Manifesto of *Obiezione Respinta* available at: <https://obiezionerespinta.info/manifesto/>

<sup>77</sup> Video available at:

[https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2016/11/24/news/polemica\\_per\\_lo\\_spot\\_con\\_bimbi\\_contro\\_la\\_violenza\\_sulle\\_donne\\_sospenderlo\\_subito\\_-152700619/?ref=twhr&timestamp=1480006646000](https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2016/11/24/news/polemica_per_lo_spot_con_bimbi_contro_la_violenza_sulle_donne_sospenderlo_subito_-152700619/?ref=twhr&timestamp=1480006646000)

as the format used for delivery in quite a few posts coming from different sources. The official Non una di meno account explicitly condemned the spot with the following posts:

We do not need little spots and dedicated programmes around the 25th of November. We need serious reflection. One of our workshops on November 27th will be on this topic.

Narratives of violence are important, the industry of culture is complicit in shaping thought and common sense.

Television and media are responsible for a culture of gender based violence that happens all the 365 days in a year. Stop to the hypocrisy<sup>78</sup>

(@nonunadimeno, feminist social movement, 25 November 2016)

The thread reported above speaks to many of the positions of Non una di meno on the issue at stake. Once again, the collective ‘we’ made of women of Non una di meno is foregrounded and speaks in its own right. Non una di meno argues that the media industry at large has no authority to speak on matters of violence against women, especially if they do so only on the occasion of IDEVAW. Broadcast media outlets are described as complicit in the production of commonsensical and inadequate understandings of violence against women. Through the topos of need, Non una di meno argues for moments of ‘serious reflection’ on the ways in which violence against women is reported and communicated. Again through the topos of need, Non una di meno calls for action to stop the hypocrisy of broadcast media agencies.

Feminist NGO Chayn Italia launched a petition to have the spot withdrawn. The petition was advertised on Twitter with a post saying that:

#violenceagainstwomen IS NOT OUR DESTINY! Sign the petition to have the spot withdrawn @RaiPlay @nonunadimeno @rebelraduno<sup>79</sup>

(@Chayn\_Italia, anti-violence NGO, 25 November 2016).

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<sup>78</sup> Non ci servono spottini e programmi dedicati intorno al 25 novembre. Ci serve una riflessione seria. Il 27 uno dei tavoli sarà su questo. / La narrazione della violenza è importante, l'industria culturale è complice della formazione del pensiero e del senso comune. / La televisione e i media hanno una responsabilità sulla cultura della violenza di genere che dura 365 giorni all'anno. Basta ipocrisia.

<sup>79</sup> La violenza sulle donne non è un destino #RaiTV Firma la petizione <https://t.co/opro0HjCS4> via @ChangeItalia #nonunadimeno

Chayn and others within the movement argued that the TV spot exploited the bodies of children to project an image of purity and helplessness in the face of violence, while at the same time depicting violence as something that is necessarily going to happen to the most symbolically pure and frail of them: the blond girl. In the view of the movement, the spot by RAI equates women with children in order to present them as powerless, thus negating their agentic position in the fight against violence. Furthermore, despite acknowledging that the perpetrator of future violence on the blond girl would be 'her husband', the spot fails to show said husband on screen, thus partially maintaining the taboo on mentioning men as perpetrators.

As one private user poignantly tweets to their followers:

There is the girl who knows that she'll be victim of violence but not the boy who knows that he will use violence. My compliments to @RaiNews #RAI #25November Violence is not our destiny. Let's teach our girls to fight together, let's take them to the rally on #26November #nonunadimeno<sup>80</sup> (@privateuser, private user, 25 November 2016)

In light of the above, it could be suggested that the movement, in many of its manifestations, sees the media industry as part and parcel in the production of a patriarchal culture that aims at disempowering women and absolving violent men. If the industry of cultural production is found to be culpable in all of its forms, public media broadcasting is addressed as the key responsible for approaching the issue of gender based violence without the necessary critical attention. In the Italian context, a focus on media narratives of womanhood and violence is perhaps unsurprising. Mainstream media in Italy are relatively well known for being particularly prone to slippage in overtly sexist commentary. In the literature, the phenomenon has been to some extent connected to the prominence of media entrepreneur turned politician Silvio Berlusconi in Italian public life over the last 25 years (Benini, 2012; see also Chapter 1).

The media system was clearly identified by Non una di meno as one of the key sites where systemic violence against women is reproduced. As pointed out during the research interview entertained for this study, the very structure of Non una di meno facilitated the prominence of this

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<sup>80</sup> C'è la bambinA che SA che subirà violenza ma non il bambinO che SA che NON userà violenza.. applausi @RaiNews #RAI #25Novembre #nonunadimeno

topic in the overall narrative of the movement. Three elements were mentioned as particularly relevant in this regard, namely the decision to establish a working table devoted to ‘media narratives’ (referring to both violent narratives and narratives about violence against women), the wide participation of female journalists in the movement, and the existence of a somewhat permanent Non una di meno press office as described in Chapter 5.

### *Section Summary*

In this section, I offered an overview of the discussion tweeted at #nonunadimeno. I argued that, despite the popularity of the movement, discussion remained fairly centralized and controlled by the movement leadership and key activists. Later, I explored the actual text circulated at the hashtag in object, arguing that most of the conversation was not specifically addressing any topic concerning gender equality or violence against women but, rather, expressing broad solidarity with the movement. This notwithstanding, I identified tweets that to some extent aim at defining the movement as a crucial component of the corpus under scrutiny. In light of the fact that the movement understands violence against women as a systemic issue, I then moved on to analyze those tweets that aimed at pointing out the ways in which systemic violence manifests itself in the form of poor healthcare provision and sexist media commentary.

### **Comparative discussion**

Based on the above, this chapter contributed to the broader argument of this project in the following ways. Firstly, the two campaigns in object reached very different levels of popularity despite relatively similar declared objectives. ‘Say no! Stop violence against women’ campaign was developed in support of the so-called ‘year of focused action to combat violence against women’. I argued that the campaign aimed at raising awareness on violence against women but ultimately failed in engaging European citizens, at least on Twitter. The number of users involved by tweeting at the hashtag remained rather small, and perhaps even negligible when compared to the half billion people living in the EU. Most of the material retrieved was produced and circulated by Twitter accounts directly or indirectly linked to EU institutions, corroborating the impression of limited involvement by private users. The hashtag campaign soon exhausted its momentum: by December 15<sup>th</sup>, hardly any message was being tweeted at the hashtag any longer.

Conversely, Non una di meno movement set up a fairly efficient social media campaign that, in combination with other traditional activist tactics, successfully mobilized an estimated number of 200,000 people in the streets of Rome on November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2016. This is not to say that social mobilization on the hashtag of the Italian movement was fully spontaneous or featured an extremely large number of users involved. Adopting the lense of Gerbaudo's (2012) choreography of assembly, I argued elsewhere that the collective action of Non una di meno was choreographed by a group of leaders that set the stage for adherents to voice their grievances on several different platforms, including social media (Trillò, 2018b). This is highlighted by the prominence of feminist collectives and activists in the ecology of #nonunadimeno. In particular, @nonunadimeno was by far the most active and most retweeted account on #nonunadimeno.

Secondly, I contend that the aspirations of 'Say no! Stop VAW' were limited, partially because of financial constraints but also because of a well-established trend of 'soft' interventions in the field of gender equality by EU institutions (see Chapter 1). The language adopted in the context of the campaign, however, was not coherent with its limited aspirations. As a matter of fact, combat metaphors, a focus on now-ness, and a large scale deployment of technical arguments produced the impression of a full commitment to the cause and confidence in the possibility of eradicating violence against women by the end of the 'year of focused action'. Conversely, the Non una di meno movement is strong of the key recognition that its claims are deeply political in character and that violence against women is a structural issue that manifests itself in all social activities rather than as a set of isolated incidents. And indeed, the feminist anti-violence plan developed by Non una di meno and launched on the occasion of IDEVAW 2017 does address violence systemically and makes proposal for political change in virtually all areas of society (Non una di meno, 2017).

Thirdly and given the above, it is perhaps unsurprising that the messages of 'Say no! Stop violence against women!' de facto reproduced already existing narratives rather than aiming for change in the way VAW is represented. The campaign aimed at mobilizing a collective 'us' made of Europeans through ambiguous reference to 'core European values' (i.e. moral authorization) but then substantiating its call to action with utilitarian arguments (i.e. theoretical rationalization or the topos of numbers). At times, this duality created paradoxical narratives in which violence against women is endemic in Europe despite the fact that Europeans are fundamentally against it.

At least in the corpus of data gathered for this study, these paradoxes remained mostly unaddressed. Furthermore, utilitarian arguments such as the business case for the elimination VAW seemed to be somewhat more prominent than value-based ones, possibly betraying the fact that a narrative representing gender equality as ‘a fundamental European value’ rests on shaky ground. *Non una di meno*, on the other hand, clearly presents itself as a movement that speaks on behalf of a collective ‘us’ made of ‘women’ and advocates for broad social transformation in the interest of society as a whole. Its arguments are markedly political in character and their legitimacy is mostly derived from reference to moral arguments.

## **Conclusions**

#Saynostopvaw and #nonunadimeno are two very different campaigns because of a broad range of characteristics. What they have in common is a wish to engage with the public at large and establish conversation over violence against women as an important social issue. #saynostopvaw was obviously limited in its scope by a wide range of constraints (financial, institutional, discursive). #nonunadimeno was less bound by formal and informal rules in the production of its messages. The result is two very distinct sets of narratives that can be summarized as follows. Both of them were dominated by key users/institutions within the respective contexts and both of them enjoyed only limited public endorsement on Twitter. This begs a reflection on the role of Twitter as a tool of political communication. Especially the case of *Non una di meno* highlights how mobilization beyond social media is a pre-requisite for any sort of collective action that is hoping to achieve change and be sustainable over time.

Both narratives engaged with the production of violence against women as an object of knowledge. #Saynostopvaw did so via widespread reference to technical knowledges produced by EU apparati. In this sense, #saynostopvaw produced violence against women as a technical problem that can be solved through minor policy intervention. Value based arguments were at time deployed, but not very consistently and virtually always in conjunction with utilitarian arguments. Conversely, #nonunadimeno attempted to produce violence against women as a political issue that can only be solved through political interventions that aim at restructuring of the current social order in general and of the nation-state in particular. However radical, this proposition emerges from the grassroots experiences of feminist collectives on the Italian territory, and thus refers to a set of knowledges that is markedly different from the ‘technical’ ones favored by the EU.

Both #saynostopvaw and #nonunadimeno attempt to produce themselves as the voice of a collective subject. #saynostopvaw aspires at being the collective voice of a European ‘us’ that allegedly cares about gender equality in general and violence against women in particular. However, the above mentioned relevance of utilitarian arguments and the business case for the elimination of VAW questions the extent to which this European ‘us’ does indeed care about women’s bodily integrity. Conversely, #nonunadimeno declaredly speaks as the voice of a collective ‘us’ made of women. In this context, women are almost invariably foregrounded and afforded the right to voice their own claims. Speaking in the first person and advocating for their own rights, the ‘women’ of #nonunadimeno are political subjects advancing a much more radical view of what achieving the eradication of VAW would entail.

## 9. LGBTI rights discussions for IDAHOTB

### Introduction

Part I highlighted the existence of overlaps and discrepancies between advocacy for women's rights and advocacy for the rights of sexual minorities in the wider ecology of 'gender equality'. I argued that there are links between the two, despite the apparent discursive separation between women's rights and LGBTI rights. Following up on discussion in Chapter 8 regarding violence against women, this chapter aims to analyze discussions on homophobia at the European level and at the Italian national level in the days leading up to and following the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia (IDAHOTB, 17<sup>th</sup> of May). As it was the case for IDEVAW, IDAHOTB is probably the yearly occasion in which issues of homophobia and transphobia are more broadly discussed.

In this chapter, I discuss two instances of aggregated conversation that emerged in the context of IDAHOTB 2017 and that did not extent over time beyond the date of the event. These hashtags are, respectively, #EU4LGBTI and #omofobia. The former is a hashtag clearly developed by EU institutions (possibly, the Directorate General for Justice of the European Commission) but that was not specifically attached to any policy action (differently from #saynostopvaw). The latter is the generic hashtag of the Italian word for homophobia; a hashtag that happened to be in the list of trending topics in Italy in the days leading up to IDAHOTB 2017.

### EU for LGBTI

This section presents the key characteristics of #EU4LGBTI as an instance of aggregated conversation, outlining the broad profile of the public that gathered therein and undertaking closer scrutiny of the messages posted.

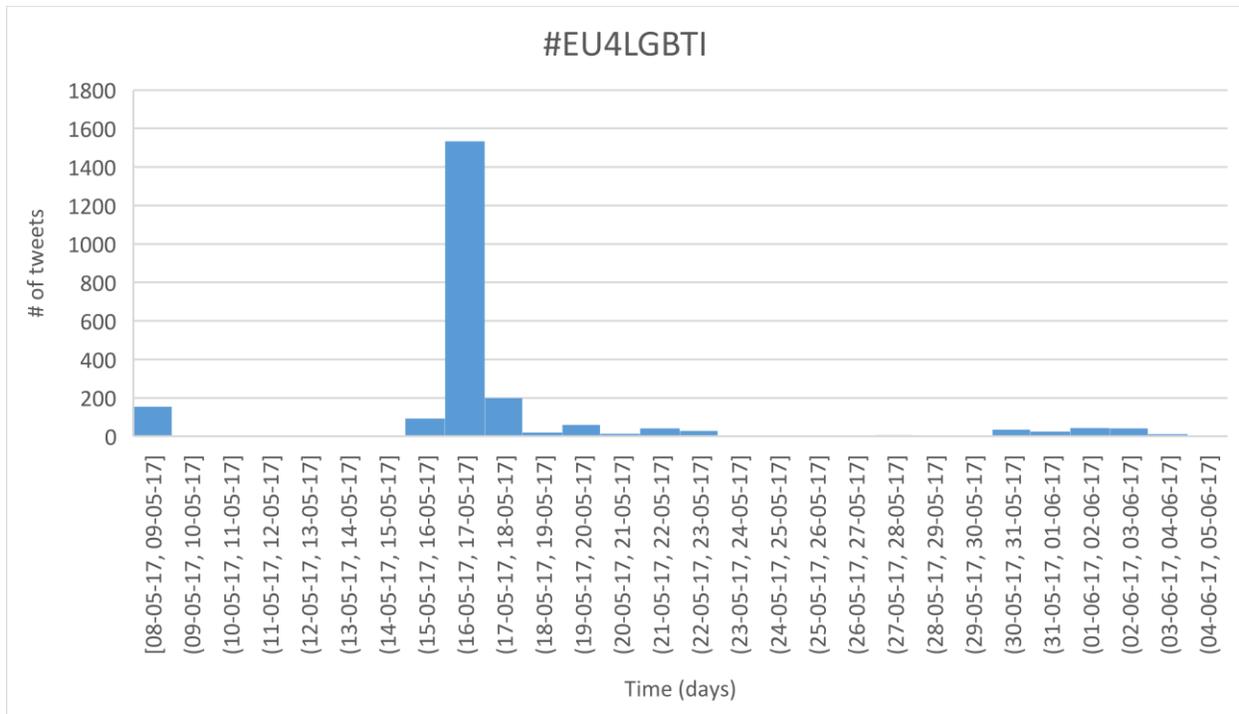
#### *Presenting the sub-sample*

In the days preceding IDAHOTB 2017, the hashtag #EU4LGBTI started trending on Twitter and enjoying some level of popularity among the users sampled for this study and discussed in Part II. As far as this research could uncover, the hashtag was not connected with any specific campaign on behalf of any emanation of the EU apparatus. Nonetheless, it is plausible that the hashtag was devised by some EU agency in order for EU bodies to have a clearly identifiable tool of aggregated conversation for the occasion of IDAHOTB. For the purposes of

this research, I retrieved Twitter data from #EU4LGBTI for a month-long timespan encompassing IDAHOTB 2017, that is, 8 May - 7 June 2017. The dataset comprises 2,334 between tweets and retweets. What follows outlines some of the key features of the dataset under observation.

In line with what was argued in the previous chapter, engagement with the hashtag was quite low. As many as 1,535 out of the 2,334 tweets gathered were tweeted on the day of IDAHOTB (around 57%). Indeed, no other peak in activity is noticed at any other moment in time during the month under scrutiny (see Table 8 below). This lack of activity prompted me to stop gathering data and limit the investigation to the month surrounding the event in object.

Table 8 - #EU4LGBTI, number of tweets over time (days)



Once again in line with discussion in the previous chapter, the most active users were emanations or individuals within the ranks of the EU. As Table 9 (below) shows, the European Commission produced three of the most retweet tweets in the dataset. Indeed, as many as 778 of the tweets captured for the analysis were produced by the Commission (33% of the material gathered). All the users retweeted 30 times or more were either EU institutions (EU Commission, EU Council, DG Justice, the official account of the Maltese presidency of the Council), EU offices in the member states or third countries (EU office in Madrid, EU office in Japan), or individual EU commissioners (Commissioners Jourová, Moads, Timmermans, and Moscovici). Expanding

the focus to the 2,334 tweets in this part of the dataset, they were produced by 204 users in total. Overall, the aggregate conversation via this hashtag did not achieve public visibility beyond the day of IDAHOTB. Whatever discussion did take place, it mostly involved EU institutions and representatives broadcasting their messages to their imagined audience.

Table 9 - #EU4LGBTI, users producing the most retweeted tweets

<b>Username</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b># RTs</b>
<b>EU_Commission</b>	European Commission	799
<b>EUCouncil</b>	European Council	187
<b>EU_Justice</b>	Directorate General for Justice and Consumers	137
<b>VeraJourova</b>	Commissioner for Justice, Consumers, and Gender Equality	93
<b>EU_Commission</b>	European Commission	91
<b>EU_Commission</b>	European Commssion	79
<b>Moedas</b>	Commissioner for Research, Science and Innovation	72
<b>EU2017MT</b>	Official Account of the Maltese Presidency of the European Council	48
<b>UEmadrid</b>	EU regional office in Madrid	48
<b>TimmermansEU</b>	Commissioner for Better Regulation, Interinstitutional Relations, the Rule of Law and the Charter of Fundamental Rights	37

### *Word frequency analysis*

As in all the cases scrutinized so far, the most frequent word in the corpus was the hashtag of the campaign in object, featuring in all the 2,334 tweets gathered for this study. Noticeably, the Twitter handle of the European Commission appears some 906 times in the corpus as the fourth most frequent word therein. To this, it is necessary to add some 300 occurrences for the Twitter handle of other official EU bodies (e.g. DG Justice @EU\_Justice), some 192 occurrences for the

Twitter handle of the European Council (@eucouncil) and some 188 occurrences for the account of Commissioner Jourová (@VeraJourova). Differently from what was found in previous cases, other hashtags were relatively marginal to the discussion. Only #idahot (544 occurrences) and #lgbti (469 occurrences) seem to be quite frequent. This perhaps hints to a campaign that exists in relative isolation from other parallel initiatives.

Aside from the hashtag in object, ‘love’ features as the most frequent word in the corpus (1,069 occurrences). This can be connected on the one hand with the centrality of equal marriage to LGBTI advocacy in recent years in the Western context, as pointed out in Chapter 6. The vocabulary of love is also largely adopted in LGBTI rights advocacy to take a stance against those who oppose the advancement of equal rights for sexual minorities, by implication constructed as ‘others’ who mostly spread ‘hate’.

Aside from love, there is large reference to freedom and the language of rights. Words such as ‘discrimination’ (940 occurrences), ‘human’ (802 occurrences), the cluster ‘treated differently’ (178 occurrences), ‘equality’ (119 occurrences), ‘rights’ (119 occurrences), and ‘diversity’ (104 occurrences) hint to strong prominence of the latter trend. Words such as ‘want’ (791 occurrences), ‘free’ (787 occurrences), the cluster ‘without fear’ (786 occurrences), ‘choice’ (199 occurrences), and ‘dreams’ (103 occurrences) further corroborate this impression. Overall, it is possible to speculate that love, rights, and freedom are master themes at #EU4LGBTI.

### *Critical discourse analysis*

As it was the case in the previous chapter, I use this section to expand on the above and present the findings from more granular analysis. Discussion is organized around three key themes, and namely the definition of sexual minorities as subjects of discourse, the centrality of love to LGBTI rights advocacy, and the wider reference to the language of rights also adopted therein.

### Defining sexual minorities, producing LGBTI subjects

In previous chapters, I dwelled at length on the ways in which discourses of equality between women and men are not only productive of gender equality policies and regimes, but happen to be productive of ‘women’ as their subjects. Picking up on discussion in Chapter 6, I argue that the same goes for policies referring to the rights of sexual minorities. That is to say, discussions around the rights of sexual minorities inevitably produce LGBTI individuals as their

subjects. Tweeted discussion at #EU4LGBTI is no exception in this sense, especially in light of its high level of centralization and the dominance of hegemonic voices therein.

A popular tweet by the Directorate General for Justice of the European Commission emerged as particularly poignant in this respect:

"It was as a total surprise. I thought that it was a choice, obviously it isn't"  
#EU4LGBTI [link to website] [embeds video]  
(@EU\_Justice, EU Commission Directorate General for Justice and  
Consumers, 20 May 2017).

The tweet reports a speech fragment from an un-known speaker. The person reported to be speaking is represented as being surprised by an unspecified discovery. The second sentence in the tweet informs the reader that the discovery in object refers to a change in opinion regarding something that the speaker mistakenly understood as a lifestyle choice up until reaching an epiphany, following which they realized it was 'obviously not' a choice. While being vague, this tweet is dense with meaning. From context, it is possible to infer that the speaker is referring to 'homosexuality' and that, therefore, they are voicing their choc in finding out that people do not actually choose their sexual orientation. Their choc also informs the reader that the person whose words are reported is most probably straight, otherwise their choc would hardly make sense.

The tweet embeds two multimodal elements. The first one is a short video (34"), in which two people passing as white men are presented to the viewer as gay subjects who are struggling with their fear of discrimination on the workplace. These men write their names on a camera to inform the viewer that they are called 'Andred' and 'Roberto'. The problems faced by these men are outlined by a background voice while the video shows them going through their daily routine, Andred and Roberto are shown at work and, later, having dinner with friends at home. The video ends on an uplifting note, suggesting that discussing their issues led them to come out at the office and, in turn, made them happier people.

The second multimodal feature is a link to an article in the website of the DG Justice newsroom. The article opens with a definition of LGBTI people and presents some statistics on discrimination drawn from the 2015 edition of the Eurobarometer and a study by the Fundamental Rights Agency from 2013. In particular, the article stresses that a majority of the European people

consider discrimination against sexual minorities as widespread ('almost 60% of EU citizens'). This is somewhat incongruent with two other figures presented on the same webpage, reporting that 70% of Europeans think that sexual minorities should have the same rights as heterosexual people and that 47% of the people identifying as LGBTI partaking in the same study declare to have been victims of violence at least once in the year before the interview. The webpage goes on to list the actions that the Commission is taking in the field. Emphasis is put on the relevance of a 'List of actions to advance LGBTI equality' adopted in 2016 and binding the Commission to yearly review of its operations, support for local levels implementers, and awareness raising. The webpage is closed by a set of informational material on the subject.

The following can be said about the tweet under analysis. Firstly, the tweet chooses to push awareness raising regarding the rights of sexual minorities by giving voice to a straight subject. This might have been a conscious choice in order to appeal to the audience identifying as straight. Indeed, LGBTI people themselves probably do not need to be sensitized towards the relevance of upholding their own rights. However, this choice can be said to favor a straight standpoint and backgrounds queer perspectives. Secondly, the post is interestingly vague regarding the topic it is discussing. This might be again a choice to push the imagined audience to find out more at the link or by watching the video. However, it also creates the uncomfortable effect of producing 'homosexuality' as something that can only be hinted at but not openly mentioned.

Thirdly, the video features gay middle class men telling their successful stories of coming out on the workplace and the improvement of their individual condition thereafter. Arguably, the video privileges the stand point of white middle class gay men over those of other groups within the LGBTI community. Obviously, a 34-second video cannot tell all facets of all stories of all sexual minorities. However, the choice of privileging a voices that is often mentioned to be already hegemonic within the LGBTI context is potentially counterproductive (Lovelock, 2018).

Furthermore, the names and the accents of the gay men featured in the video inform us that they are not native English speakers, although they are represented while speaking English. Thus, these men can be said to be representative of a group of mobile European citizen-worker, who can cross borders and find job because of their middle class competencies, including English language skills. Chapter 6 highlighted how crossing intra-EU borders is not as easy as it looks for LGBTI

subjects (see for example Meyer, 2017). The video seems to be blind to this problem, and actually engages in the production of gay men as viable subject of a positive narrative of intra-EU mobility.

Finally, the webpage linked to the tweet bears some of the shortcoming already highlighted in Chapter 8 with respect to the use of statistics (i.e. the topos of numbers or scientific rationalization) in the communication of EU institutions. EU institutions frequently find themselves advocating for the eradication of violence against women and sexual minorities through a paradox. On the one hand, discrimination is presented as endemic in order to justify targeted action. On the other hand, respect for the bodily integrity of women and sexual minorities is presented as a deeply held belief for a majority of the European people. However, the former would not be an endemic issue if the latter were actually true. As I already argued in previous chapters of this work, preferring theoretical rationalization to moral legitimization via value-based arguments seems to be controversial strategy because of the logical fallacies it produces.

### Love is love

‘Love’ happened to be the most frequent word in the sub-sample of #EU4LGBTI aside from the hashtag itself. The prominence of love was found to be relevant in light of the crucial role that advocacy for equal marriage is currently having in the context of the struggle for the equal rights of sexual minorities. However, love is deeply intertwined with other tropes, and especially a widespread reference to freedom, as exemplified in one of the most popular posts in the corpus originally produced by the European Commission:

Freedom to love is freedom to live. European Commission #Berlaymont lit  
up to support #LGBTIequality. #IDAHOT  
(@EU\_Commission, European Commission, 16 May 2017)

Figure 19 - picture embedded in the tweet above



This tweet presents a wide array of features that are worth unpacking. To begin with, the tweet foregrounds the European Commission as the subject of a symbolic gesture in support of LGBTI equality. A first element of symbolism is the use of the Berlaymont building as a proxy for the European Commission itself and, in turn, the European project. The EU is often represented as an abstract entity that is distant from its citizens and has no place in their collective imaginary. By foregrounding one of the key places for EU decisionmaking, the official account of the Commission is attempting to make up for this perceived deficit in legitimacy. Indeed, they are quite literally showing that ‘Europe’ exists as a physical location in the real world. The objective is probably that of making the Berlaymont recognizable to EU citizens as a shared symbol of European unity.

If the construction of Europe is one of the key elements of this message, the post also stresses that Europe is not just a place, but a place that is exceptional because of its fundamental values. Indeed, the first sentence of the tweet constructs ‘the right to love’ (i.e. the right to choose whom to love regardless of sexual orientation) as a freedom that is as fundamental as the right to life itself. With this choice of vocabulary, the Commission is attempting to set the European project within a Western tradition of individualism and self-ownership. By showing the Berlaymont lit in rainbow colors, the Commission is taking the message one step further, symbolizing that being European also means supporting the rights of sexual minorities.

It can be argued that this tweet attempts to make a particular statement acceptable to the general public by linking it to another, more universal, statement that is believed to be widely shared (Lilija, 2012). Starting from the general assumption that all European citizens believe that ‘the individual’ is free to live their lives as they please, the Commission is also qualifying this statement by claiming that the freedom to live also encompasses the freedom to choose whom to love. The second statement is probably far from being universally shared by the European population. However, by connecting it to a wider, more universal statement, the Commission is engaging in discursive work to make it acceptable to its imagined audience.

It is also worth noticing that the choice of the vocabulary of ‘love’ is hardly a coincidence. Romantic love enjoys wide currency in the Western imaginary, with examples spanning from the latest pop cultural trends to the most widely acclaimed literary classics. Being in support of love is hardly a controversial statement. Conversely, being against love immediately implies being to some extent on the side of ‘hate’. Furthermore, being in support of ‘love’ does not carry any political responsibility for action. In this sense, ‘love’ is de facto an empty signifier that can be interpreted by the imagined audience of the Commission in several different ways without any of them being necessarily wrong. The Commission does qualify its support for love as a support for LGBTI equality (adding emphasis by hashtagging the concept). However, ‘LGBTI equality’ is a concept just as broad that does not imply any specific policy action.

#### Equal rights and non-discrimination

If the trope of ‘love’ did not provide much information on the commitments of the European Union in support of LGBTI equality, tweets more specifically deploying the language of rights can provide this information and corroborate the discussion. A first hint can be found in a fairly popular tweet by Commissioner Jourová, in which she states that:

We all share the same dreams: to be valued, loved and respected. No to discrimination of #LGBTI. #EU4LGBTI #IDAHOT #ShareYourDream  
[link to the tweet by the Commission analyzed in the previous sub-section]  
(@VeraJourova, EU Commissioner, 17 May 2017)

Jourová is here engaging in discursive work to produce Europe as a place inhabited by people that jointly support equality for sexual minorities. In her tweet, Jourová presents herself as

speaking on behalf of a collective ‘we’ most probably made of ‘Europeans’. The language of love described in the previous section is deployed once more, this time corroborated with a relatable set of floating signifiers, including the word ‘dreams’. The European ‘we’, Jourová claims, shares the same vaguely defined set of ‘dreams’, and namely to be valued, loved, and respected.

‘Love’ and ‘dreams’ add a strong affective charge to the message that is then mobilized in the following part of the tweet, in which Jourová seems to suggest that the ‘shared’ dream of being loved should translate in a stance against discrimination of sexual minorities. Argumentatively, Jourová is here deploying the topos of justice. That is to say, by claiming that a group is made of equals, Jourová is also claiming that justice demands for everyone in that group to be treated equally. In light of the fundamental place of ‘justice’ in the construction of ‘Europe’ as a community of values (Diez, 2012), it can also be argued that Jourová is also in part appealing to moral authorization in order to grant legitimacy to her statement.

Crucially, this post makes reference to ‘discrimination’ as the object against which the European ‘we’ is taking a stance. Discussion so far highlighted how the European Union tends to favor ‘soft’ approaches to equality issues in light of the fact that it has mostly exhausted its competences on the matter. Indeed, the heydays of gender equality legislation in Europe came to an end once most reforms for non-discrimination and positive action entered into force. While this is particularly true for equality between women and men, the same cannot be said with respect to discrimination of sexual minorities. Most European states, for example, do not have a law protecting victims of homophobic violence, as the Italian case study for this chapter points out. Thus, reference to discrimination might signal a wish to promote ‘hard’ EU policy action for the rights of sexual minorities in the future.

And indeed, a somewhat less popular tweet by the European Commission explicitly advocates in that direction:

We call on member states to unblock discussions on the Equal Treatment Directive. Discrimination has no place in the EU. #EU4LGBTI #IDAHOT (@EU\_Commission, European Commission, 17 May 2017)

Figure 20 - picture embedded in the tweet above



In this post, the Commission directly addresses its member states with a very specific call for action. The ‘we’ that is foregrounded in the post is probably that of the European Commission. However, extending that ‘we’ to the above mentioned European ‘us’ would not be that much of a stretch. The member states of the Union are presented as being responsible for the action of ‘blocking’ a piece of legislation in support of the rights of sexual minorities. Thus, they are also attributed responsibility for ‘unblocking’ the discussion.

The object of the discussion to be unblocked is defined as ‘Equal Treatment Directive’. The name is the same as the one of the popular directive from 1976 in which equality between women and men in the workplace was enshrined in EU law. In 2008, the Commission introduced a new anti-discrimination directive also dubbed ‘horizontal directive’ to extend protection for victims of discrimination on the grounds of age, disability, religion or belief and sexual orientation. New protections would encompass the areas of healthcare, education, housing and access to goods and services. This directive would expand the protections available to sexual minorities, currently limited to employment and training, and move their status closer to that of potential victims of discrimination on the base of sex and ethnicity. The directive is stuck in Brussels’ backrooms because of lack of consensus in the Council.

The Commission builds its argument on the ground that discrimination has no place in the EU. The argument is probably grounded in the topos of definition. That is to say, an object defined by some specific characteristics should do things that are coherent with its characteristics. Therefore, by defining the EU as a place where there is no place for discrimination, the EU member

states are compelled into taking action to make that definition a reality. Moral authorization is perhaps deployed again by making reference to justice as a key source of legitimacy. The message is multimodally reinforced through a picture of a ‘green’ traffic light with stick figures of a same-sex couple. Reference to ‘green light’ as a sign of approval is quite obvious and should require no further explanation. Representation of same-sex couples on objects as mainstream as traffic lights should also be considered as an attempt to normalize their presence in everyday environments.

### *Section summary*

In this section, I offered an overview of the narratives circulate at #EU4LGBTI during a one-month timespan around the date of IDAHOTB 2017 (17<sup>th</sup> of May). I argued that the hashtag gathered a quite narrow public mostly composed of EU institutions voicing their support for LGBTI equality. Picking up on discussion in Chapters 5 and 6, I argued that posts referring to gender equality and LGBTI equality contribute to the production of both equality policy and women/LGBTI people as their subjects. In this context, I expanded on that proposition by claiming that LGBTI subjects are mostly constructed by the narrative circulated at #EU4LGBTI as middle class worker-citizens who enjoy intra-EU mobility rights and are active members of the productive laborforce. I further argued that ‘love’ was confirmed to be a central trope in narratives of LGBTI equality because of the centrality of equal marriage in Europe in recent years. Finally, I argued that the slightly less advanced situation of LGBTI equality opens an opportunity for European level advocacy in support of binding measures such as an equal rights directive. In this sense, the narrative of LGBTI equality is somewhat less neoliberalized than the one speaking of equality between women and men. Indeed, this narrative seems to be more open to value-based arguments grounded in the topos of definition or the topos of justice rather than in theoretical rationalization.

### **#Omofobia**

In this section, I follow the model adopted thus far to discuss the case of #omofobia at the Italian national level. I start from a broad overview of the feature of the corpus of data under scrutiny to then expand in the discourse analysis to follow.

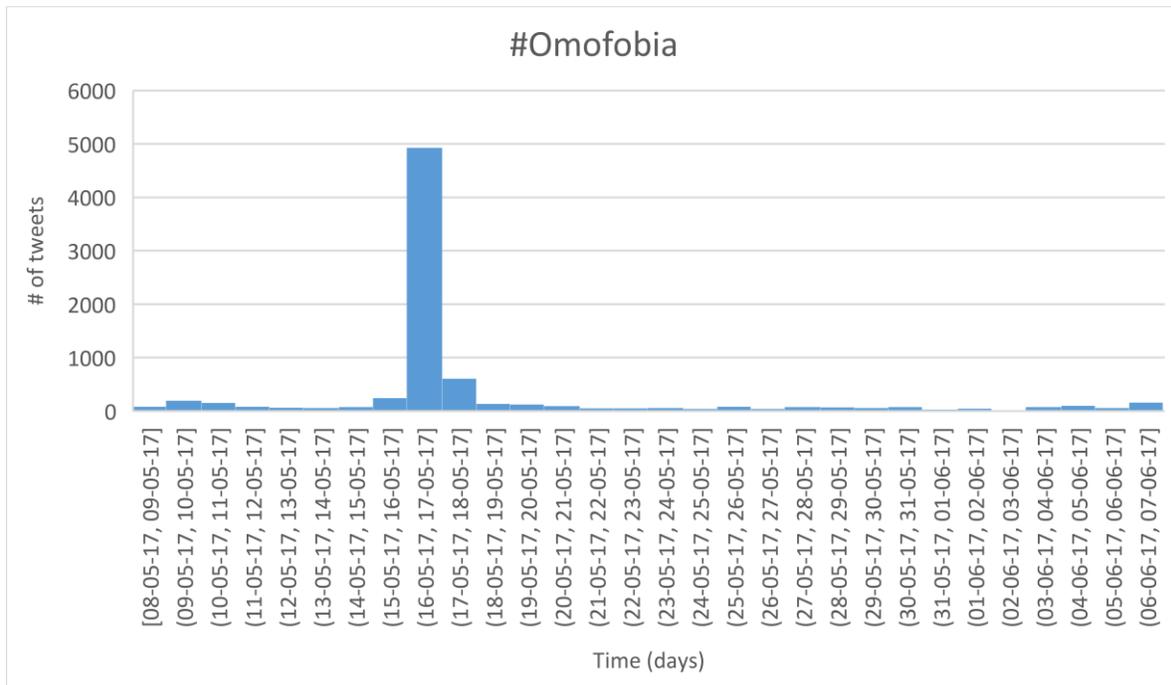
### *Presenting the sub-sample*

‘Omofobia’ is the Italian word for ‘homophobia’. #Omofobia started trending around the date of IDAHOTB 2017 in Italy and enjoyed some popularity among the users that were sampled

for this study as well as in the wider ecology in which their tweets are set. As far as I could uncover, the hashtag was not used for any specific campaign. Rather, its main use was that of offering a space where to broadcast comments on the occasion of IDAHOTB. For the purposes of this chapter, I gathered data from #omofobia for a month-long timespan around the date of IDAHOTB, that is, 8 May - 7 June 2017. The dataset comprises 7,934 tweets and retweets.

The temporal distribution of activity of #omofobia closely resembles that on #EU4LGBTI. That is to say, activity only peaks on the day of IDAHOTB and vanishes thereafter. As many as 4,927 of the tweets gathered for this study were tweeted on the day of IDAHOTB (around 62% of the dataset). No other peak in activity took place during the one-month sample of data here scrutinized (see Table 10 below).

Table 10 - #omofobia, number of tweets over time (days)



Building once again on what was mentioned for all the other cases scrutinized so far, discussion was largely dominated by pre-existing opinion leaders and politically visible figures. Their dominance, however, was not as marked as in other cases, perhaps signaling a slightly more organic mode of conversation for this particular case. For example, LGBTI-friendly news outlets and LGBTI activists are among the producers of the most re-circulated posts. These are, namely, Radio Zek, an internet-based radio station favouring LGBTI-friendly content (@radio\_zek), an

LGBTI rights blogger known as ‘Rainbow’ and tweeting as @nellafossettadiH, and a Twitter account dedicated to LGBTI news in Italy known as @PhobiaHomo.

Nonetheless, many among the most popular tweets in the corpus were produced by fairly recognizable figures from representative politics and the entertainment industry. These include Vladimir Luxuria (a trans rights activist who achieved fame as a TV actress and soon thereafter served as member of the Italian parliament from 2006 to 2008, @vladiluxuria); Enrico Maddalena, journalist for the broadsheet newspaper *Libero* (@Ri\_Ghetto); TV host Simona Ventura (@Simo\_Ventura); Sky TV news anchorwoman Federica de Sanctis (@fe\_desanctis); the official account of the Italian Ministry for Education, at the time headed by progressive Senator Valeria Fedeli (@MiurSocial); and an account administered by the fans of pop singer Scialpi (@scialpifans). Finally and interestingly, a public library in Milan (@Biblio\_Bastia) also produced one of the most retweet tweets in the dataset.

Table 11 - #omofobia, users producing the most retweeted tweets

Username	Description	#RTs
<b>vladiluxuria</b>	Activist and politician	238
<b>Ri_Ghetto</b>	journalist	191
<b>Simo_Ventura</b>	TV host	158
<b>Radio_Zek</b>	LGBTI-friendly web radio	152
<b>LaFossettaDiH</b>	LGBTI Blogger	138
<b>BiblioBastia</b>	Public library	137
<b>PhobiaHomo</b>	LGBTI news	129
<b>fe_desanctis</b>	Journalist	125
<b>MiurSocial</b>	Ministry of Education	115
<b>scialpifans</b>	Pop singer fan club	91

Despite the slightly less centralized character of #omofobia, its popularity and horizontality should not be overstated. The 7,934 tweets gathered for this chapter were produced by as few as 1,124 users, and only 541 of them appear in the dataset twice or more. Nonetheless, the distribution of users at the national level is substantially less centralized than that at the European level.

Furthermore, some of the users that occupy central positions in the discussion do not necessarily come from the so-called ‘mainstream’, but include activists and alternative sources of information.

One final feature should be highlighted before moving to more in-depth discussion. Going through the dataset, I found that part of the discussion was occupied by a narrow group of anti-equality bloggers, apparently tweeting in a ‘bubble’ of their own that only marginally overlaps with the rest of the discussion. This group seems to have tried to exploit the visibility of #omofobia to voice their reactionary views on the rights of sexual minorities, de facto producing an anti-equality counternarrative. A similar trend will be also analyzed in the next chapter of this work, suggesting that this might be a deliberate strategy of anti-equality advocacy by reactionary groups.

#### *Word frequency analysis*

#Omofobia is the most frequent word in this part of the corpus, appearing 7,934 times, that is, in every tweet gathered. Following a trend that is now common in this study, the handles of the most popular accounts in the sub-corpus figure prominently in the word frequency analysis, as for example Radio Zek (@Radio\_zek, 488 occurrences), broadsheet newspaper Repubblica (@Repubblica, 394 occurrences), pop singer Scialpi (@scialpi, 379 occurrences) and his fans (@scialpifans, 271 occurrences), those of LGBTI news account ‘PhobiaHomo’ (@phobiahomo, 245 occurrences), and that of trans rights activist and politicians Vladimir Luxuria (@vladiluxuria, 243 occurrences).

Temporality seems to be a key feature of the corpus, perhaps hinting to the relevance of IDAHOTB in the discussion. ‘Day’ [giornata] and ‘today’ [oggi] appear respectively 1923 and 750 times in the corpus as the third and seventh most frequent words. The date of IDAHOTB appears as #17may [#17maggio] some 1665 times. Finally, words such as ‘global’ [mondiale] and ‘international’ [internazionale], appearing respectively some 558 and 430 times, hint to the fact that many used the full name of the celebration in their tweets (e.g. ‘today is the global/international day against homophobia’).

Aside from the hashtag in object and the one with the date of IDAHOT, some other hashtags figured relatively prominently. #Loveislove (1,424 occurrences) once again hints to a prominence of love in the narrative of present day advocacy for the rights of sexual minorities and the centrality of equal marriage therein. #Transphobia [#transfobia] (675 occurrences) hints to a

wish to remark that IDAHOTB also encompasses that phenomenon. #Lgbt is also widely used (457 occurrences), and so is #gay (392 occurrences) hinting to some possible slippage between the two identity categories. #cyberbullism [#ciberbullismo] (258 occurrences) hints to another key feature of present day lgbti advocacy in Italy, and namely the fight against online harassment. Finally, #IDAHOT2017 (254 occurrences) probably aims at positioning the Italian conversation in the broader international context.

The triad of love, rights, and freedom is found also in the context of #omofobia. Indeed, ‘law’ [legge] (661 occurrences) is the eighth most frequent word in the corpus. Analysis in the next section shows that much of the discussion tweeted at #omofobia laments the fact that a law on homophobia has been stuck in parliamentary commissions since 2014 (at the present time, the law still hasn’t made it to the parliamentary floor). ‘Love’ [amore] features 391 times in the corpus as the 21<sup>st</sup> most frequent word and corroborates the 1,424 occurrences of #loveislove. ‘Discrimination’ [discriminazione] appears some 387 times in and can be considered as a general claim to freedom from discrimination or a claim that is more legalistic in character. Finally, the word ‘human(s)’ [umani] (276 occurrences) might hint to frequent reference to human rights.

### *Critical discourse analysis*

This section outlines the key features of the collective narratives in the hashtag under scrutiny. Discourse analysis is carried out with an eye to what was outlined above, setting the stage for comparative discussion in the following section.

#### Love is love, in Italian sauce

As mentioned in the word frequency analysis, #omofobia makes widespread reference to ‘love’ as one of the essential features of advocacy in the context of IDAHOTB. Based on online and offline observation of the context in which the discussion at #omofobia took place, it is possible to argue that widespread reference to ‘love’ is loosely associated with wider discussion and celebration for the adoption of the ‘Decreto Cirinnà’ (see Chapter 6) and the legalization same-sex civil union in Italy. The adoption of the law was celebrated as triumph of ‘love’ over ‘hate’. Much of that rhetoric remains to these day one of the main frames through which LGBTI issues are debated in the country. A good example of this trend is the second most re-tweeted tweet in the corpus by journalist Enrico Maddalena (@Ri\_Ghetto), tweeting that:

Love is beautiful, it is human beings that suck. #homophobia #loveislove<sup>81</sup>  
(@Ri\_Ghetto, Journalist, 17 May 2017)

The author of this post is here engaging in two kinds of discursive action. The first part of the statement can be said to be a semiotic action that aims at defining the attributes of ‘love’ as an object of knowledge. Love is described as beautiful and, therefore, as carrying positive characteristics. The author then goes on to describe ‘human beings’ as a social group that collectively ‘sucks’. In other words, ‘sucking’ is presented as a somewhat permanent characteristic of the social group ‘human being’.

The two hashtags #homophobia and #loveislove can be considered as tools to make the statement retrievable and to set it in the context of two relatively wide but nonetheless bounded instances of aggregated conversation. With the former, the author is positioning his statement in the context of discussions of homophobia, probably in connection with IDAHOTB. With the latter, the author is positioning his statement in the context of the discussions that followed the passing of Decreto Cirinnà; discussions that largely argued for the equal recognition of ‘love’ in front of the law, regardless of sexual orientation.

Messages such as the one above were rather common. Probably the most relevant characteristic of these messages is a strong affective character (Papacharissi, 2015). Indeed, the example above conveys affects such as love and disgust. The argumentative structure is somewhat backgrounded but not absent. The claim that ‘human beings suck’ might seem universalistic and hopeless at first sight. However, the post implies that not all human beings ‘suck’, but only those who do not recognize that ‘love is love’ and that therefore happen to be homophobic. Thus, the reader is compelled towards recognizing the equal ‘beauty’ of same-sex love and therefore escape definition as a human being that ‘sucks’. It can be said that the topos deployed is that of reality, insofar as the reader is tautologically compelled towards action because reality is the way it is.

#### Equal rights, human rights, rights for all

Those tweets referring to love can be said to mobilize affect and to deploy a vocabulary that mostly emerged in the context of the debate for and follow-up to the passing of a law on same-

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<sup>81</sup> L'amore è bello, sono gli esseri umani a fare schifo. #omofobia #loveislove

sax civil unions in Italy in early 2016. Since then, LGBTI rights advocacy in Italy mostly revolved around four main claims, and namely the possibility for same-sex couples to access adoption, issues of surrogate motherhood, online hate speech towards sexual minorities (mostly framed as cyber-bullying), and the passing of a law specifically protecting victims of homophobic violence and punishing its perpetrators. In light of the fact that reproductive rights and family rights of LGBTI subjects were discussed in Chapter 6, this section gives space to the latter two topics.

Drawing once again from one of the most popular posts in the corpus, it is possible to outline some of the trends identified therein.

TODAY I encountered an Italy against #homophobia and #cyberbullism, but I hope the same for TOMORROW<sup>82</sup>  
(@LaFossettaDiH, blogger, 17 May 2017)

Speaking in the first person, the author of this post is engaging in descriptive action that aims at pointing out the defining features of Italy ‘today’ (i.e. on the day of IDAHOTB). In their interpretation, IDAHOTB was a day where it was possible for them to witness ‘Italy’ as a collective social subject that stands against homophobia. In the second part of the statement, the author is representing a mental and/or affective process through which they express their hope to witness the same Italy in an idealized ‘tomorrow’ that stands for ‘the future’ at large. As it was the case in the example above, the affective character of the post can hardly go unnoticed. The use of CapsLock to mark the temporal expressions of ‘today’ and ‘tomorrow’ clearly points in that direction. The action of ‘hoping’ is one further element signaling a wish to express affect and also mobilize affect in the reader.

The argumentative structure is not immediately detectable. The topos of reality is probably deployed. That is to say, the fact that ‘today’ Italy was against homophobia should compel the reader towards ‘hoping’ the same for ‘tomorrow’, and ideally engage in action to make that hope a reality. The hashtags adopted serve the purpose of adding emphasis on the words ‘homophobia’ and ‘cyberbullism’. The former also positions the post in the context of IDAHOTB discussion, while the latter positions it in the more time-specific context of unfolding parliamentary debates on cyberbullying following the legislative initiative of Laura Boldrini (see Chapter 4).

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<sup>82</sup> OGGI ho conosciuto un'Italia contro l'omofobia e il cyberbullismo, ma lo spero anche DOMANI.

## A law on homophobia: Voices in favor and against equality

In the data retrieved from #omofobia, it was possible to identify posts arguing both in favor of a law on homophobia and against it. While talking of a debate is probably too much of a stretch, I find it fruitful to analyze both sets of narratives. The most poignant example of arguments in favor of a law on homophobia comes from one of the most popular tweets in the corpus, in which Sky TV anchorwoman Federica de Sanctis states that:

On the day against #homophobia, it is good to remember that the law has been stuck in Parliament for 3years and a half #17May<sup>83</sup>  
(@fe\_desanctis, journalist, 17 May 2017)

De Sanctis is describing a mental process, and namely that of ‘remembering’. The object of this remembrance is the fact that a law against homophobia has long been stuck in parliamentary committees. The social actors involved in the post are arguably two. The first one is a collective ‘we’, perhaps made of ‘Italians’, who should engage in the act of remembering. The second one is ‘Parliament’, understood as the community of the Italian parliamentarians, who are objectivated and passivated as a place where law remain stuck, perhaps implying negligence and malpractice.

De Sanctis is keen on stressing temporality in her post. IDAHOTB is presented as a day particularly apt for the act of remembrance that she is representing in her post. The importance of IDAHOTB as the day in which the action of ‘remembering’ takes place is reinforced through the hashtag at the end of the tweet, spelling out the date of IDAHOTB itself (17<sup>th</sup> of May). In contraposition with the brevity of the ‘day’ of IDAHOTB, the law against homophobia is presented as having been stuck in parliament for a relatively long time: three and a half years. The topos of reality is deployed to convey a feeling of stasis (reality is the way it is). The reader is therefore compelled to the very least into ‘remembering’ that the law on homophobia is stuck in parliament, but also into exerting pressure on ‘parliament’ in order for the law to find its way to the floor. The affective character of the message is somewhat less clear than in previous examples in this chapter. Perhaps the author aimed at mobilizing indignation as a possible motive for action.

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<sup>83</sup> Nella giornata contro #omofobia è bene ricordare che la legge è ferma in Parlamento da 3anni e mezzo #17maggio

While many argued along the lines of the example above, a relatively bound yet non-negligible number of anti-equality voices tweeted at #omofobia to argue against any legislative initiative in the field. Some of these accounts are the official Twitter handles of anti-equality movements that enjoy some level of popularity in the Italian context. Others are anti-equality bloggers that probably did not achieve their visibility offline but, rather, through their online anti-equality propaganda. Their narratives are fairly consistent, possibly hinting to the existence of some degree of behind the scenes concertation. These mostly revolved around two key arguments, and namely the irrelevance of homophobia as a social phenomenon and alleged ‘reverse discrimination’ against the catholic majority in Italy. An example of the former reads as follows:

#globaldayagainsthomophobia

Arcigay: 196 cases of #homophobia in Italy, including conferences on #gender<sup>84</sup> [link to FB page]

Figure 21 - picture embedded in the tweet above



[Like the law on civil unions, involving 3000 couples, the fight against homophobia involves less than 200 cases per year.\* A real national emergency.

\*Read the report in the link, and see the severity of the cases]

(@nelleNote, anti-equality blogger, 17 May 2017)

<sup>84</sup> #giornatamondialecontrolomofobia Arcigay: 196 casi di #omofobia in Italia, conferenze sul #gender comprese.

This post was produced by an anti-equality blogger tweeting as @nelleNOTE. While not having a large follower base (less than 2,000 followers), @nelleNote hardly ever fails to intervene in public discussions on the rights of sexual minorities, producing tweets that often gain a currency of some 25-30 retweets. In the tweet, @nelleNote engages in semiotic action that aims at producing homophobia as a non-issue in the public eye. A report by Arcigay is allegedly quoted in the post (semiotic action of ‘rendition’). The author fakes solemnity while proclaiming that homophobia involves 196 cases per year in the country. Through irony, the author is suggesting that homophobia is not ‘a real national emergency’.

The author of the post is using the topos of numbers and/or theoretical rationalization as the grounds for their argument. The topos of numbers here is used to compel the reader into non-action by making reference to a numeric figure that is presented as small. Scientific rationalization summons the expert knowledge specifically gathered by Arcigay for the occasion and subverts it in an attempt to delegitimize the fight against homophobia as well as Arcigay as an authoritative source of information on the issue. The message is multimodally reinforced by the picture, essentially re-stating the same arguments and enhancing their ironic and de-legitimizing character.

If the above post exemplified those anti-equality arguments that want to produce homophobia as a non-issue, some other anti-equality voices were particularly keen on producing ‘reverse discrimination’ as the real issue at stake. For example, the Catholic anti-equality group *Sentinelle in piedi* posted the following:

Homophobia as an excuse to empty from within not only Christian culture, but  
also freedom of thought  
[link to facebook page]<sup>85</sup>  
(@sentinpedi, anti-equality group, 26 May 2017)

In this post, *Sentinelle in piedi* are engaging in the discursive production of homophobia as an insidious social phenomenon that has nothing to do with violence against sexual minorities, but actually hides some hidden agenda. The tweet tells the reader that homophobia is in fact a discursive weapon that works to strip a group of insiders of their Christian values and their freedom of thought. What’s worse, those weaponizing homophobia are acting ‘from within’ the in-group.

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<sup>85</sup> L’#omofobia come scusa per svuotare dall’interno non solo la cultura cristiana, ma anche la libertà di pensiero.

At a closer look, the in-group can be said to be composed of ‘Catholic Italians’, i.e. those that ascribe to the Catholic values upon which the country is allegedly founded.

The in-group is presented as endowed with a right to freedom of thought. The out-group is completely backgrounded, almost invisibilized. However, it is safe to state that this outgroup is probably ‘other Italians’, in light of the fact that they are operating ‘from within’. It can be inferred that these ‘other Italians’ are those who have renounced their Christian heritage (they are trying to ‘empty’ it) and are co-opted into some sort of ideological fight to strip ‘Catholic Italians’ of their freedom of thought. The topos of threat is clearly deployed to compel the reader towards action because of an imminent threat looming upon them. The threat is an existential one, insofar as it is framed as being on the verge of undoing deeply rooted identity traits and inalienable rights. The threat is also insidious, insofar as it comes from a backgrounded perpetrator that operates ‘from within’. The action that the reader is compelled to undertake is unspecified. Probably, the post aims at producing suspicion of homophobia as a concept and hostility towards those advocating for its eradication, insofar as their ‘real’ intent is to shut down fundamental freedoms.

### **Comparative discussion**

Based on the examples from the dataset presented above, this chapter advances my overall argument through the following propositions. First and foremost, #EU4LGBTI and #omofobia present different levels of horizontality. #EU4LGBTI closely resembles the example of #saynostopvaw (Chapter 8), featuring low level of engagement and high prominence of hegemonic voices, especially EU institutions. #Omofobia, on the contrary, seems to have been a space where non-hegemonic voices could find their way to visibility. The level of horizontality of #omofobia, however, should not be overstated. Many of the users in the corpus actually spoke from the subject position of traditional elites either in the field of politics, entertainment, or broadcast media. Based on the above, #EU4LGBTI seems to be a space where the power *of* discourse seems to be particularly strong and productive of sexual minorities as social subjects of a specific policy framework. Conversely, #omofobia seems to be a space where power *in* discourse operates alongside power *of* discourse (KhsraviNik, 2017).

Secondly, access to visibility seems to be strongly structured on the bases of access to material and/or symbolic capital, such as for example having a press room and/or being recognizable because of popularity on broadcast media (Fuchs, 2013b). This appears to hold true

for both #EU4LGBTI and #omofobia. These findings are consistent with those of other chapters of this study, despite the somewhat more horizontal character of the example of #omofobia.

Thirdly, reference to ‘hard’ policy measures for the rights of sexual minorities was mentioned in the context of both #EU4LGBTI and #omofobia. The former made reference to an ‘Equal Treatment Directive’ stuck in the backroom of Brussels-based decisionmaking since 2008. The directive would expand the protection offered to victims of homophobic discrimination, elevating them to the same level of protection available to the victims of discrimination based on sex or race. At the Italian level, reference was made to a draft law to protect victims of homophobia that is stuck in Parliamentary commission since 2014. Furthermore, both contexts presented reference to equal marriage and/or same sex civil union legislation. While it is often lamented that the EU exhausted its competencies for ‘hard’ policy initiatives in the field of equality between women and men, broadening the scope of ‘gender equality’ to encompass the rights of sexual minorities points out that there might still be room for EU-level ‘hard’ policy initiatives.

Fourthly, affect was found to be an important element in many of the tweets in the context of #EU4LGBTI and a crucial one in the context of #omofobia. In particular appeal to ‘love’ was found to be common to both contexts. The vocabulary of love is indeed fairly common in the context of LGBTI advocacy at large, particularly in light of the importance of equal marriage in the Western context over the last few years. As suggested in Chapter 6, the presence of this shared vocabulary might hint to possible cross-border coordination among LGBTI rights activists.

Discussion of the data gathered from #EU4LGBTI highlighted that a universal appeal to ‘love’ as a fundamental human rights can be mobilized in order to argue for narrower issues such as the right of sexual minorities to equal recognition of their unions in front of the law (Lilja, 2012). It also highlighted how this narrative can serve the purpose of producing the EU as a space where the rights of sexual minorities are upheld as part of a broader reference to justice as a fundamental European value (Diez, 2012). Discussion of the data gathered from #omofobia highlighted how different currents within the Italian context appeal to a wide range of affects, including also hope, disgust, and fear, to in an effort to mobilize their imagined audience towards action. Based on the above, it can be to some extent stated that the publics that gathered at #omofobia to have elements of the ‘affective publics’ described by Papacharissi (2015).

## Conclusions

#EU4LGBTI and #omofobia are relatively divergent phenomena of aggregate conversation via Twitter hashtags. What they do share is a similar distribution over time, a generalized appeal to affect, as well as hints to the possibility of furthering the rights of sexual minorities through hard policy initiatives. Overall, #EU4LGBTI and #omofobia show elements of consistency with the examples presented in the previous chapter. #EU4LGBTI mostly presented a strong dominance of institutional users, that in turn voiced discourses that happened to be productive Europe as a space where the rights of sexual minorities matter and LGBTI people as subjects of a specific set of policy action. LGBTI individuals are at times allowed to speak for themselves, but institutional voices often take their place, defining them as subjects of policy action and articulating their interests. Differently from #saynostopvaw, however, utilitarian arguments are somewhat set aside to make room for value-based arguments that fall under the broad umbrella of ‘justice’.

#Omofobia was more horizontal than #EU4LGBTI in its character, with power *of* discourse and power *in* discourse operating alongside each other. Representatives of sexual minorities did speak for themselves, were often foregrounded, and spoke from the margins as well as from institutional positions. Widespread reference to love and to human rights was mostly tied to discussion of the 2016 law on same sex civil unions and to a law on homophobia stuck in parliament since 2014, thus suggesting a focus on moving beyond the status quo through hard policy action. Support for these initiatives, however, is hardly universal, as proved by the presence of anti-equality tweeting their own counternarrative in the context of #omofobia.

## 10. Tweeted synoptic resistance

### Introduction

Discussion in the last two chapters focused on long-lasting anti-violence campaigns emerging around the time of IDEVAW and time-specific instances of aggregated conversation the rights of sexual minorities around the time of IDAHOTB. These were described in terms of their bottom-up or top-down character, the temporality of their emergence and development, and the language included in the discourses therein circulated. I argued that discussion was relatively centralized and preplanned, with visibility on Twitter tied to material and discursive resources.

This chapter specifically focuses on hashtags that emerged as the sudden reaction of the public vis-à-vis two cases of politically relevant news that touched upon gender issues. At the European level, the case study refers to the hashtags that emerged in response to the decision of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) over Case C-157/15, issued on March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2017. In this judgement, the ECJ upheld the right of employers to decide on whether their employees can or cannot display religious symbols during work; a decision with clear implications regarding Islamic veiling. The sampled hashtags are three: #muslimwomenban, #hijabban, and #headscarfban.

At the Italian national level, the case study is that of the public reaction to a sexist infographic aired by the show *Parliamone... Sabato* (Let's talk about it... on Saturday) on public television network RAI Uno on March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2017. The sampled hashtags are #parliamonesabato, official hashtag of the show and main outlet through which the public voiced its outrage, and #parliamonesubito ('let's talk about it now'), the parallel hashtag launched by the Non una di meno feminist network in response to the event.

These cases are different from the ones presented in the previous chapter because of three factors. Firstly, both of them emerged in conjunction with unfolding political events that could not be foreseen. That is to say, they clearly fall outside of the scope of the 'tweeted calendar of equality' mentioned several times throughout this work. Secondly, both these cases make reference to tweeted reactions that were not planned in advanced by any institution or social movement. Analysis will show that institutions and social movement quickly rose to the occasion and occupied nonetheless the center of the debate in both cases. However, it can be safely stated that both cases emerged as somewhat visible on social media because of the joint affective reaction of the wider

public (Papacharissi, 2015) and not because of behind the scenes ‘choreographic’ leadership (Gerbaudo, 2012). Thirdly, these cases present elements of what has been called ‘synoptic resistance’, i.e. a form of resistance in which ‘the many’ direct their gaze towards ‘the few’ in power and question their narratives (Kelsey & Bennett, 2014).

### **ECJ ruling over Case C-157/15: A ban on Muslim women?**

Following the scheme adopted thus far, I analyze in this section the tweeted narratives circulated at the selected discursive locations. I start by presenting some indicators of the size, scope, and spread of the data under analysis. Word frequency analysis and critical discourse analysis are reported in the sub-sections to follow.

#### *Presenting the sub-sample*

On March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2017, the European Court of Justice ruled on two cases brought forward by women residing in France who regularly wear the headscarf. These women were laid-off by their employers because of their open display of religious affiliation on the workplace. While the women argued that the termination of their employment constituted illegal discrimination based on religion, the Court ruled in favor of the defendants (i.e. the employers). The Court stated that there is no inherent discrimination in producing rules internal to a company that bar employees from openly displaying symbols of political, philosophical, or religious affiliation.

The decision of the ECJ was celebrated by far-right parties across Europe as a victory, while progressive forces voiced their concern regarding the repercussions that the ruling was likely to have for Muslim residents of the Union. For the purposes of this chapter, I gathered Twitter data from three hashtags directly referring to the ECJ decision over a time span of two weeks, (14 March – 27 March 2017). These hashtags are, namely, #muslimwomenban, (2,048 tweets) #hijabban (1,933 tweets), and #headscarfban (635 tweets). What follows outlines some of the key features of the 4,616 between tweets and retweets in the dataset under observation.

The hashtags under consideration for this section present elements of continuity with what was discussed so far. #Muslimwomenban presents temporal features that are coherent with what was discussed in Chapter 8 regarding #saynostopvaw and #nonunadimeno. That is to say, after a first surge in activity was achieved on the date of the ECJ ruling, a second peak in activity is registered on March 20<sup>th</sup>. More granular analysis suggests the presence of some behind the scenes

concertation leading up to a physical protest in Brussels and a virtual protest on social media for that very date.

A conversation with a member of the Brussels-based organization ENAR (European Network against Racism) uncovered that the #muslimwomenban was indeed devised and choreographed by a group of feminist and anti-racist organizations based in the wider ecology of EU-level policymaking and lobbying. Thus, this first hashtag might be said to resemble more closely the dynamics of concerted campaign rather than spontaneous affective reactions to unfolding events. The other two hashtags selected for this chapter, namely #hijabban and #headscarfban, have a temporal distribution resembling those discussed for #EU4LGBTI and #omofobia. That is to say, after a peak in activity during the date of the ECJ ruling, activity dropped substantially and soon approached zero (see tables 12-15 below).

Once the three hashtags are considered in combination, it is possible to argue what follows. During an affective wave that followed the ECJ ruling, different publics gathered in a somewhat unorganized fashion to voice their outrage via different hashtags that were used alternatively or in combination. As many as 1,006 out of the 4,616 tweets analyzed in this section (around 22%) were tweeted during the day of the ECJ ruling. Of these 1,000+ tweets, however, some 259 were tweeted using #muslimwomenban, a hashtag devised by a group of choreographic leaders orchestrating a physical and virtual protest. This mobilization took place soon thereafter and sparked the highest peak in activity detected for this part of the study. Indeed, 1,733 of the tweets gathered were posted during the 19<sup>th</sup> or the 20<sup>th</sup> of March, i.e. in the lead-up to the mobilization. This might suggest a crucial role on behalf of choreographic leaders; a role that at least in this case surpasses that of unorganized affective public engagement.

Table 12 -#Muslimwomenban,  
number of tweets over time (days)

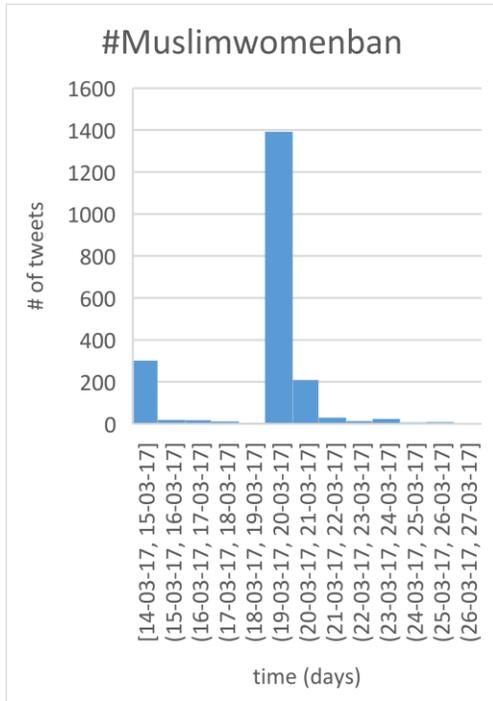


Table 13 - #Hijabban,  
number of tweets over time (days)

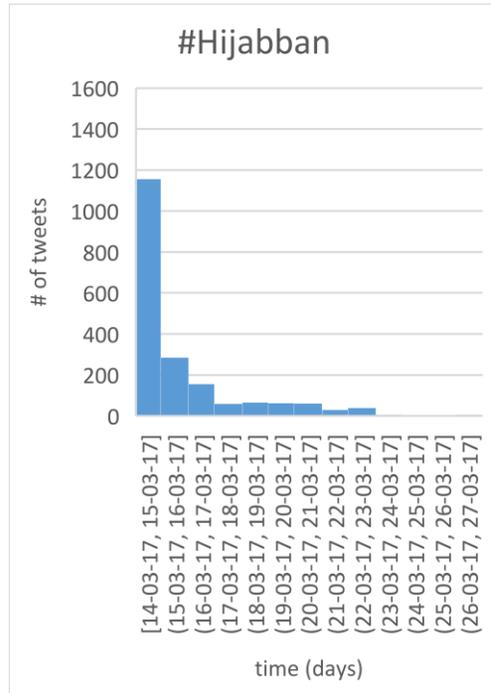


Table 14 - #Headscarfban,  
number of tweets over time (days)

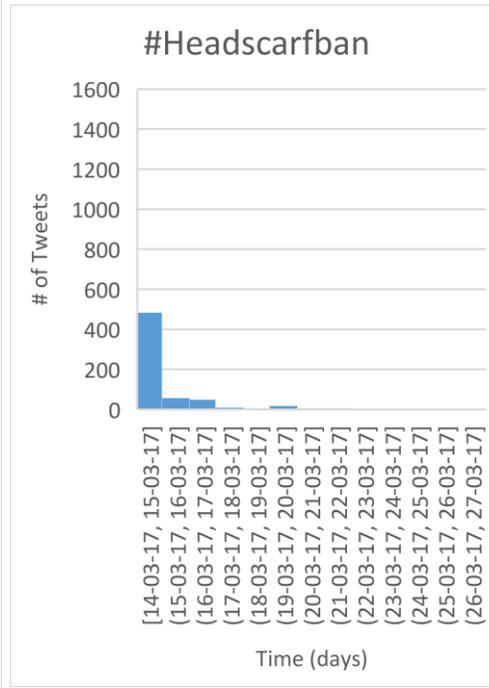
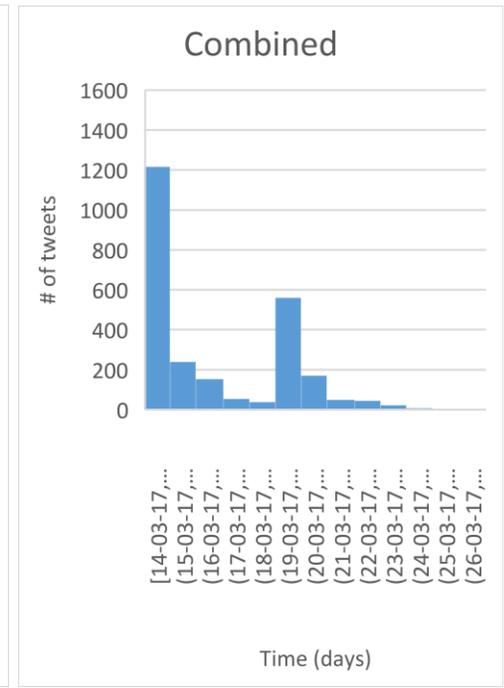


Table 15 - Combined,  
number of tweets over time (days)



Still considering the three hashtags in aggregation, it is interesting to notice that the most popular content was produced by voices that at least in theory seem to speak from the subject position of the Muslim ‘other’. Five of the ten most popular tweets in the sub-corpus under scrutiny for this section were in the Turkish language. Three of them were produced by the Turkish association ‘Kadın ve Demokrasi Derneği’ (KADEM, tweeting @kademorgtr), roughly translating to ‘Women and Democracy Association’. The other two were produced by documentary director and child right advocate Tülay Gökçimen (tweeting @ TlayGkimen). The remaining tweets presented in table 16 and entering the list of the ten most popular ones were produced respectively by a TV host and producer (@SayedModarresi), a relatively well-known photojournalist (@Sara\_\_Firth), a private users (@PrivateUser1), a publically involved scholar and activist (@DrSuad), and an account that is no longer active (@TheDesertDO).

Table 16 - Combined, users producing the most retweeted tweets

User	Description	# RTs
<b>kademorgtr</b>	Women’s rights organization	382
<b>TlayGkimen</b>	Documentary film director	323
<b>TlayGkimen</b>	Documentary film director	299
<b>kademorgtr</b>	Women’s rights organization	245
<b>SayedModarresi</b>	TV Host	224
<b>Sara__Firth</b>	Photo-journalist	147
<b>PrivateUser</b>	Private user	114
<b>DrSuad</b>	Scholar and activist	104
<b>kademorgtr</b>	Women’s rights organization	90
<b>TheDesertDO</b>	Inactive	70

### *Word frequency analysis*

The internal diversity of the event under scrutiny in this section provided several challenges for the production of meaningful word frequency analysis. As mentioned above, #muslimwomenban was slightly more popular than the other two hashtags, at least during the timespan under consideration, with 2,049 between tweets and re-tweets gathered for this study.

#hijabban follows with some 1,933 between tweets and retweets. #Headscarfban was the least popular hashtag among the three, with 636 between tweets and retweets.

The #muslimwomenban dataset is centrally dominated by Turkish-speaking organizations that staged protests in Brussels, probably through the support of behind the scenes choreographic leaders operating in the wider ecology of Brussels-based advocacy groups. The most frequently occurring word in this part of the corpus is, unsurprisingly, the English speaking hashtag in object (2,039 occurrences). The Twitter handles of some of these organizations also feature prominently, hinting to a large portion of the dataset being retweets of their content. Examples of these are @kademorgtr (1,043 occurrences), @esarea (367 occurrences), and @tlaygkimen (326 occurrences).

In light of the popularity of the tweets of these organizations and the impact of retweets in the corpus under scrutiny, many of the most frequent words are in Turkish (virtually all of the words appearing more than 100 times). Rough translations of the most frequent words seem to suggest a focus on three main areas, and namely religious rights, European-ness, and woman-ness. Words referring human rights and religious rights include ‘human’ [insan] (465 occurrences, third most frequent), ‘people’ [insanlar] (407 occurrences, sixth most frequent), ‘religious’ [dini] (405 occurrences, seventh most frequent), ‘not be forced’ [zorlanamaz] (385 occurrences, ninth most frequent), and ‘right’ [hakki] (385 occurrences, tenth most frequent) all appear among the ten most frequent ones, with examples of relatable words de facto taking over much of the dataset. ‘Europe’ [avrupa] features prominently as the fifth most frequent words in this part of the corpus, with 419 occurrences, while the only hashtag co-occurring with #muslimwomenban more than 100 times is #ECJ (134 occurrences). Woman-ness is perhaps less prominent but nonetheless present: ‘women’ [kadinlara] and ‘women’ (in English) appear 244 and 135 times respectively.

The situation at #hijabban is not particularly different. However, English is the dominant language, suggesting that the hashtag probably had as its intended audience a wider English-speaking public, possibly including EU institutions. The most frequent word is #Hijabban (1,933 occurrences). Other hashtags co-occur in a fashion resembling that detected in other cases scrutinized in this work. These include #hijab (301 occurrences, third most frequent word), #islamophobia (267 occurrences, fourth most frequent word), #Europe (106 occurrences, twenty-first most frequent word), and #myhijabdoesnotpreventme (104 occurrences, twenty-second most

frequent word). The only Twitter handles appearing with frequency are those of @sayedmodarresi and of @drsquad; that is, those of two users producing particularly popular tweets in the dataset.

The overall impression is that of a discussion that focused on labor rights and civil rights (rather than religious rights), with gender equality and European-ness acting as background issues. Aside from the most popular hashtags, words such as ‘different’ (199 occurrences, seventh most frequent), ‘bigoted’ (195 occurrences, eighth most frequent), ‘misogyny’ (also 195 occurrences), and ‘system’ (also 195 occurrences) seem to construct the issue in terms of discrimination against individual freedom. Words such as ‘work’ (139 occurrences, fourteenth most frequent) and ‘workplace’ (137 occurrences, sixteenth most frequent) might corroborate this focus on right suggesting that the issue is to some extent being frames as a labor market dispute.

The focus on religious right is in no way dismissed, as proved by the prominence of the already mentioned #hijab and #Islamophobia as well as words such as ‘Muslim’ (186 occurrences, eleventh most frequent), ‘hijab’ (52 occurrences, thirteenth most frequent), ‘religion’ (123 occurrences, eighteenth most frequent), and ‘religious’ (110 occurrences, nineteenth most frequent). The focus on Europe is somewhat less evident and mostly signaled by the presence of the already mentioned #Europe (106 occurrences, twentieth most frequent). The extent to which there is an explicit focus on womanhood is unclear. ‘Women’ is indeed the most popular word in the dataset after the hashtag in object (308 occurrences) but, aside from misogyny (mentioned above), is the only word specifically making reference to womanhood. However, this might be due to the fact that discussion over veiling practices to some extent assume ‘women’ as its subjects.

For what concerns the substantially less popular #headscarfban, its features resemble those of #hijabban. Aside from the hashtag in object, the Twitter handles of @Sara\_firth and @ENARIRI (two of the users producing popular tweets) appear prominently as the eighth and nineteenth most frequent words. Other hashtags co-occurring with the one in object include #ECJ (135 occurrences, twelfth most frequent), #muslim (39 occurrences, seventeenth most frequent), #myhijabdoesnotpreventme (30 occurrences, twenty-seventh most frequent), #EU (33 occurrences, twenty-fourth most frequent) and #headscarf (27 occurrences, twenty-ninth most frequent). The high frequency of words such as ‘ban’ (196 occurrences, second most frequent), ‘ruling’ (48 occurrences), ‘ECJ’ (39 occurrences, eighteenth most frequent), in combination with some of the above mentioned hashtags, seem to suggest a narrower focus on specifically

addressing the ECJ decision. All the issues discussed by at #muslimwomenban and #hijabban are also present, but with low frequency due to the smaller sample under consideration.

Before moving on to more granular discussion it is worth considering that, once combined, the most popular words across the three hashtags mostly come from the Turkish-speaking pool of #muslimwomenban. This might signal that, once again, behind the scenes coordination is a determinant factor together with pre-existing popularity in determining what messages happen to achieve broad re-circulation on social media.

### *Critical discourse analysis*

The tweeted response to the ECJ decision in favor of employers took different forms depending on what hashtag was adopted. This is particularly true for the most popular tweets. Less popular ones seemed to use the three hashtags here analyzed either in conjunction or interchangeably. The three instances of aggregated conversation are substantially overlapping in the topics they treat, perhaps with the exception of the coordinated action via #muslimwomenban.

### #Muslimwomenban: Choreographing action, defining the borders of Europe

Considering that I am not a Turkish speaker, offering a linguistic analysis of the material circulated at #muslimwomenban proved to be rather challenging. It was my decision to attempt a short commentary on the most popular tweet of the campaign and complement it with broader reflections on the possible reasons for such a strong prominence of Turkish-speaking users in the dataset under consideration. These reflections are further corroborated by a quick overview of some examples tweeted in English at #MuslimWomeBan.

The most popular tweet posted at the hashtag in object was produced by the women's rights group Kadin ve Demokrasi Dernegi (KADEM), roughly translating to Women and Democracy Association. KADEM is an Istanbul-based organization that, however, has branches in all major Turkish cities. The organization enjoys the support of the Turkish government as well as the personal support of the family of Turkey's President Erdogan: Sümeyye Erdoğan Bayraktar (the President's daughter) is one of their executive board members. The tweet roughly reads as follows:

Don't you think that it is Europe that really needs a lesson on human rights?

#muslimwomenban

[embeds link to picture that will not be analyzed here]<sup>86</sup>

(@kademorgtr, Women's rights association, 24 March 2017)

As mentioned above, a close linguistic analysis of this message is way beyond my language skills. However, from the translation available above<sup>87</sup> it is possible to make some speculations. KADEM is positioning itself as a speaking subject posing a question to its audience. The positionality that KADEM adopts is that of an entity that exists outside of the boundaries of 'Europe'. Once achieved this spatial positioning, KADEM wonders whether it is 'Europe' rather than its own territorial space (possibly, Turkey) to be 'really' in need of a lesson on human rights. By posing this question, KADEM is operating a reversal of some pre-existing order of discourse in which its own territorial space is commonly treated as the one in need of lessons on human rights. The tweet is complemented with a picture bearing Turkish-language text (light brown font on black background for the top half, opposite colors for the bottom half). The text prompts the reader towards taking a stance against Europe's measures vis-à-vis Islam, defined as racist and fascist. In light of the limitations listed above, I will make no attempt to further analysis.

This tweet is a good example of how the issue of veiling in public spaces has been crucial in the last decades for the definition of Europe as a community of values as well as Europe as a geo-political space. Europe has not yet come to terms with the tension between the allegedly secular ethos of some of its declared values (e.g. democracy, justice) and a not-so-covert identification with a community of nations that share Christianity as one of their fundamental features (Bail, 2008; Allievi, 2012). This tension has time and again posed the question of the potential place of Muslim-majority countries within the European Union and, by extension, within the imagined boundaries of 'Europe' (Narbone and Tocci, 2007; Aydın-Düzgüt and Tocci, 2015).

Turkey's negotiations for accession to the EU have now been a battlefield for these tensions for almost two decades (since 1999). From a strictly geographical point of view, Turkey is indeed a European country; a factor that makes it eligible for EU membership unlike countries that are outside of geographically defined 'Europe'. Furthermore, the predecessor of the Turkish nation-

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<sup>86</sup> Sizce de insan hakları dersine asıl ihtiyacı olan Avrupa değil mi? #Muslimwomenban

<sup>87</sup> A Turkish native speaker colleague from the GRACE project kindly accepted to translate the tweet for me as well as offer a summary of the text in the picture embedded therein.

state, the Ottoman Empire, has historically been one of the major players in European politics throughout modern and contemporary European history.

If the EU is a community of nations bound by secularism and respect for the rule of law, Turkey should face no more obstacles to accession than the countries that joined the Union in 2004 and 2007. If the EU is a community of nations bound by Christianity, then a Muslim-majority population of 80+ million might be indeed a disqualifying factor for Turkey. Turkey's allegedly poor human rights record has been mentioned time and again as the cause of a slow accession procedure that now seems to have reached a definitive stalemate (Icoz and Martin, 2016). However, the resurgence of identity politics in Europe offers ground to argue that Turkey's exclusion for EU membership has to do more with ethno-religious identity than anything else.

Once set in the above context, the tweet posted by KADEM offers a window into how macro-political processes have repercussions at the individual level in relation to the issue at stake, and namely veiling in public spaces. KADEM tweet produces Europe as a space characterized by hypocrisy in light of the fact that it excludes some nations from joining its ranks on the ground of poor human rights records while it simultaneously discriminates against its female Muslim residents. Women's freedom to wear the veil on the workplace is therefore turned from a labor dispute into an issue concerning the boundaries of 'Europe' as a community of values. To put it differently, labor disputes regarding Islamic veiling have the uncomfortable effect of foregrounding the never-resolved tension between secularism and Christianity as founding European values, insofar as it forces 'Europe' to define what embodiments can be said to be 'European' and, therefore, protected by European norms against discrimination.

This tension is also captured in some of the (less popular) tweets in the English language that were produced by Turkey-based commentators as well as EU-based ones. Among these, a relevant tweet was posted by journalist Selami Haktan via his English-speaking account:

Europe can't afford to exclude Muslim women if it stands up for gender  
equality & anti-racism #ECJ #muslimwomenban  
(@slmhktn\_eng, journalist, 14 March 2017)

This tweet hits the core of the issue. 'Europe' is in this case personified and foregrounded as the entities predicating 'exclusion' on a passivated other made of 'Muslim women'. The second

part of the sentence, however, qualifies this statement by arguing that the exclusion of Muslim women is something that Europe can't afford without surrendering some of its most vocally declared values such as gender equality and anti-racism. While the statement in object can be said to be valid in all cases, the hashtags at the end of the tweet clarify that it was issued on the occasion of the ECJ decision regarding veiling on the workplace.

#### #Hijabban: English language and irony

The second of the hashtags here analyzed, namely #hijabban, gathered reactions to the ECJ decision that were mostly in the English language, although often enough from a Muslim standpoint. On the one hand, many tweets voiced concerns that were similar to the ones described in the previous sub-section. On the other hand, tweets posted at #hijabban seem to also encompass more bottom-up commentary that involved humor as a strategy of de-legitimization for the decision of the ECJ.

An example of the former is a popular tweet posted at #hijabban and produced by the account of Su'ad Abdul Khabeer (@drsudad), academic, activist, and self-declared public intellectual. In her post, Su'ad comments that:

This EU #hijabban is just further proof of how secular liberalism is ALL ABOUT religion rather than not about it at all  
(@drsudad, academic and activist, 14 March 2017)

As hinted above, Su'ad's tweet explicitly aims at foregrounding the tension between secularism and Christianity as founding values of the EU. Through descriptive action, Suad defines 'secular liberalism' as an excuse to covertly practice religious discrimination and 'the EU hijab ban' as proof substantiating this claim.

Irony was widely used at #hijabban in order to perform similar discursive work to highlight the Christian bias of the ECJ's allegedly secularizing decision. For example, an account that has been deactivated commented that:

Mary, the mother of Jesus, peace be upon her, would not be allowed to work in Europe today #hijabban  
(@TheDesertDO, deactivated account, 14 March 2017)

This post foregrounds the religious figure of Mary of Nazareth. At the beginning of the tweet, she is revered because of her crucial role to Christianity as mother of Jesus. However, Mary is also presented as a headscarf-wearing Middle Eastern woman. Consequently, the speaking subject of this sentence can confidently claim that Mary's headscarf would prevent her from accessing the labor market in today's Europe. In turn, Europe is produce as a space where allegedly secularizing decisions produce repercussions that are paradoxically discriminatory towards women, whose innocence concerning the issue at stake is taken to the extreme via reference to the symbolically 'immaculate' figure of Mary of Nazareth.

In this post, Mary's figure assumes a twofold characterization. On the one hand, she retains the religious connotation of Christian narratives. On the other hand, she is ascribed a socio-historical background that is factually accurate and therefore troubles the stability of her figure for Euro-Christian identity. In less than twenty words, this tweet ironically points out what follows. Firstly, Europe's Christian identity has Middle Eastern roots. Secondly and connectedly, establishing hard lines between a Euro-Christian 'us' and a Middle Eastern-Muslim 'them' has paradoxical consequences. Thirdly, decisions taken in the name of the values of secular liberalism such as the one by the ECJ can end up contradicting other declared EU values such as non-discrimination and gender equality.

In the posts tweeted at #hijabban, the overall impression is that the decision of the ECJ was constructed as having more to do with religion than with secularism. Another example pointing in this direction is the ironic post by webradio host Raz (@raztweets), in which he states that:

Europe is officially more obsessed with the hjaab than Muslim Twitter. Quite the achievement. #Hijabban  
(@raztweets, webradio host, 15 March 2017)

Europe is here personified again and defined in terms of its obsession with the hijab. This obsession is compared with that of another personified entity: 'Muslim Twitter'. From the tone of the author, it is quite clear that he believes that 'Muslim Twitter' is actually very obsessed with veiling. It is unclear whether this is because of a large volume of communication on the issue by Muslim Twitter or because the speaker considers Muslim Twitter to be conservative. Whatever the case, the author is convinced that Europe obsession with veiling surpasses that of Muslim

Twitter; a level of obsession that is in his view hard to achieve. This post uses naked irony to point out that, regardless of its secular façade, Europe is extremely concerned for the presence of Muslim bodies within its boundaries.

### #Headscarfban: Irony and women's bodily autonomy

Discussion at #headscarfban seems to present slightly different features. While irony remained a crucial element, the focus seems to be substantially more oriented toward affirming women's bodily autonomy. The most popular tweet retrieved for this part of the study, produced by photojournalist Sara Firth, states that:

'If we are going to start telling people what to wear, maybe we should ban suits'... #headscarfban

[broken link to picture or newspaper article that could not be retrieved]

(@Sara\_\_Firth, photojournalist, 14 March 2017)

In this tweet, Firth is quoting someone's comment regarding the ECJ decision, as clarified by the inverted commas at the beginning and end of the sentence. The authorship of the quote would probably be accessible via the link. Unfortunately, the link is broken, leading to an error page. Nonetheless, it is clear that the author is speaking in favor of women's autonomy of choice over their apparel. The author of the quote is ironically pointing out that, if there is any piece of apparel that should be banned, that should be male business suits. By stating that suits should be banned, the author is pointing at 'respectable', upper-class, and probably white men as the source of the problem at stake. The issue of open display of religious symbols on the work place is trivialized into irrelevance, while the issue of upper-class men being able to rule over other people's bodily autonomy is foregrounded and ascribed weight.

Another example of this trend comes in a tweet by a student-activist adopting the screen name of Nimah A (@MsNemah). The author ironically engages with the 'World Have Your Say' account of the BBC network; an account specifically designed for public engagement and crowdsourced journalism.<sup>88</sup> Nimah A comments on the Headscarf Ban by asking:

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<sup>88</sup> The initiative supporting it was running at the time of the data gathering but it is no longer running at the time of this writing.

Why do we always feel the need to tell women what to wear? @BBC\_WHYS  
#headscarfban  
(@MsNemah, student-activist, 14 March 2017)

In this example, the veil is presented as a regular piece of apparel completely decoupled from its religious significance. This necessarily implies that the ECJ decision is no longer tied to the display of religious symbols on the workplace. Rather, it is an attempt at regulating women's bodily presence in public spaces by a patriarchal system of oppression.

Another poignant example of irony at #hedscarfban was posted by Writer and activist Shelina Janmohamed (@loveinheadscarf), who commented that:

One is not amused #headscarfban #ecj

Figure 22 - picture embedded in the tweet above



(@loveinheadscarf, writer and activist, 14 March 2017)

The picture attached to the tweet is a relatively recent close-up of Queen Elizabeth II of England wearing a headscarf and looking towards the camera with a grudge. The effect obtained by this multimodal message is similar to that of the post having Mary of Nazareth as its protagonist, described above. It points out that headscarves are in no way foreign to Euro-Christian culture and

that banning them from the workplace can produce paradoxes that would end up discriminating against unlikely figures such as the Queen of England.

As a concluding note, it is worth mentioning that #headscarfban gathered voices that mostly tweeted from the British Islands in general and from the Republic of Ireland in particular. This is possibly due to the social media campaigning carried out by the Irish chapter of the European Network Against Racism, who widely used #headscarfban during the sampled timespan.

### *Section summary*

In this section, I covered the narratives circulated at a set of hashtags making reference to the ECJ decision upholding employers' right to ban religious symbols in the workplace; a decision with clear implications over Islamic veiling. When presenting the sub-sample, I argued that three different hashtags referring to the issue present different features that probably depend on different levels of behind-the-scenes concertation. In all three cases, the public that gathered to protest against the decision of the ECJ mostly spoke from the subject position of a Muslim 'other'. Much of the narrative revolved around some of the internal contradiction of declared 'European values', in particular those contradictions that emerge when liberal secularism and Christianity collide. By ruling against hijab-wearing Muslim women in the name of neoliberal secularism, the ECJ perhaps involuntarily visibilized the Christian bias of these values and their discriminatory effects on Muslim residents of Europe.

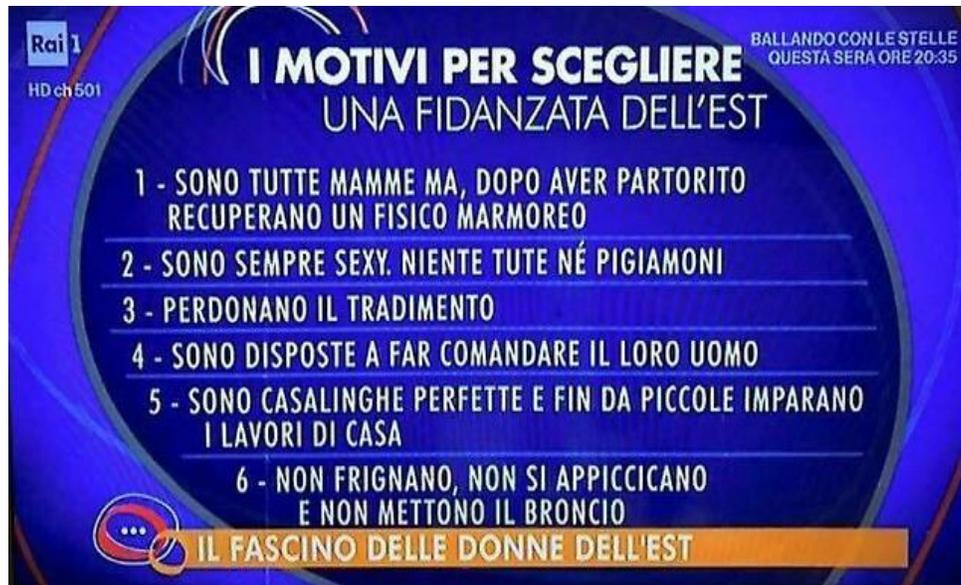
### **Parliamone sabato, Parliamone subito**

On March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2017, Italian public television channel RAI Uno aired what ended up being the last episode of a relatively popular talk show called *Parliamone... Sabato* ['let's talk about it... on Saturday']. The show used to air in the primetime afternoon slot (4.40 – 6.45 p.m.) and enjoy relatively broad viewership (on average, 1.5 million viewers per episode) (Zacconi, 2017). Despite its success, the show was abruptly taken off the air after widespread outrage for the content of its last airing. The last episode discussed 'the romantic preferences of Italian men', with a particular focus on why do Italian men seem to fantasize of Eastern European women as their ideal partners. The show identified six imagined reasons for this fantasy, and namely that:

- They are all mothers, but after giving birth they manage to regain a sculpture-like body;

- They are always sexy: no sweatpants or large pajamas;
- When it comes to cheating, they are forgiving;
- They are willing to let their men be in charge;
- They are perfect housewives and they learn housework from an early age;
- They do not wine, they are not clingy, and they do not hold grudges.

Figure 23 - The infographic aired by *Parliamone... Sabato*



Soon after the above infographic went on air, a portion of the Italian public mobilized to oppose its narrative. The public articulated three key demands: an apology for the sexism and racism involved, the resignation of the journalist hosting the show (Paola Perego), and the cancellation of the show from the schedule of public TV networks. Interestingly, all of the demands were granted by the administration of RAI. One of the spaces where public mobilization took place was #parliamonesabato, the official social media hashtag of the show. During the two weeks following the last episode of the show, more than 15,000 messages were tweeted or retweeted at #parliamonesabato. The Non una di meno feminist network also seized the opportunity to support its own engagement with the issue at stake through a parallel hashtag, and namely #parliamonesubito ('let's talk about it now').

Unfortunately, I did not manage to gather data from #parliamonesabato and #parliamonesubito from the very day in which the last episode of the show was aired (18<sup>th</sup> of March 2017). Rather, I retrieved data only from the day in which the decision to take the show off the air

was announced (20<sup>th</sup> of March 2017). As unfortunate as this might be, such an occurrence is not incoherent with the ethnographic and ‘on the spot’ character of this project. After close scrutiny and consultations, it was my decision to follow through with the inclusion of this case study despite its slightly delayed timing. The decision is mostly due to a belief that the two-day gap does not hinder the power of the arguments advanced.

Table 18 - #Parliamonesabato, number of tweets over time (days)

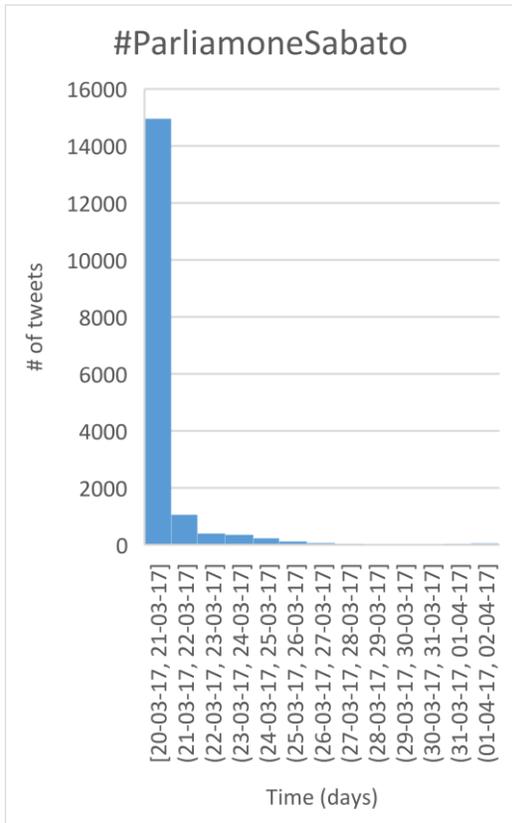


Table 19 - #Parliamonesubito, number of tweets over time (days)

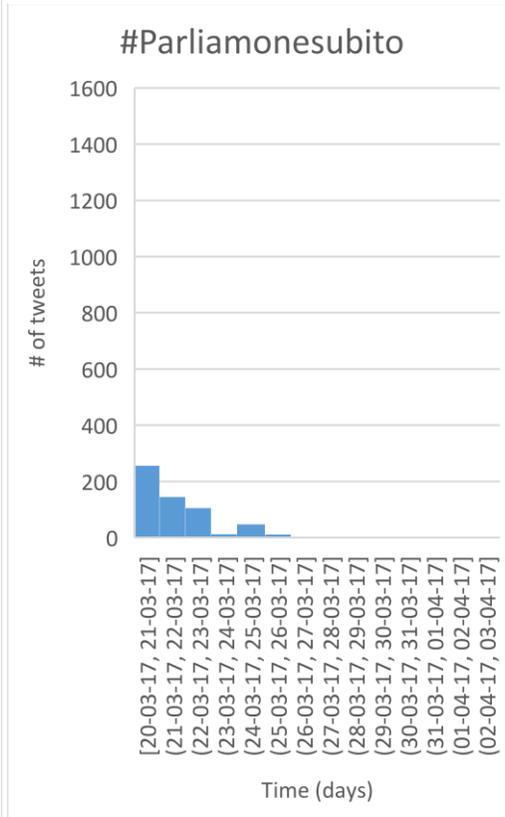
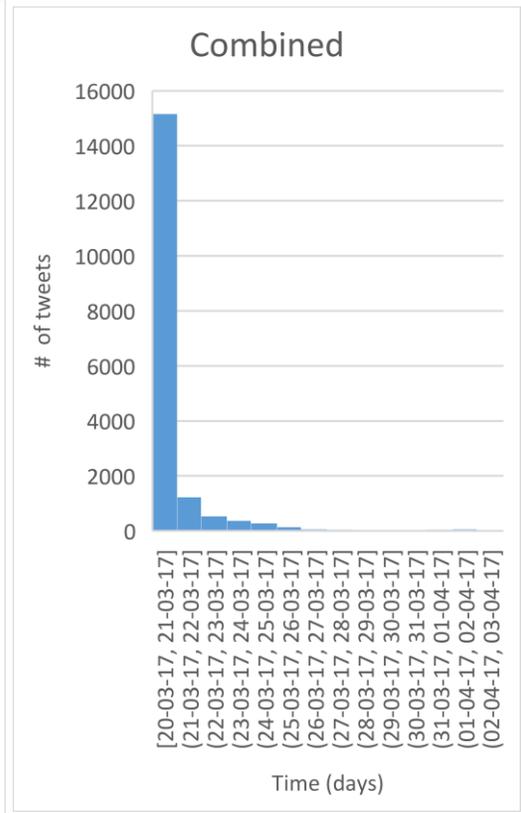


Table 20 - Combined, number of tweets over time (days)



The temporal distribution of activity at #parliamonesabato and at #parliamonesubito is coherent with what was described above. For what concerns the former, a spike in activity is registered in the earliest part of the dataset, with a substantial drop in activity soon thereafter. For what concerns the latter, the initial surge in activity is followed by a drop and a slight secondary hump on 24 March, day in which Non una di meno organized a sit-in in front of the RAI’s headquarter in Rome. However, once the two hashtags are combined, the rather small number of

tweets gathered at #parliamonesubito makes it so that the spike in activity on March 24<sup>th</sup> has almost no effect on the overall distribution of tweets over time.

A closer look at the most retweeted messages in the dataset shows strong homogeneity among the producers. Satire dominated the discussion. The three most popular tweets were all from satirical blogs or commentators (@PamelaFerrara, @\_the\_Jackal, and @GianniCuperloPD), and so was the sixth most retweeted one (by @pisto\_goal). Mainstream news outlets also enjoyed broad popularity in terms of retweets, producing the fourth, eighth, and tenth most retweeted posts in the corpus (respectively by @raiofficialnews, journalist @fabiofr, and @repubblicait).

Table 21 - Combined, users producing the most retweeted tweets

Username	Description	#RTs
<b>PamelaFerrara</b>	Satirical blogger	573
<b>_the_jackal</b>	Satirical blog	362
<b>GianniCuperIoPD</b>	Satirical blog	331
<b>Raiofficialnews</b>	Mainstream news outlet	233
<b>lauraboldrini</b>	Progressive politician	222
<b>pisto_go</b>	Satirical blog	194
<b>nonunadimeno</b>	Feminist social movement	184
<b>fabiofr</b>	Journalist	178
<b>cris_cersei</b>	Anti-equality blogger	172
<b>repubblicait</b>	Mainstream news outlet	170

Three other users that entered the top ten of most retweeted posts, each of them coming from a different strand of public life. The fifth most retweeted post was produced by the (at the time) Speaker of the House Laura Boldrini (@lauraboldrini). The seventh most retweeted tweet was produced by the account of the Non una di meno network (@nonunadimeno). Finally, the ninth most popular tweet was produced by an anti-equality blogger (@cris\_cersei) who exploited the visibility of the issue at hand to advocate against a possible law on surrogate motherhood.

Some 17,000+ messages were tweeted or retweeted at #parliamonesabato over the timespan under consideration. These messages were produced by a total of 3,812 unique users. As

little as 588 tweets or retweets were posted at #parliamonesubito. Of these, a wide majority was centrally produced by Non una di meno's nation-wide account (@nonunadimeno) and its Milanese chapter (@nonunadimenoMI): 287 and 51 tweets respectively. These numbers can provide a sense of how narrow the public participating in the protest actually was and inform further claims about the relevance of social media mobilization in obtaining the cancellation of the show.

As it was the case for #omofobia (see Chapter 9), #parliamonesabato presents a niche of anti-equality bloggers. In this case, however, the niche was found to be somewhat less marginal than the one present at #omofobia. It could be speculated that the slightly more controversial character of the issue at stake and the more marked role of affect might have prompted more anti-equality voices to join the conversation.

#### *Word frequency analysis*

An exploratory look at the most recurring words in the corpus tweeted at #parliamonesabato and #parliamonesubito shows what follows. Besides the obvious primacy of the hashtag #parliamonesabato as the most recurrent word in the corpus, there is a clear prominence of 'Eastern European women' [donne dell'Est], appearing as a cluster as many as 1,811 times. Based on this, it might be already possible to state that 'Eastern European women' are the object of the tweeted discussion.

Word frequency also points out that the other social actors involved are clearly the TV network RAI and the TV hostess running the show Paola Perego. The name of the TV network appears either as 'RAI' (2,201 occurrences) or as '#rai' (1,803 occurrences) as the third and fifth most frequent words respectively. 'Perego' features 1,215 times in the corpus (eight most frequent), her first name 'Paola' appears 873 times in the corpus (fourteenth most frequent) the hashtag #paolaperego and #perego appear respectively 773 and 742 times (seventeenth and eighteenth most frequent), and her twitter handle @paolaperego appears 600 times. In light of the above, it is possible to speculate that the protest tweeted at #parliamonesabato strongly emphasized the impersonal responsibility of the TV network RAI. Even more prominently, the public seems to hold TV hostess Paola Perego personally responsible for leading a show in which sexist and racist content was unproblematically presented to as many as 1.5 million viewers.

The list of most recurring words in the corpus contains some noteworthy homogeneity for what concerns verbs. There seems to be a strong emphasis on the action of ‘shutting down’, either at the present tense (‘chiude’, 1,175 occurrences, tenth most frequent), as an adjective (‘chiuso’, 1,143, twelfth most frequent), as a substantive (‘chiusura’ 552, twenty-eighth most frequent), or as an infinitive (‘chiudere’ 478, thirty-second most frequent). The centrality of the gesture of ‘shutting down’ the TV show might hint to a strong prominence of descriptive action in the corpus, possibly in the form of journalistic reportages on the final act of the scandal: the shutting down of *Parliamone Sabato* on Monday, March 20<sup>th</sup>.

The situation at the parallel hashtag *#parliamonesubito* by the feminist network *Non una di meno* shows a substantially different picture. Arguably, this hashtag served the twofold purpose of informing the followers of the movement regarding its stance vis-à-vis the issue while simulatenously inviting them to join the sit-in in front of the RAI headquarter on March 24<sup>th</sup>. *#parliamonesabato* (the main hashtag, appearing 267 times, third most frequent) appears often in this part of the dataset, perhaps because of a wish to peg the parallel hashtag to the main one. *#RAI* is the only other prominent hashtag in the list of most occurring words (81 occurrences, nineteenth most frequent). The only Twitter handles featuring prominently are those of *@nonunadimeno* (344 occurrences, second most frequent) and *@nonunadimenoMI* (63 occurrences, twenty-sixth most frequent), signaling a fairly centralized communication from the network to its followers, who mostly retweeted its messages.

Words such as ‘rai’ (182 occurrences), ‘sexism’ [sessismo] (179 occurrences, sixth most frequent), ‘racism’ [razzismo] (176 occurrences, seventh most frequent), ‘media’ (123 occurrences, fifteenth most frequent), ‘show’ (in English, 114 occurrences, eighteenth most frequent) suggest that *Non una di meno* is probably trying to construct the TV network RAI and its show as the venue for sexist and racist commentary. Words such as ‘all’ [tutte] (with a feminine suffix, 190 occurrences, fourth most frequent), ‘us’ [noi] (153 occurrences, ninth most frequent), ‘Wednesday’ [mercoledì] (170 occurrences, eighth most frequent), ‘Mazzini’ (148 occurrences, tenth most frequent), ‘h14’ (129 occurrences, thirteenth most frequent), ‘Rome’ [Roma] (74 occurrences, twenty-first most frequent), and ‘headquarter’ [sede] (71 occurrences, twenty-fourth most frequent) all suggest that *Non una di meno* widely circulated messages inviting its adherent to participate in the sit-in outside of the RAI headquarter in Rome via *#parliamonesabato*.

When considered in combination, the words that are frequent in #parliamonesubito get drowned by the substantially larger corpus of data gathered at #parliamonesabato. Indeed, the difference is stark, with the former gathering only 636 tweets while the latter comprising more than 17,000 between tweets and retweets. Nonetheless, my analysis will attempt to do justice to the link between the two, bringing examples from the communication of Non una di meno.

### *Critical discourse analysis*

Discussion at #parliamonesabato and #parliamonesubito was dominated by pre-existing opinion leaders. For the purposes of analysis in this chapter, I organized the data by groups of content producers, and namely: satirical accounts, mainstream news outlets, politicians, feminist voices, and anti-equality bloggers. This is because the dataset presented a high degree of homophily, that is, similarly characterized users spoke through very similar frames.

### Satirical accounts

A large part of the content circulated at #parliamonesabato was produced by a narrow group of satirical accounts that de-legitimized the sexist infographic of *Parliamone... Sabato* by comparing it to a wide number of other ‘lists’ of reasons to be romantically involved with countless categories of people. It is worth remembering that the original list constructs ‘Italian men’ as the ingroup of its narrative and ‘Eastern European women’ as a passivated group object of their sexualized romantic fantasies. The original infographic also backgrounds ‘Italian women’ as a group of passive bystanders that is unfit for the ‘choosing’ of ‘Italian men’.

The satirical narratives sampled for this chapter subvert the narrative therein implied, often by switching the positionality of the social groups involved. The most popular tweet in the dataset, for example, declares that:

The public awaits the sequel “reasons to choose [an affair with] an African [male] lover”... #Parliamonesabato, Rai Uno<sup>89</sup>  
[link to a picture of the original infographic, see Figure 25]  
(@PamelaFerrara, satirical blogger, 20 March 2017)

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<sup>89</sup> Grande attesa per il sequel "Perché scegliere un amante africano"... #Parliamonesabato, Rai Uno

The producer of this message openly challenges the male-bias of the original infographic by foregrounding an ingroup of ‘Italian women’ that ‘awaits’ a follow up episode of *Parliamone... Sabato* in which they would finally be the agents having reasons to choose an African [male] lover for an affair. ‘Italian men’ are now backgrounded as bystanders who are unfit for the choosing of Italian women because they fail to live up to the intentionally sexualized standard of African men.

Another similar example was produced by satirical group The Jackal (@\_the\_jackal), who posted a mock infographic outlining six ‘reasons to choose an Italian boyfriend’. The infographic was embedded as a picture to a tweet saying:

Here is a preview of the new inquiry by Paola Perego at #parliamonesabato:  
Do you agree?<sup>90</sup>

- If you show them as little as one boob, they’ll do whatever you want
- With that belly, no one will take him away from you
- They usually do not notice if you cheat on them
- You can make them believe they are in charge
- You won’t ever have to iron, wash, or cook: their mom is there to take care of that
- They wine, cling, and hold grudges, but only when their football team loses a match.

Figure 24 - picture embedded in the tweet above



(@\_the\_jackal, satirical blog, 20 March 2017)

<sup>90</sup> Un'anteprima della nuova inchiesta di Paola Perego a #Parliamonesabato  
Voi siete d'accordo?

The JackaL is here imagining an upcoming episode of *Parliamone... Sabato* in which the agentic group endowed with the prerogative of choosing their romantic partners is ‘women’ (perhaps ‘non-Italian women’). ‘Italian men’ are passivated as the object upon which this action is predicated. Differently from the original infographic or the example above, however, no group is presented as unworthy of being ‘chosen’.

These mock infographics feature representations of social groups that are highly gendered and sexualize. Firstly, heterosexuality is implied as a key feature of all the groups described in the original infographic as well as in the examples above. Secondly, all the examples present problematic depictions of romantic relationships as zero-sum games in which one group has the power to ‘choose’ over others and in which deceit is praised and compensated as a ‘winning’ strategy. Thirdly, ‘Eastern European women’ as well as ‘African [male] lovers’ are produced as romantically/sexually appealing ‘others’ for the broader in-group of ‘Italians’ through reference to racist stereotypes. Similarly, the latter example derives its irony from the use of intergenerational sexism towards a passivated category of women: mothers of Italian men. In sum, protest through irony at #parliamonesabato is not immune from sexism and racism on a par with the sexism/racism that triggered the tweeted protest in the first place.

### Mainstream news outlets

Aside from satirical commentary, a good portion of the posts tweeted at #parliamonesabato was produced by mainstream news outlets, journalists, and more or less independent bloggers. Despite relative popularity in terms of retweets, however, their messages were fairly dry. For example, the official Twitter outlet of the RAI public broadcasting network tweeted a rather detached comment that stated:

#Parliamonesabato shut down: ‘it contradicts the mission of public broadcasting service’<sup>91</sup> [link to news article]  
[embeds picture of the logo of RAI TV network that will not be analyzed]  
(@raiofficialnews, mainstream news outlet, 20 March 2017).

In a comparable fashion, left-leaning newspaper *La Repubblica* tweeted that:

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<sup>91</sup> Chiuso #Parliamonesabato: "Contraddice mission servizio pubblico"

#Rai shuts down the show #parliamonesabato because of the episode on the ‘six reasons to choose an Eastern European woman’ [link to news article]<sup>92</sup> (@repubblicait, mainstream news outlet, 20 March 2017).

The relevance of the action of ‘shutting down’ in both the examples above seems to confirm the impression that mainstream reporting on the issue mostly focused on its final acts. In both the above cases, the action of shutting down has as its object the show *Parliamone... Sabato*. In the former case, the shutting down is performed by some implicit source of authority that is also granted their own voice, as signaled by the reported speech presented thereafter and offering reasons to justify the action. In the latter case, it is the RAI television network that is foregrounded as the authority performing the shutting down of the show.

Both examples seem to offer relatively vague arguments for the shutting down of the show. The former example makes reference to the fact that the content of the show is in contradiction to the mission of public service broadcasting. The latter example is slightly more specific and makes reference to the content of the last episode as a cause for its removal from RAI Uno’s schedule. Both examples justify the decision through the topos of reality, insofar as the action in object (i.e. the shutting down of the show) is justified through a tautological reference to reality being the way it is (i.e. the content and the mission of the show do not align).

### Feminist networks and activists

Previous chapters dwelled at length on the vibrant season of feminist mobilization that started with Non una di meno’s first rally in November 2016. Thus, it should be unsurprising that Non una di meno participated in the protest tweeted at #parliamonesabato with several tweets. Among these, the most popular stated the following:

After censoring the women’s strike, Rai performs sexism and racism  
#parliamonesabato<sup>93</sup>  
(@nonunadimeno, feminist movement, 20 March 2017).

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<sup>92</sup> La #Rai chiude il programma #Parliamonesabato a causa della puntata sui "6 motivi per scegliere le donne dell'est

<sup>93</sup> Dopo aver censurato lo sciopero delle donne, la Rai fa sessismo e razzismo #parliamonesabato

Chapters 5 and 8 pointed out that Non una di meno consistently constructed its own subject position as that of a movement speaking on behalf of a collective ‘us’ made of ‘women’ who wish to take a stance against systemic oppression predicated upon them by an ‘other’ made of governmental and social ‘institutions’. Non una di meno has consistently taken a pro-migration stance that finds its origin in a belief that institutions predicate their oppression along multiple axes of discrimination. The above example offers further evidence to corroborate these claims. Reference to censorship in the first half of the tweet further produces the antagonism between the network and institutions, lamenting lack of coverage of its initiatives by public media broadcasting.

Non una di meno also launched the parallel hashtag #parliamonesubito to invite its adherents to a sit-in in front of the headquarters of RAI in Rome. In the most popular tweet gathered from the parallel hashtag, Non una di meno states that:

Wednesday at 14h, we’ll be the one hosting a talk show! #parliamonesubito, everyone [female suffix] at v. Mazzini to talk about media, sexism, and racism #parliamonesabato<sup>94</sup>

Figure 25 - picture embedded in the tweet above



(Non una di meno, feminist movement, 20 March 2017)

This post is noteworthy for two reasons. On the one hand, it is one further example of the way in which Non una di meno constructs its own subject position. The enunciating subject of the

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<sup>94</sup> Mercoledì h14 il talk show lo facciamo noi! #Parliamonesubito tutte a v. mazzini a parlare di media, sessismo e razzismo #Parliamonesabato

tweet is, once again, a collective ‘us’ made of ‘women’ (implicit in the female suffix in the second sentence) that stands in opposition to an ‘other’ composed of ‘institutions’, in this case objectified in the address of the headquarter of RAI in Viale Mazzini in Rome. On the other hand, this posts confirms many of the impressions that emerged from word frequency analysis as presented above. That is to say, the popularity of this and similar posts confirms that #parliamonesubito was mostly used to share information regarding the analog mobilization organized by Non una di meno for March 24<sup>th</sup>. It is also confirmed that #parliamonesubito and #parliamonesabato were used together in order to peg discussion of the former to the much more popular discussion of the latter.

### Politicians

Politicians from all currents seemed to agree on the outrageous character of the last episode of *Parliamone... Sabato* and voiced their dissent via its official hashtag. The (at the time) Speaker of the House Laura Boldrini voiced her concern in a tweet stating that:

There ought to be an immediate sanction from #Rai to the #Parliamonesabato Show. Never again can #women be treated on tv as if they were pets<sup>95</sup>  
(@lauraboldrini, former Speaker of the House, 20 March 2016)

In the first sentence, Boldrini draws legitimacy from her personal authority and compels RAI to sanction the show *Parliamone... Sabato*. The topos of urgency is clearly adopted in the sentence. Action should be taken immediately as a response to an event that lays outside of the control of the speaker. In the second sentence, Boldrini deploys again the topos of urgency when stating that sexism on public television can ‘never again’ be tolerated. For what concerns the representation of social actors, the social group ‘women’ is presented as the subject of a passive sentence in which an unidentified other predicates upon them the action of ‘treating as pets’. The space in which this action is performed is that of public TV broadcasting. Arguably, the choice of comparing women to pets in this tweet is not random, but rather an explicit attempt to foreground the dehumanizing character of sexist commentary.

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<sup>95</sup> Doveroso immediato provvedimento della #Rai su trasmissione #Parliamonesabato. Mai più #donne in televisione trattate come animali domestici

A similar example was tweeted by former Minister for Equal Opportunities Mara Carfagna (Center-right), who commented that:

#Rai should shut down #parliamonesabato after reportage that hinders the dignity of women and offends them. There must be a drastic decision targeted towards the board of the show <sup>96</sup>  
(@mara\_carfagna, former-Minister for Equal Opportunities, 20 March 2017)

The speaker draws from her personal authority to argue that RAI ‘should’ act and shut down #parliamonesabato. The topos of urgency is deployed again, as suggested by the sanctions should be ‘drastic’. In this example, ‘women’ are at the receiving hand of the action being represented. The reportage by *Parliamone... Sabato* performs the action of ‘hindering’ their dignity. Reference to dignity might hint to an evaluation of the reportage by *Parliamone... Sabato* as dehumanizing, thus resonating with the simile adopted by Boldrini.

One further example comes from Roberto Fico (M5S, populist/non-aligned), who at the time of the scandal presided the parliamentary commission for the monitoring of RAI Public Television. Fico tweeted that:

I’ll soon summon the Office of the President of RAI to discuss what happened at #parliamonesabato >> [link to post on Facebook] <sup>97</sup>  
(@Roberto\_Fico, President of the Parliamentary Commission for the Monitoring of RAI Public Television, 20 March 2017)

Much like his colleagues, Fico is drawing from his personal authority. In this case, however, the RAI television network is presented as the object upon which the speaker himself predicates the action of ‘summoning’. The verb ‘summoning’ does convey a certain degree of urgency, but this feeling is defused through the notable absence of any clear call for action and the use of the future tense. In the examples by Boldrini and Carfagna, actions had to be taken ‘now’ and be ‘drastic’. Fico’s own action is presented as scheduled to happen ‘soon’. RAI’s Presidency

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<sup>96</sup> #Rai chiuda #Parliamonesabato dopo servizio che lede dignità e offende le donne. Serve decisione drastica che coinvolga vertici programma

<sup>97</sup> Su quanto accaduto a #Parliamonesabato convocherà a breve ufficio di presidenza #VigilanzaRai

is summoned ‘to discuss what happened’, implying that there might even be no sanction at all. Overall, Fico’s is markedly less concerned with the event than his colleagues.

### Anti-equality voices

The example of #omofobia presented in the previous chapter pointed out that anti-equality voices often exploit the visibility of pro-equality discussions to push their own agenda. A similar trend was detected also in the case of #parliamonesabato. For example, a fairly popular tweet by anti-equality blogger Roger Halsted stated that:

Feminists [are] quacking [like ducks] because of #parliamonesabato but have nothing to say on the exploitation behind renting a uterus [Italian vernacular speech for surrogate motherhood]<sup>98</sup>

[embeds picture of the original infographic]

(@RogerHalsted, anti-equality blogger, 20 March 2017)

In this tweet, a social group defined as ‘feminists’ is presented in the act of showing concern for the content of *Parliamone... Sabato*. Simultaneously, those same ‘feminists’ are presented as showing no concern for a matter that, in the eyes of the speaker, is substantially more pressing: the possible introduction of a law on surrogate motherhood in Italy. ‘Feminists’ are foregrounded in this tweet, but only in an attempt to delegitimize their voice through an animalizing metaphor that presented them as ducks that don’t speak but ‘quack’.

Further delegitimization is achieved by arguing that their concerns are, according to the speaker, misplaced. In his view, the sexism of *Parliamone... Sabato* is of little relevance when compared to the allegedly exploitative practice of surrogate motherhood. Reference to surrogate motherhood might be linked to discussion over a possible law regulating surrogacy, currently illegal on the Italian territory. The impression that a law on surrogate motherhood would be detrimental on women’s rights is produced through the use of the degrading metaphor ‘renting a uterus’, common in vernacular Italian. Anti-equality blogger (@cris\_cersei) adopted a remarkably

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<sup>98</sup> Femministe che starnazzano per il programma #Parliamonesabato ma non hanno niente da dire sullo sfruttamento dell’utero in affitto...

similar argumentative structure in a tweet that happened to be the ninth most retweeted one in this part of the dataset, suggesting coordination or cross-contamination among anti-equality bloggers.

A slightly different example was produced instead by anti-equality group ‘Sentinelle in piedi’, already encountered when discussing anti-equality voices at #omofobia in the previous chapter. In this case, the group tweeted that:

#Parliamonesabato jokes on Eastern European women and gets immediately shut down. When the women of #FamilyDay got humiliated on Mediaset no one flinched. [link to tweet by Catholic Church-affiliated news outlet]<sup>99</sup>  
(@sentinipiedi, anti-equality group, 23 March 2017).

The show *Parliamone... Sabato* is here foregrounded as the subject of the action represented. The sexism of its reportage is trivialized as ‘joking’, while Eastern European women are passivated as the object of the joke. Thereafter, *Parliamone... Sabato* is on the receiving hand of a passive sentence in which the show ‘gets shut down’ by an unnamed agent. In the second sentence, ‘the women of #FamilyDay’ (a yearly initiative promoting conservative ‘Catholic’ family values) are also on the receiving hand of a passive sentence in which they suffer humiliation by an unspecified show that aired at some point in the past on Berlusconi-owned private TV network Mediaset. According to Sentinelle in piedi, ‘no one flinched’ in that occasion.

The above tweet is lamenting the selective outrage that the Italian public and authorities applied in the two cases therein described. Sentinelle in piedi seems to believe that a minor offense against ‘foreign women’ (a joke, as the tweet says) solicited major public uproar, while a full-fledged ‘humiliation’ suffered by ‘Italian women’ went unnoticed and unpunished. What’s implied in this tweet is the paradoxical notion that the Italian public operate reverse racism to the detriment of ‘Italian women’.

### *Section summary*

In this section, I analyzed the narratives tweets at #parliamonesabato and the parallel hashtag launched by the Non una di meno femint movement #parliamonesubito. I argued that the overall narrative voiced collective outrage against the sexist content of the last episode of the show.

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<sup>99</sup> A #Parliamonesabato battute sulle donne dell'Est e viene chiuso subito. Per le donne del #FamilyDay umiliate da Mediaset nessuno si è mosso.

Despite its somewhat organic and spontaneous character, the protest was mostly led by pre-established opinion leaders such as satirical commentators, journalists, politicians, and the feminist movement *Non una di meno*. Each of these groups gave their own take on the issue at stake, some voicing more outrage than others. As it was the case for #omofobia in the previous chapter, some anti-equality voices also participated in conversation at #parliamonesabato, trivializing the sexism of the show and redirecting the attention towards the alleged risks of a law regulating surrogate motherhood.

### **Comparative discussion**

The two cases outlined above present several points of convergence across the national-supranational divide as well as elements of continuity with what was presented thus far in this dissertation. Firstly, the two cases seem to be instances of ‘affective publics’ (Papacharissi, 2015) who have formed from the on-the-spot reactions of individual users to unfolding political events. The extent to which these publics were actually horizontal and organic, however, shall not be overstated. As it was the case in all the examples in this dissertation, pre-existing opinion leaders retained the center of the discussion in light of the privileged access to visibility they enjoy under the conditions the political attention economy of capitalism (Fuchs, 2013b). Some of the opinion leaders that emerged in the two cases here scrutinized might have spoken from subject positions that are mostly resistant vis-à-vis existing structures. However, these users might be considered to be hegemonic within their own pro-equality circles.

Secondly, the publics that gathered for the two cases might be said to have staged a form of ‘synoptic resistance’ exposing ‘the few’ in power to the collective gaze of ‘the many’ (Kelsey & Bennett, 2014). Indeed, the bottom up and counter-hegemonic ethos of both the initiatives here scrutinized can hardly be contested. However, there are at least two factors that dilute the synoptic character of these tweeted protests. Taking into consideration the narrow context of these tweeted mobilizations, the already mentioned prominence of pre-existing opinion leaders poses question as to the extent to which the protests can be said to have been staged from the bottom up. Once Twitter is set into its wider ecology, thus including mainstream media and other forms of analog mobilization, the relatively narrow number of users involved makes it hard to argue that it was actually ‘the many’ who staged the protest, especially at the European supranational level. Overall,

the impression is closer to that of a contestation between hegemonic and counter-cultural elites rather than one in which society at large reacts against a narrow hegemonic group.

Thirdly, both of the cases presented in this chapter featured at least some choreographic leadership (Gerbaudo, 2012). At the European supranational level, this was most evident because of the prominence of Turkish-speaking NGOs dominating the discussion at #muslimwomenban. At the Italian national level, choreographic leadership was driven by the feminist network Non una di meno. It is probably safe to say that neither of the two groups were the choreographers that ‘set the stage’ for the respective protests, insofar as ‘the stage’ emerged affectively and synoptically in both cases. However, both groups performed some choreographic leadership in consolidating the network of protesters and steering the discussion (Gerbaudo, 2012). Further speculations in this respect would require a level of ethnographic engagement that was beyond the scope of this research.

Fourthly and finally, both cases studies directly spoke to the intertwining of gender issues with migration issues at the European as well as national level. At the European Level, the protest tweeted at #muslimwomenban/#hijabban/#headscarfban promptly pointed out that the ECJ ruling de facto aimed at limiting the presence of Muslim bodies in the European public space. Far from a mere labor dispute, the decision has serious implications regarding whose bodies can be said to belong in the ‘European’ public space and therefore enjoy protection under European anti-discrimination law. In turn, ruling on who belongs in the European public space has the unintended consequence of bringing to the fore some never resolved contradictions between liberal secularism and Christianity as founding values of ‘Europe’. As those tweeting at the three hashtags aptly pointed out, these tensions cannot be resolved because of the impossibility of drawing a clear line separating a Euro-Christian ‘us’ from a Middle Eastern-Muslim ‘other’. Attempting to do so can only produce paradoxical consequences that, however, have discriminatory effects with very tangible consequences for individual residents of Europe, in this case hijab-wearing women.

At the Italian national level, the *Parliamone... Sabato* scandal might suggest a not-so-covert anxiety of the Italian public in the face of growing diversity. The original infographic by *Parliamone... Sabato*, in which the showrunners speculate that Italian men have a preference for Eastern European women over Italian women, speaks to concerns regarding who is going to mother the next generation of Italians (Krause, 2006; Krause & Marchesi, 2007; Marchesi, 2012;

Trillò, 2018b). Politicians and feminist groups addressed the issue through narratives of respect for women's self-determination. However, the extent to which they defused public anxieties is ambiguous at best. The same can be said about the role of satirical commentary. Backgrounding and foregrounding different groups of sexualized and racialized 'others', they might have contributed to the discussion of who's bodies belong in the Italian public space rather than trivializing this discussion via humor. In this sense, the fact the anti-equality voices attempted to peg the discussion to issues of surrogate motherhood might not be random, but actually speak to these reproduction anxieties and to what 'others' can be accepted as mothers of the nation.

## **Conclusions**

The cases of #muslimwomenban/#hijabban/#headscarfban and #parliamonesabato/#parliamonesubito are different yet connected phenomena of aggregated conversation on Twitter. These cases share a similar temporal distribution, a similar affective and synoptic character, and a comparable set of interventions by choreographic leaders. Once more, the size of the public that reacted at the national level was substantially larger than that who reacted at the European level.

Differently from what was found in previous cases at the European level, discussion at #muslimwomenban/#hijabban/#headscarfban was not dominated by EU institutional or civil society elites. Rather, most of the dominant voices spoke from the point of view of the Muslim 'other' and were in this sense resistant towards a hegemonic and discriminatory European 'them'. However, the most visible voices were those of pre-existing opinion leaders. Thus, the overall impression is that of a clash between hegemonic and counter-cultural elites rather than that of a bottom-up reaction of the many against the few.

In the cases presented in the previous two chapters, 'Europe' emerged as a social space in which value-based arguments and utilitarian arguments for equality often co-exist despite their contradictions. The cases presented in this chapter point to another axis of contradiction in the production of so-called 'European values', and namely the tension that exists between Europe's overt commitment to secular liberalism and an unspoken attachment to Christianity as a ground of communality between European member states. While being on paper a simple labor dispute, the case of the ECJ decision has the unintended side-effect of foregrounding this tension, highlighting

the fact that solving it in favor of Christian values has discriminatory side effects for Muslim residents of the Union.

#parliamonesabato/#parliamonesubito gathered a public that was substantially larger but also close to the ones described in the previous chapters. Traditional elites (as opposed to countercultural ones) dominated the discussion. Differently from the other cases scrutinized thus far, humor played a major role in the affective reaction of the public to the issue at stake. As it was the case for #omofobia, a narrow yet non-negligible number of anti-equality voices successfully exploited the visibility of the issue to push their agenda, in this case pegging it to advocacy against a possible law regulating surrogate motherhood.

Discussion above pointed out that the apparently trivial case of sexist commentary on public TV might speak to deeper anxieties regarding the reproduction of the nation in the face of growing diversity. In this sense, concern over the romantic preferences of Italian men, humoristic commentary pointing to other sexually desirable groups of ‘others’, and anti-equality incursions demonizing surrogate motherhood might collectively comprise a wider set of concerns over the body of the nation and who is entitled to mother it. Crucially, both #muslimwomenban/#hijabban/#headscarfban and #parliamonesabato/#parliamonesubito construct the boundaries of Europe and the boundaries of the nation on the bodies of women that are to some extent considered to be ‘other’.

# Conclusions

## Introduction

This final chapter attempts to offer an overview of the arguments advanced in this work, connecting them to each other as well as to the broader theoretical framework outlined in Part I. This summary is organized as follows. A first section outlines those findings that are pertinent to the ‘vertical contextualization’ of this study, and more specifically to the role of Twitter as a social media platform in the broader ecology of political communication. These include reflections on the subjectification of Twitter users as well as that of hashtag networks. In other words, the first section deals with those power dynamics that are mostly external to tweeted discourses but that are nonetheless crucial in determining what discourses are more likely to enjoy consensus and what subjects are more likely to enjoy hegemonic positionality therein.

A second section discusses the social subjects produced in the gender equality discourses sampled for this study, summarizing the findings of the analysis of the subjectification of women, LGBTI subjects, and men therein. A third section outlines the main features of ‘gender equality’ as an object of knowledge constructed in the discourses analyzed in this dissertation, and includes reflection of ‘Europe’ and ‘Italy’ as socio-political spaces also constructed in those discourses. A fourth section outlines the main limitations of this research, while a fifth section suggests avenues for future investigation.

## Twitter and social media as spaces for individual and collective political performances

The epistemology adopted for this work mostly relies on the assumption that social media are spaces where power *of* discourse a power *in* discourse coexist and operate alongside each other (KhosraviNik, 2017). In other words, I started from the assumption that macro-structural constraints heavily shape what subjects are able to say on social media platforms, but subjects also make strategic use of what they are permitted to say for the purpose of achieving their political objectives. This section mostly deals with the former, leaving the latter for discussion in the section to follow. In this work, I also accepted Fuchs’ argument that social media visibility is strictly tied to material inequalities (Fuchs, 2013b, 2016). Thus, I drew a sample of users having preferential access to resources (and therefore visibility) within the field of gender equality in order to study their discourses and the ways in which they shape gender equality as an object of knowledge.

The above notwithstanding, I also argued that material inequalities do not produce a context in which only ‘the few’ have access to social media visibility. As a matter of fact, ‘the many’ do manage to resist the political attention economy of capitalism (Fuchs, 2013b) and collectively access at least some visibility for their claims on social media. I argued that ‘the many’ access visibility through collective social media performances that resemble the ‘performed assemblies’ or ‘choreographed assemblies’ of Butler (2015) and Gerbaudo (2012). Based on the threefold typology proposed by Bennett and Segeberg (2012), these were analyzed as networks that can be differentiated by the level of brokerage performed by traditional social movements.

Combining the above assumptions, I drew a sample of ‘privileged’ users within the field of gender equality and a sample of hashtag-based ‘publics’ that collectively voiced their position vis-à-vis unfolding issues that to some extent involved ‘gender equality’ as an object of knowledge. Limited ethnographic engagement with these users and networks followed the design phase and offered further elements of vertical contextualization.

*Users: Hegemonic, resistant, plural*

The privileged users sampled for this study might enjoy relatively broad visibility and recognition within the context of gender equality discourses, but are nonetheless set in an environment that is mostly indifferent and at times hostile to equality issues. These users might have a few thousands followers, but their following is limited when compared to that of more ‘mainstream’ political figures and it is negligible when compared to that of users from the entertainment industry. In this sense, I theorized users such as EU Commissioner Věra Jourová, the European Women’s Lobby, or the Italian feminist network Non una di meno as hegemonic *within* discussions of gender equality although resistant vis-à-vis the broader framework in which these discussions are set.

Because of frequent attacks against it, ‘gender equality’ tends to have a place in mainstream media commentary. However, gender equality does not enjoy preferential access to funding (Elomäki, 2015). This was confirmed to be the case by the social media officers interviewed for this study. On the one hand, virtually all the interview partners described fairly sophisticated processes of production for their social media narratives that simply could not be possible without access to some material resources such as funds and expertise. On the other hand, however, all of them lamented lack of resources to conduct proper analysis of the outcomes of their campaigns or,

more generally, to properly engage and regularly interact with their follower-base. This trend is consistent with Fuchs' (2013b) argument that social media visibility is unequally distributed on the basis of material inequalities.

A further layer of nuance was added in the analysis carried out in Part II. I argued that 'institutional' users such as gender equality institutions and high-profile feminist politicians are resistant towards the broader political system and hegemonic within discussions of gender equality. In turn, women's right movement and women's rights groups within progressive political formations were said to be resistant vis-à-vis institutional interpretations of what 'equality' would entail, but also hegemonic in their own right when articulating a 'feminist' definition of 'equality'. LGBTI rights associations and LGBTI rights advocacy groups within progressive parties were said to be somewhat at the margins of the 'gender equality' discourse. Nonetheless, they were also said to be hegemonic within their own context, which happens to be closer to a discourse of human rights/minority rights rather than gender equality per se. Finally, groups of pro-equality men were said to be at the very margin of the gender equality discourse, as confirmed by their negligible visibility and almost complete lack of voice therein.

Via interviews with those managing the Twitter profiles sampled for Part II, it was also uncovered that the identity of these users and their social media narratives are produced by a collection of individuals and through a complex set of policies, practices, and negotiations. This might be obvious for institutional users such as the European Institute for Gender Equality or social movements that by definition have a plural character such as *Non una di meno*. However, this description was found to be equally fitting in the case of individual politicians tweeting with their own first and last names. With a few exceptions, it was found that most of the sampled Twitter accounts are managed by one experienced communication officer with the support of one or more assistants (e.g. trainees, interns, junior officers).

The freedom that these individual enjoy in the production of the post they eventually publish varies greatly across the sample. Some of these officers de facto enjoy significant degrees of freedom, afforded them on the basis of their experience as well as the assumption that their posts will be consistent with the overall message of the institution or individual they represent. Others produce their posts under the constraints imposed by political mandates, institutionally negotiated schedules, specific policies on what language can be adopted, and strict procedures for

approval before publication. Only few of the interview partners described practices of production that diverge from these models and have a more horizontal, plural, and informal character based on trust and shared responsibility.

The level of professionalization of the personnel involved was relatively high. All of the interviewees have an understanding of social media as being set in a wider media ecology. All of them have a heuristic understanding of how Twitter algorithms work and make some attempts at exploiting loopholes to gain visibility. Those operating at the national level are also deeply aware of the crucial role of television in the Italian context and work from the assumption that the media system within which they operate is a hybrid one (Chadwick, 2013). That is to say, they try to achieve visibility for their social media messages starting from the assumption that they will reach a wide audience only if intercepted and reverberated by mainstream media.

Finally, it is worth noticing that these considerations hold true across the national-supranational divide. This might be taken as an indication that institutions, parties, activist organizations, and social movements mostly share a similar understanding of how social media work and how they should be used. It might also hint to the fact that these users share a similar set of constraints as well as practices that ultimately produce them as subjects of discourse.

#### *Hashtag networks: Institutional brokerage, affect, resistance*

I also sampled a set of hashtags to capture collective reactions to unfolding events that had to do with different aspects of gender equality. Similar reflections to those sketched out for users can be drawn concerning the visibility of these hashtags in their broader context. The sampled hashtags might have been the most clearly identifiable discussions of gender equality during the sampled timespan, but their visibility is narrow when compared to that of other more mainstream political events (e.g. general elections) and negligible when compared to entertainment-related events (e.g. the Eurovision song contest). Thus, while it is important to acknowledge the potential of social media as channels through which collectivities can achieve visibility and resist hegemonic narratives of equality, this potential should not be overstated.

Differently from what was argued in Part II, the hashtags analyzed in Part III show substantial divergence between the supranational and the national level. Hashtags captured for Europe-wide discussions gathered publics that were quite narrow and mostly brokered by EU

institutions in the context of EU-led initiatives. This was surely the case for two of the three hashtag sampled for Part III, namely #saynostopvaw and #EU4LGBTI. Institutional brokerage seemed to be crucial also in the case of #muslimwomenban/ #hijabban/ #headscarfban. In this case, however, brokerage was performed by groups and individuals that clearly stand ‘outside’ of the EU and attempted to perform synoptic resistance against its policies (Kelsey & Bennet, 2014). In this sense, none of the cases scrutinized for the European-level can be said to be swarms (Hardt & Negri, 2005) or rhizomes (Castels 2009, 2012), nor can they be interpreted as self-organizing networks that adopt the logic of ‘connective action’ (Bennet & Segeberg, 2012). Rather, these collectivities are better described as choreographed assemblies (Gerbaudo, 2012) or institutionally-brokered networks (Bennet & Segeberg, 2012).

The situation was found to be somewhat different at the national level. The public that gathered at #nonunadimeno was found to be an institutionally-brokered network (Bennet & Segeberg, 2012) or a choreographed assembly (Gerbaudo, 2012) that skillfully resisted mainstream interpretations of gender equality and gathered a fairly wide number of adherents. Institutional brokerage took the form of high visibility for the official account of the movement and for the individual accounts of key activists therein. Non una di meno was therefore interpreted as a ‘traditional’ social movement that offers its choreographic leadership to a relatively wide public of sympathizers and coordinates advocacy to make its activities sustainable over time in the virtual as well as in the analog (see also Trillò, 2018a).

The public that gathered at #omofobia was somewhat more horizontal, with very limited institutional brokerage during the sampled timespan (Bennet & Segeberg, 2012). Visibility therein was to some extent tied to pre-existing material inequalities. This mostly took the form of mainstream media personalities occupying some particularly visible position in the discussion. However, a set of other, less institutionalized users managed to make their way to visibility. More granular analysis highlighted that affect was fairly important in many of the messages posted at #omofobia, hinting to the possibility of interpreting this collectivity as an affective public (Papacharissi, 2015). Analysis also detected the presence of voices advocating against LGBTI equality, suggesting at least some degree of discussion that could push for an interpretation of #omofobia as an *ad hoc* public (Burns & Burgess, 2011).

The case of #parliamonesabato/#parliamonesubito is probably the example in the dataset closest to a self-organizing network (Bennet & Segeberg, 2012) or an ‘affective public’ (Papacharissi, 2015). The collectivity that gathered therein emerged with hardly any institutional brokerage and staged its synoptic resistance (Kelsey & Bennett, 2014) against what was perceived as institutional misuse of public TV broadcasting. However, visibility within #parliamonesabato/#parliamonesubito was once again tied to previously existing inequalities, with politicians, mainstream news outlets, and blogs of political satire dominating the conversation (Fuchs, 2013b). Furthermore, Non una di meno promptly intervened with its own posts at #parliamonesabato. The network gained visibility for its messages, linked them to its own advocacy, and choreographed virtual as well as analog mobilization through the parallel hashtag #parliamonesubito. Thus, what started as a self-organized or affective public could be said to have turned in an institutionally-enabled network (Bennet & Segeberg, 2012) once Non una di meno stepped in as choreographic leader (Gerbaudo, 2012). Finally, #parliamonesabato also featured the presence of diverging voices arguing against gender equality, thus suggesting a possible interpretation of the hashtag as an *ad hoc* public (Burns & Burgess, 2011).

Analysis in the different chapters attempted to draw comparisons across the national-supranational divide, with some degree of consistency across the two parts of the sample. However, while the networks that gathered at the Italian level were wide enough and diverse enough to discern the above listed characteristics, the ones that gathered at the European level were indeed diverse among themselves, but mostly characterized by their narrowness. It is also worth pointing out that, throughout the sampled timespan, it would have been fairly easy to find ‘global’ publics responding as a collectivity to developing political issues in the field of gender equality. Therefore, there seems to be at least some ground to argue that there are publics that discuss gender equality on social media at the national and global level, but not at the European level. If taken to its extreme consequences, the divergence between the supranational and the national part of the sample might be taken as a suggestion that there is no such a thing as a ‘European’ public, at least on social media. The material sampled for this study is obviously too narrow to substantiate such a strong claim, but it can be taken as an indication that national publics are stronger than European ones on social media, with global publics possibly being stronger than both.

## **Subjects of ‘gender equality’: Women, allied subjectivities, men**

The most self-evident feature of the corpus of text under scrutiny is that ‘women’ are by far the most commonly mentioned subject of gender equality discourses. Discussion in Part II pointed out that women are defined as a political category in fairly different terms by the sampled users. Nonetheless, women seem to be constructed across the sample as a diverse yet cohesive social group whose needs or demands can be singled out with relative ease. While institutional users construct women as a demographic category that has policy-related needs but no political demands (Bacchi, 1996, pp. 1-13), the other users sampled for this study tend to construct women as political subjects whose demands are deeply political in character. The boundaries of the category ‘women’ as subjects of the gender equality discourse are arguably contested. Institutional users tend to understand women in essentialist terms (i.e. the women approach to gender equality policy). Women’s rights users and especially the Non una di meno feminist movement tend to be more inclusive and present a collective ‘us’ made of women that is open to the possibility of encompassing non-binary subjectivities in its sisterhood, perhaps mixing the gender approach and the intersectionality approach to gender equality.

Contestation of the boundaries of womanhood also takes place along ethno-religious lines, as suggested by the cases of hijab-wearing women and Eastern European women scrutinized in Chapter 10. The case of #muslimwomenban/hijabban/#headscarfban has shown that inclusion of hijab-wearing women into the collective ‘us’ endowed with labor rights protected by the European Court of Justice is not as straight forward as reference to a universal category of ‘women’ would suggest. Similarly, inclusion of ‘Eastern European women’ in the national ‘us’ as potential partners of ‘Italian men’ exposed some of the anxieties of the Italian public in the face of growing diversity. At both levels, women’s rights movements staged their synoptic resistance through messages of inclusion that, arguably, widened the boundaries of ‘womanhood’ as understood by their institutional counterparts, especially at the European level.

Depending on the political agency ascribed to women as subjects of gender equality, they are either backgrounded as recipients of policy actions or foregrounded as bearers of political demands. Institutional users tend to represent women as objects upon which policies are predicated. In these constructions, women are often at the receiving hand of passive sentences. These sentences usually have impersonal subjects that are either unspecified or named after policy

actions (e.g. gender mainstreaming). Conversely, women's rights users tend to foreground women as agentic and afford them the right to speak in their own voice (e.g. direct quotation). In these messages, it is often a collective 'us' made of women who predicates action upon objects (e.g. the labor market, the school system) in order to achieve a progressive transformation.

The passivated women constructed by institutional users tend to be a category whose claims have no political salience. Consequently, argumentation in favor of their rights is mostly instrumental rather than value-based. Women's rights are hardly ever presented as worth pursuing for their own sake. Rather, they are presented as worth pursuing because of their instrumental value for the achievement of economic prosperity. Linguistically, this is often achieved through the topos of numbers (Wodak, 2009) or theoretical rationalization (van Leeuwen, 2008). Women's rights users are not immune for the adoption of such arguments. However, value-based arguments are substantially more common in their narratives. These are mostly supported through the topos of reality (Wodak, 2009), impersonal authorization, or moral authorization (van Leeuwen, 2008). Overall, the sampled users seem to share a wish to convey the impression that action shall be taken 'now', as testified by widespread adoption of the topos of urgency across the sample.

Differences were not only detected across the divide between institutions and activists, but also across the supranational-national divide. Indeed, institutional users at the national level constructed women as substantially more agentic than their European level counterparts. The most plausible explanation of this divergence is the substantially wider set of competences that the national level has when it comes to gender equality policy and advocacy in comparison to the narrow set of options available at the European level. Nonetheless, the differences detected were substantial and carry far reaching consequences for the political subjectivity of actual women.

If women are the chief subject of the gender equality discourses sampled for this study, other subjectivities do not feature quite as prominently. In particular, sexual and bodily minorities are seldom mentioned. And indeed, LGBTI rights users as well as networks gathering at hashtags specifically discussing LGBTI issues tend to speak a language that is somewhat different from that of gender equality. Their narratives seem to only marginally overlap with discussions of gender equality and to be more clearly set in the discussions at the adjacent discourse of minority rights or human rights. These narratives tend to have as their subjects a set of collective names such as 'LGBTI individuals' or 'rainbow families'.

The division is, of course, not so clear-cut. Especially in the case of *Non una di meno*, the wish to displace women as the only subject of gender equality has taken the form of a wide array of neographisms that defy the mandatory gender binary of the Italian language. Other cases were not as radical in their attempts, but nonetheless practiced inclusion towards sexual and bodily minorities. For example, almost all the sampled users participated in conversations over LGBTI rights around the time of IDAHOTB. Similarly, LGBTI rights users tend to seek positioning within the gender equality discourse by speaking for women's rights around key dates such as IWD.

LGBTI rights users also seem to deploy discursive strategies similar to those of their Women's rights counterparts. In particular, they often strive to foreground LGBTI subjectivities in a set of discourses that prefer value-based arguments via the topos of justice or the topos of burdening over instrumental rationalization. The topos of reality is also at times adopted to speak marginalized LGBTI subjectivities into existence. For example, describing 'rainbow families' as already existing units was adopted as a strategy to draw them out of invisibility and unlocks the possibility of advocating for their rights. In this sense, women's rights advocates could perhaps learn from their LGBTI rights comrades on how to resist a hostile environment without participating in potentially harmful discourses such as those that present gender equality as an instrumental goal.

If women are the main subject of gender equality discourses, men are unspoken subjects that are backgrounded into quasi-invisibility. If at all present, they exist as un-named perpetrator of violence or as invisible benchmarks against which the performances of women are measured. Chapter 7 argued that backgrounding men in the equality discourse has its advantages. Most of these are tied to the fact that men already enjoy broad visibility in public discussions. Foregrounding them also in gender equality discourses would take away a much needed space for women's formal representation in public life. However, a full backgrounding of men was found to have two main shortcomings. These are the impossibility of calling out men as possible or actual perpetrator of violence as well as the impossibility to account for men's aspirational or actual participation in feminist advocacy. In light of this, I cautiously argued that selectively foregrounding men in *some* parts of the equality discourse, and especially discussions of violence against women, might have its benefits. As a matter of fact, some of the users sampled at the national level do make attempts in this direction.

## **‘Gender equality’: Neoliberalized, repoliticized, queered**

A relatively clear definition of ‘gender equality’ emerged from the discourses sampled for this study. For what concerns institutional users, especially those operating at the European level, analysis in this dissertations seems to offer corroborating evidence in support of the argument that ‘gender equality’ is increasingly ‘neoliberalized’ (Prügl, 2015). That is to say, gender equality tends to be presented as instrumental for the achievement of economic growth, depicted through neoliberal frames such as self-entrepreneurships, and technicalized into a policy problem that can be ‘solved’ through parameters and measurements. The topos of reality and/or theoretical rationalization are the most common manifestations in language of this trend. While lip-service is constantly paid to gender equality being a fundamental European value, arguments in favor of gender equality are almost invariably framed in terms of the business case. In the narratives of the EU institutions sampled for this study, value-based arguments are scant, at best.

Some interview partners for this study pointed out the strategic character of the business case for gender equality. In their view, the business case for equality is instrumental in ‘selling’ equality to stakeholders that would not be interested in equality otherwise. Arguably, however, referring to gender equality solely because of its value to the economy has a wide range of shortcomings. Firstly, it dilutes the crucially political character of gender relations and reduces them to a technical matter (Meier, 2018, p. 181). Secondly, it turns ‘women’ from subjects of political claims to objects upon which policies are predicated (Elomäki, 2015). Thirdly, it supports the proliferation of instruments of ‘feminist’ governmentality that aim at formulating inequality as a policy problem that can be solved once and for all through measurements and top-down package of solutions (Bacchi, 2009; Bacchi & Eveline, 2003; Prügl, 2009; Kantola & Squires, 2012).

The ‘strategic’ need to appeal to big businesses pushed the EU to adopt economic arguments in its pro-equality advocacy. In turn, these arguments became the main frame for equality discussions within gender equality discourses. The original strategy might have been that of ‘selling’ equality to the corporate sector, but the end result can be said to have been that of ‘importing’ neoliberalism from them and selling it to feminist stakeholders (Elomäki, 2015). This is detectable in language because of the widespread use of the topos of numbers and/or theoretical rationalization. The use of vocabulary from the corporate sector (e.g. benefits, benchmark, stakeholders, etc.) in gender equality discussions can be said to be another symptom of this trend.

Overall, these developments are coherent with the dual position of EU equality institutions as resistant to an environment that is indifferent to gender equality but hegemonic within the equality discourse.

The only topic that is partially safeguarded from this trend and retains political salience is that of violence against women. And indeed, the fact that the EU collectively adopted the Istanbul Convention during the timespan of this study is indicative of its wish to take action on equality issues beyond the economy. However, even the topic of violence is often discussed through the lens of the business case for equality (see Chapter 8). Violence is therein produced as a policy problem through reference to statistics and other measurements. In turn, its eradication is presented as achievable through the implementation of technical solutions based on empirical knowledges produced for the occasion. This ambiguity is also detectable in language. EU institutions discuss VAW through a wide range of combat metaphors that would suggest a tough stance across sectors. However, combat metaphors are complemented with market-based arguments that deploy the topos of number and/or theoretical rationalization. Despite lip-service to equality as fundamental European value, reference to the intrinsic value of women's bodily integrity is marginal.

It is also worth pausing to reflect on the role of the sampled discussions play in producing 'Europe' as a socio-political space. In the narratives sampled for this study, gender equality is time and again presented as a fundamental European value. However, it is at the national level that a majority value-based arguments were found. At the European level, theoretical rationalization regularly took their place. Overall, the attempt at producing Europe as a space where equality matters seems to be relatively poor in its outcomes. In fact, analysis such as the one carried out in this study are likely to reveal that Europe is more or less willingly produced as a spaced where economic growth is an unquestionable goal that must be achieved with all possible means, including the adoption of equality measures that might be unpopular but are nonetheless necessary to that end.

The extent to which gender equality is 'neoliberalized' was found to be a key point of misalignment across the supranational-national divide. Indeed, institutional users at the national level were way more likely to produce narrative of equality that point out its intrinsic value rather than its instrumental value to the supposedly higher goal of economic growth. This is not to say that these users do not strategically use the business case for equality. However, its deployment

remains somewhat occasional and unorganized. The result is that ‘women’ as subjects of the equality discourse are not fully passivated as policy objects, but actually remain to some extent characterized as agents endowed with political rights. In this sense, it could be argued that Italian institutions still operate along the logic of ‘state feminism’ (see among others Outshoorn & Kantola, 2007; Fraser, 2013) rather than that of ‘neoliberal feminism’ (Prügl, 2015). At the national level, legitimacy for gender equality is often produced through reference to the impersonal authority of the law (often enough, the Constitution), the history of women’s rights struggles, or the intrinsic value of women’s right as part of moral authorization.

As pointed out in Chapter 5, neoliberalized narratives of gender equality are resisted by women’s rights users that present themselves as the voice of a feminism that is deeply political in character. Value-based argument for equality are widely preferred to the technical ones offered by their institutional counterparts. Women’s rights groups advance a vision of equality as part of a broad political project of the left for the eradication of inequality (Eschle & Maiguashca, 2014, 2018). A more or less complete restructuring of the social order is surely part of their demands. This transformation would entail a new set of value-based political priorities in which women’s rights are really treated as fundamental. Reference to the oppression of women across space and time reverberates through the dataset, and especially with regard to the link between gender equality and migration issues. In this sense, narratives of intersectional sisterhood (Predelli & Halsaa, 2012) seem to have found a renewed strength.

The claims of women’s rights groups are mostly advanced in calls for action that deploy the topos of reality or moral authorization. Crucially, the ‘reality’ therein described is not one in which equality supports economic growth. Rather, it is a reality in which women’s oppression is widespread, systemic, and therefore demands action. Reference to the topos of burdening is relatively scant. Women are indeed represented as burdened by the current social order, but action is required because reality is the way it is rather than because of a specific reference to the disproportionate burden it places on women.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the *Non una di meno* feminist movement is the most radical voice in the sample, presenting a vision of equality that strongly diverges from the neoliberalized one of EU institutions. *Non una di meno* also attempts to displace ‘women’ as the sole subject of feminism by including in its collective ‘us’ a set of identities that the movement itself defines as ‘allied

subjectivities'. Openings towards an inclusive understanding of womanhood are signaled, for example, from the explicit choice of queering the language of the movement through neographisms that defy the mandatory gender binary of the Italian language.

Despite the fact that this study purposefully sampled discourses referring to the rights of sexual and bodily minorities, the discourses by Non una di meno and are the ones that most clearly queer 'gender equality' as an object of knowledge. This is because LGBTI rights advocacy seem to make reference to a different set of discourse, and namely that of minority rights or human rights. This discursive separation has its advantages. For example, 'hard' policy measures and legal provisions for the rights of sexual and bodily minorities are still a discursive possibility in the context of a discourse on minority rights, while they seem to be discursively unavailable in the context of gender equality (see Chapter 9).

Discourses of LGBTI equality are not free from 'technical' arguments, but these tend to be legal rather than economic in character. That is to say, LGBTI rights advocacy makes reference to the impersonal authority of the law or a higher moral authority to advance demands for the removal of obstacles towards equality. The topos of burdening is also used to prompt action towards full LGBTI inclusion. The topos of reality is at times used to discursively affirm the literal existence of LGBTI subjectivities that are currently unspoken, in turn unlocking the possibility of advocating for the recognition of the rights. Overall, the narratives of LGBTI advocates are markedly value-based and aim at achieving a vision that is political in character. While they do have an impact on how equality is broadly understood in society, however, it is important to restate that the narratives of LGBTI advocacy groups only partially influence the way in which 'gender equality' is constructed, insofar as these narratives seem to fall somewhat outside of the equality discourse.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that groups of men in favor of gender equality also make their (however narrow) contribution to constructing gender equality as an object of knowledge. In their view, equality is to be achieved through micro-political interventions at the level of the individual. Such a vision is coherent with a backgrounded positionality within macro-political discussions of gender equality. Such a positioning is also coherent with a pattern detected in seminal work on men and masculinities such as that of Connell (e.g. Connell, 2005). As Chapter 7 argues, the quasi-absence of male voices makes sense from an explanatory point of view and has its strategic advantages. However, the absence of men as subjects of the equality discourse

produces a problematic situation in which they cannot be called out as responsible for inequality or violence, and thus cannot be targeted for intervention.

## **Limitations**

I identified four main limitations to this project. First and foremost, the novelty of the field of social media – critical discourse studies and the associated difficulties in finding clear reference points made it so that the sampled material ended up being somewhat wider than deeper. Indeed, the final sample picked up on issues as disparate as neoliberal feminism, mass feminist mobilization, homonormativity, Islamic veiling, and intra-European transnational romance, just to mention a few. In this sense, the sampled material can be said to encompass most of the gender equality discussions at the European and Italian national level during the selected timespan. This width is also due to the diverse character of ‘gender equality’ as an object of knowledge and hint to the large number of discursive battlefield upon which its meaning is contested and produced. However, depth was at time sacrificed for the sake of covering all the sampled material.

A second limitation for this study is also connected to sampling. The sample of institutions selected for Part II is to some extent based on traditional categories in comparative politics. It was not always easy to find a compromise between the wish to sample ‘most similar’ cases for comparison and the wish to sample ‘hegemonic’ users in the respective areas of the gender equality architecture. A more flexible research design might have been more true to my original objectives. Flexibility, on the other hand, proved to be a challenge in its own right when it came to the hashtag-based part of the sample scrutinized in Part III. Decisions had to be taken in real time due to the limitations of Twitter’s API regarding what data could be retrieved. In some occasions, bad timing resulted in failing to detect potentially interesting data, partially mutilating sub-samples that were eventually selected for analysis (e.g. #parliamonesabato in Chapter 10), or abandoning research avenues that could have been followed for longer periods of time. If acknowledging these difficulties is only fair, it is just as fair to mention that these frictions are probably inevitable in any data gathering process involving individual decisionmaking at multiple points over time.

A third limitation of this study is probably the narrow-ness of its ethnographic engagement. Several things can justify the impossibility of a fuller immersion in the field. For example, a number of the events sampled for this study took place nowhere or everywhere in the analog realm. A researcher cannot be ‘on the spot’ if there is no ‘spot’ where to physically be, nor can they be

on ‘all of the spots’ if a social action is taking place in a wide number of analog places at the same time. Furthermore, the ‘live’ character of Twitter trends make it difficult for any researcher to be ‘on the spot’ without prior knowledge of the where the ‘spot’ would be in the analog realm, regardless of the amount of travel resources available to them. Achieving this previous knowledge would not in all cases be impossible. However, it would require a research design that privileges user-based data over screen-based data; that is, a research design different from the one originally devised for this project. The ‘live’ character of Twitter makes it complicated to be ‘on the spot’ in the virtual, too. With the risk of stating the obvious, ‘discourses of gender equality in Europe’ do not happen in a single location on the social media platform Twitter but in multiple locations therein, on other social media, elsewhere online, as well as in the analog realm. In this sense, one of the take-home messages of this study is that timeliness is of the essence.

A fourth and final limitation for this study was embedded in the design, and namely the decision to focus only on production and circulation of discourses and not on reception. This is in part compensated in Part III through the inclusion of public reactions via hashatags as part of those discourses that produce gender equality as an object of knowledge. However, it is hard not to wonder what data could have been retrieved by engaging in interviews with a sample of users that mostly ‘receive’ the narratives broadcasted by the hegemonic users sampled for Part II. Given the multi-sited and defuse character of social media publics, however, sampling such users would have proven challenging, to say the least. Engaging with reception would have required broader ethnographic engagement, privileging user-based data over screen-based data and shifting away from the original intention of my study, which was that of analyzing the features ‘gender equality’ as an object of knowledge constructed in social media discourses.

### **Avenues for future research**

Based on the above, I invite scholars across the fields of political communication, social media studies, critical discourse studies, European studies, gender studies, and adjacent fields to engage with the following possible avenues for future research. Firstly, there is a clear need for more ethnographically-oriented research that explores the relationship between what can be seen on screen on social media and analog practices of production, circulation, and reception. This might include studies that explicitly survey the way in which institutions organize the broadcasting of their social media messages, studies that engage with activists in order to identify the ways in

which bottom-up resistance on social media is choreographed, or reception studies with private users to inquire on the extent to which hegemonic discourses actually influence them.

By design, this study only engaged with social media narratives *for* gender equality. Therefore, an obvious avenue for future research would be to engage with narratives of hegemonic users as well as publics that are explicitly advocating *against* equality. There is a wealth of research that is already engaging with this issues. This spans from the study of far right groups, studies of the anti-gender movements, and studies of online misogyny. Some of these studies might benefit from adopting a dual approach such as the one tested in this work, analyzing the role of politically visible figures as well as that of networked publics and the interplay between the two.

One further avenue for future research would entail moving away from macro-political discussions of gender equality and explore the implications of micro-political discourses that necessarily have an impact on how equality is practiced in everyday life. This might entail the study of social media platforms other than Facebook and Twitter, such as for example instant messaging platforms like WhatsApp or Telegram. Necessarily, this would entail a more micro-level approach and direct ethnographic engagement with the users involved. For example, it might be interesting to study homosocial interactions among female or male peers within WhatsApp group chats (e.g. sports teams, groups of parents, etc.). While generalizations would obviously be narrower, the richness of the data as well as the possible ‘fields’ in which such research can be performed are potentially endless.

## **Conclusion**

This study surveyed the discourses circulated by a sample of hegemonic users as well as different publics regarding ‘gender equality’ on the social media platform Twitter. I argued that these discourses are productive of ‘gender equality’ as an object of knowledge and of a set of subjects therein. Gender equality was mostly found to have women as their subjects, sexual and bodily minorities as marginal subjects that make reference to the adjacent discourse of ‘minority rights’, and men as unaddressed subjects. Gender equality was found to be increasingly defined in neoliberalized terms, despite the fact that activist groups and social movements regularly resist this narrative with value-based arguments. A notable exception to this trend is that of the omnirelevant topics of violence against women. However, this topic too tends to be treated in

economic terms, especially in those instances in which the business case for its eradication is presented as the most compelling reason to take action.

Since this study was designed to make reference to a socio-political space of Europe, the sampled discourses also provided insights on the way in which ‘Europe’ is constructed in discourse. Europe came to be defined in terms of a space where gender equality matters, although it does so for market-based reasons rather than because of the inherent value of gender equality in the eyes of European institutions or its populace. By comparison, the Italian case study has shown that gender equality is far more politicized at the national level, especially because of the substantially more active participation of feminist forces within parliament and social movements.

Twitter was found to be a space where the potential for political engagement is severely limited by an unequal distribution of visibility based on material inequalities. To put it simply, topics that drive large amount of material resources have substantially more visibility than gender equality. Within gender equality, market-based discourses tend to be dominant. Within equality discourses, users that have material resources such as the availability of funds or access to a press room tend to occupy hegemonic subject positions. Bottom-up participation on behalf of diverse publics was found to be indeed possible, but small, sporadic, and ultimately stratified according to the same mechanisms described above. The potential for public engagement through social media platform was found to be limited at best.

In this project, I aimed at offering an overview as wide as possible of ‘gender equality discourses’, in the context of ‘Europe’, across the national-supranational divide, on the social media platform Twitter. Despite limitation, I hope to have shed some light on the knowledges and subjectivities that these discourses produce, suggesting avenues for future research in a range of adjacent fields.

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