

DISCUSSING GENDER AMONG RIGHT-WING MEN: CENSORSHIP, DILEMMAS AND DISSENTS BETWEEN SPANISH CONSERVATIVES AND RADICALS

DISCUTIENDO EL GÉNERO ENTRE HOMBRES ESPAÑOLES DE DERECHA: CENSURA, DILEMAS Y DISENSOS ENTRE CONSERVADORES Y RADICALES

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ABSTRACT

The reappearance of the Spanish far right (Vox) in institutional politics has destabilized the conservatives' (PP) hegemony on the right and has ended an apparent democratic consensus around gender issues, particularly among right-wing men. Through a qualitative and emic approach, this article aims to explore the negotiations, dilemmas, and contradictions within right-wing gender politics as expressed by their male voters. We conducted a focus group with seven Spanish right-wing men and analyzed their unique conversation from a conception of discourse as an interactional-social practice. The discussion evolved through different stages of censorship, negotiation, and conflict. This article shows how gender is at the core of politics and creates both connections and conflicts on the right.

Keywords: violence, antifeminism, focus group, gender, right-wing men

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RESUMEN

La reaparición de la ultraderecha española (Vox) en la política institucional ha desestabilizado la hegemonía conservadora (PP) en la derecha, lo cual ha acabado con el aparente consenso democrático sobre cuestiones de género, especialmente entre los hombres de derecha. Mediante un enfoque cualitativo y *emic*, el artículo explora las negociaciones, dilemas y contradicciones dentro de la política de género derechista según lo expresado por sus votantes masculinos. Realizamos un grupo de discusión con siete hombres de derecha y analizamos su conversación concibiendo el discurso como una práctica interaccional-social. La discusión evolucionó a través de diferentes etapas de censura, negociación y conflicto mostrando cómo el género está en el centro de la política y crea conexiones y separaciones en la derecha.

Palabras clave: violencia, antifeminismo, grupo de discusión, género, hombres de derecha

1. Introduction

In 2013, some members of the People's Party (PP, Spanish conservatives) decided to split and create a new political party, Vox (Spanish far right). Santiago Abascal, one of the heads of this split and current leader of Vox, argued that he left PP because of the submission of Mariano Rajoy's government (PP, 2011-2018) to the left, its timid defense to the unity of Spain and its failure to repeal gender laws (Abascal, 2013)—such as the legalization of same-sex marriage, the Abortion Law, or the Gender-Based Violence Law (GBVL). During its first years (2014-2017), Vox took advantage of the “betrayal” felt by the Spanish early-2000s antigender movements (Blázquez-Rodríguez, Cornejo-Valle, & Pichardo-Galán, 2018) of PP government's “moderation.” This shows how the right wing is not a solid ideological space (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018), and how gender is central in political alliances (Grzebalska & Petó, 2018) as well as in conflicts and dissents (Cabezas Fernández, 2022b; Enguix, 2021a).

Since 2019, when Vox gained its first seats in the national Congress, it has become the third biggest party in Spain and has entered almost all subnational parliaments and some regional governments with the PP. Although Vox has not been able to electorally surpass the conservatives (PP) yet, its presence has changed the whole right-wing spectrum. The constant presence of Vox leaders in the media and the populist construction of their political discourse has led to the legitimization of “political incorrectness” (Galais & Pérez-Rajó, 2023).

The appearance of Vox in institutional politics not only meant the end of PP's hegemony on the right but also the end of some democratic consensus around gender issues—especially regarding violence against women. From the beginning, Vox has fervently criticized the

GBVL for the alleged attack on the presumption of innocence of men, has denied male violence through slogans such as “violence has no gender,” has attacked public funding to feminist policies and organizations, and has proposed a punitive populism based on a femonationalist positioning to justify nativist persecution against immigration (Cabezas Fernández, 2022a; Alcaide, 2022; Martínez-Jiménez, 2020). Vox appeared in the Spanish political sphere with a renewed antifeminist gender politics.

Vox is inserted within a “patriarchal ecosystem” (Cabezas Fernández & Vega, 2022) with proposals that coexist, like “tectonic plates” (Enguix, 2022b), with other gender proposals, both feminist and conservative. In this sense, gender does not only serve to differentiate left-wing from right-wing parties (Enguix, 2021a, 2021b). Gender is also fundamental in the battle for the hegemony of the Spanish right wing (Navarro & Redondo, 2021). Conservative and radical gender politics are simultaneously different but similar. It is in this constant relationship between their similarities and differences that alliances and conflicts arise. However, this unsteady connection between conservatives and radicals has been understudied—especially at the micro level and from a qualitative perspective (Off, 2023). This paper aims to observe how in a context of ideological and gender radicalization, right-wing men (conservative and radical) discuss and negotiate gender issues.

The (re-)appearance of far-right forces in Western democracies, their consideration as men’s parties (Kreisky, 2014), and their connections with antifeminist, religious, and masculinist organizations (Cabezas Fernández & Vega, 2022) have made gender in politics even more explicit. Gender has become a cornerstone in far-right political mobilization through the defense of the traditional family and its naturalization (Mayer, Ajanovic, & Sauer, 2014), the opposition to feminism, abortion, gender-equality, and same-sex marriages (Mayer & Sauer, 2017; Wodak, 2015), and the performance of hypermasculine leaderships (Cabezas Fernández, 2022b; Hakola et al., 2021; Löffler, 2020).

This antifeminist revival on the far right has also renewed the political interest in masculinity and men’s studies (Kimmel, 2013; Messner, 1997). In recent years, there has been an increasing number of works that have explored the role of men, masculinity, and gender within politics. To explore this relationship, Kathleen Starck and Birgit Sauer (2014) propose the use of “political masculinity” as a concept that “encompasses any kind of masculinity that is constructed around, ascribed to and/or claimed by ‘political players’” (p. 6). Except for a few exceptions (e.g., Enguix, 2022a), most of the research on “political masculinities” still deals only with cases of “professional politicians” (e.g., Löffler, 2020; Starck, 2020; Eksi & Wood, 2019). Moreover, the conceptual utility of the political masculinity and its analytical

limitations when studying men in politics have recently been questioned (Messerschmidt, 2023). This article aims to contribute to this field of study through the exploration of the tensions among Spanish right-wing masculinities.

In order to see how right-wing men reflect, negotiate, and confront each other when discussing gender, we conducted a focus group among seven right-wing Spanish men (Vox or PP voters) inviting them to talk about the relationships between men and women.⁴ We do not pretend to produce a generalization of our unique situational conversation, but to observe the potential strategies right-wing men might deploy when discussing gender issues. Inspired by Martín Criado's (2014) conception of discourse as an interactional-social practice, we explore the discursive processes of negotiation, censorship, and ambivalence that different right-wing men performed to validate or refute gender discourses.

This article aims to explore the political and discursive dynamic of these seven right-wing men on gender issues. To stress this interaction between participants and the discursive variations that they developed, we use narrative as a methodological tool and as a way to present our results (Macgilchrist, 2021).

The next sections are structured as follows. First, we present our focus group and our interest in a single-case study. Then, we discuss our analytical perspective based on interactional discourse analysis and the conceptualization of our categories. Third, we present how the conversation evolved and the different performances involved. We conclude by reflecting on the political and analytical relevance of observing disputes on the right.

2. Focus Group: A Discussion Between Seven Right-Wing Men

In February 2020, we contacted participants through a social studies center to discuss "the relations between men and women." We organized three focus groups (with seven participants each) following five variables: ideology, place of residence, social class, age, and gender. The first group consisted of seven right-wing upper-middle-class 40-45-year-old women, the second of seven right-wing upper-middle-class 40-45-year-old men, and the third of right-wing upper-middle-class 20-35-year-old group of four women and three men. Voice recordings were made of all three focus groups, and informed consent was sought from all participants. The transcription of the conversations was carried out by the social studies center and delivered, together with the voice recordings, only to the research team.

⁴ This work is part of a larger project exploring the resonance of Vox's radical and antifeminist gender discourse, particularly about gender-based violence, among Spanish right-wingers (Cabezas, Pichel-Vázquez & Enguix, 2023).

When analyzing these groups (see Cabezas Fernández, Pichel-Vázquez & Enguix, 2023), we noticed the importance of the conflict in the men's group and the analytical potential of analyzing it in-depth. Although we used the other two groups as control conversational situations, analyzing solely this men's group from an "emic approach" (Harris, 1976)—that is, a non-comparative and insider's approach that pays attention to discourses, representations, and practices of a particular group of people from the perspective of the same people who participate within that culture (Avanza, 2018, p. 115)—allows us to observe the complexity and plurality of tensions, agreements, and contradictions that can appear when right-wing men talk about gender. Instead of understanding the right, masculinity, and right-wing men as non-conflictual spaces, this article aims to look closely at their conflicts. This group is also relevant because it was the only all-male group, which created a homosocial space that accommodated a "misogynistic radicalism" (Cabezas Fernández, Pichel-Vázquez & Enguix, 2023), straining their relationship with conservative views. Moderation was carried out by a man in order not to break the homosocial space.

Except in a few cases (i.e., Boon, 2010; Pirro & Róna, 2019; Crespo & Mora, 2022), the use of focus groups with right-wing agents has not been very popular. Neither is the analysis of a single group. However, taking only the group of men as our case study enables us to observe the discursive, interactional, and conflict dynamics that occurred during the discussion.

This article focuses on a more than two-hour-long conversation with seven right-wing upper-middle-class 40-55-year-old men from Madrid (Spain) to explore how confrontation is deployed when gender issues are on the table. Despite all the similarities among them (ideology, place of residence, social class, age, and gender), participants did not know each other beforehand and were unaware of their peer-ness. This factor is relevant since it allows us to observe the structural discursive restrictions and censorship they feel concerning gender issues, how they deal with them, and how they move and reconceptualize them during their interaction.

3. Discourses as Interactional Processes

To see how gender issues conflict across the Spanish right-wing spectrum, we go through the discussion group following Martín Criado's (2014) discourse as a social practice approach. It means to understand and explore discourses expressed during focus groups situating them in their contextual enunciation: "discourses are not simple 'expressions' of opinions or facts, but interactional plays of self-presentation" (Martín Criado, 2014, p. 118).

This approach leads us to explore how discourses are being enunciated during the group's conversation as well as the process of negotiation, censorship, and ambiguity of their claims.

We perform three levels of analysis to contextualize and situate participants' discourses within the group's social interactions. In the first layer, we identify which discourses are being deployed and which discursive space they are embedded in. We focus on two specific areas: *general legitimacy*, which includes all those practices and discourses that "position themselves in relation to discourses of experts" (Martín Criado, 2014, p. 131), and *social proximity*, which are those acts that are elaborated in the participants' "day-to-day social relations" (Martín Criado, 2014, p. 131). At the same time, we also pay attention to the discursive incoherencies, since they are key in visualizing and comprehending legitimacies, tensions, and complicities (Martín Criado, 2014).

To understand the structure and mobilization of the discourse in context, we observe the parameters of censorship. Censorship is an analytical category that comprehends the discursive structure where the message is embedded while contextualizing the situation (Martín Criado, 2014, p. 130). We decided to differentiate those censored activities that are *structural*, that rely on legitimacies constructed in society, in the outside world; from those other censored activities that are *situational*, negotiated between the participants within the group's social activity. Going beyond traditional approaches to discursive censorship (Bunn, 2015) or its understandings as a contemporary phenomenon, such as "cancel culture" (Norris, 2023), allows us to observe how the participants create and negotiate the social limits, not only with their peers (situational) but also with society in general (structural).

Lastly, we pay special attention to the social interactions in the group. In this sense, we explore the *complicities* and *tensions* between the participants, and the discourses employed to enunciate, maintain, or modify their positions. It permits us to create a comprehensive affective timeline of agreements and disagreements along with the discussion topics. This last level of analysis is completed identifying the discursive and practical *constrictions* for each stage. It enables us to wonder "to which extent the arguments that are used, the boundaries that are established between categories, the legitimacy that is defended or contested, serve as justification for the courses of action undertaken" (Martín Criado, 2014, p. 132).

4. Ambivalence, Subjugation and Mediation in the Radical-Conservative Dispute

This discussion among the right-wing men developed a constant process of negotiation about the discursive limits on gender, feminism, and the relations between men and women. From their interactions, we identify four stages: Initial Ambivalence, Censorship's Restructuring, Patriarchal Subjugation, and Conservative Mediation. However, these phases cannot be read as closed categories with mechanical and stable uniformity. But rather as part of a process of tension, escalation, and conflict over gender discourses.

4.1. Initial Ambivalence: Feminism as Both Necessary and Aggressive

The moderator opens the discussion by asking about participants' perceptions of today's women-men relationships. However, participants rapidly readdress the question to the influence of feminism in society. This change in the topic (from women-men relationship to feminism) is not banal and occurs in all three focus groups. It is a symptom of the current political capacity of feminism and of the feminist repoliticization of Spanish society (Galdón, 2019) to influence the debate on women-men relationships. As we mentioned, participants did not know beforehand that they were among peers and consequently began the discussion by sounding out where the acceptability borders were and how far(-right) their speech could go. This is noted in Man 1's (M1) first intervention:

[Excerpt-1]

M1- [...] the 60s, for example, when feminism burst in as a vindictive fact to demand rights that the other part of society didn't... well, it didn't grant them. [...] And that feminism, I believe, was necessary because one part of the population excluded the other part of the population in their rights, even in their duties. But also now, feminism, from my point of view, is becoming a weapon of war [...]. Not always, but I do see feminists aggressively going against... I'm not talking about March 8th, Women's Day, but recently there has been a demonstration and it was against a public figure [referring to Santiago Abascal, leader of Vox], with whom you may or may not agree, but it doesn't precede, being feminists, to act in such an aggressive way... I think.⁵

M1 seems to be equally conscious about the possibility of being censored if he frontally attacks feminism or if he defends it, in the Spanish political context, where feminism is one of the axes of polarization. Consequently, he performs timid conservatism through a discursive ambivalence between the necessity of feminism and its aggressiveness. However,

⁵ Translated by the authors. Original speeches in Spanish.

the necessity of feminism is framed through a “postfeminist sensibility” (Messner, 2016) in two specific moments: in the past, as a depiction of a patriarchal time that is already over, and on March 8th Women’s Strikes, an unprecedented feminist mobilization with millions of people demonstrating in all the Spanish cities in 2018 and 2019 (Campillo, 2019; Cabezas Fernández, 2022b).

Comparing the beginning of the men’s group to that of the other two groups, we can appreciate how the ambivalence and the feeling of potential censorship is felt especially among men. In the women’s and the gender-mixed group, the first participant was always a woman and showed a clear position contrary to feminism. This freed the group from the discursive restriction of feminism.

This first excerpt shows how M1 is suffering a dilemma between the will to express his rejection of current feminism and the existing structural censorship. This censorship is perceived as a consequence of the rise of feminism in Spain, as the cornerstone of political struggles (Cabezas Fernández, 2022b). This feminist strength comes from a generational renewal of feminist activists and a repoliticization of Spanish society during the Indignados’ mobilization in May 2011 (Galdón, 2019). Thus, M1 hesitates, tests, and modifies his position in a short time (from necessity to aggressiveness), showing us in this ambivalent process a reference to the discursive hegemony of feminism within the public sphere. Faced with this *obstacle*, he performs an ambivalent and tensional discursive approach.

However, feminist legitimacy is rapidly renegotiated since participants erase the discursive constriction toward antifeminist stances that M1 had supposed, as he was unaware that he was among peers. Resonating with M1’s configuration of feminism as aggressive, the following interventions keep the same argument while increasing the intensity and the fierceness in their speeches. The *initial ambivalence* ends, and a restructuring of the censorship is on the table.

4.2. Censorship’s Restructuring: Toward Antifeminist Stances

The *restructuring of the censorship* is performed through the portrait of feminism as aggressive. Here, the other members pick M1’s argument:

[Excerpt-2]

M2- I agree. I think it is getting a bit out of hand. [...]

M3- Sorry. What I would ask—if you agree that it has become aggressive, and I also agree with this theory—is why has it become aggressive? [...]

M1- Well, sexism still exists... Of course, and it's something that when I was born already existed. It is something atavistic, but... Even in younger generations, I see that there's a kind of heritage of this sexism, which I think might be biological because I don't understand how there are young men with this thinking.

M4- [...] it has also coincided with the presence a political group that has supported women. They are even called Unidas Podemos (United [in feminine] We Can). I mean, are we all women? [...] Then the war is exalted. As I had commented before, it is a war against...

Moderator- Is it a war?

M4- ... a war against men, yes.

Although M1 uses this aggressiveness alongside the necessity of feminism in the past, the other participants consolidate this *feminist belligerency* to demonize feminism and criticize the new gender and power relations that arise from it (Tebaldi, 2021). Even when the existence of sexism is reaffirmed, masculine privilege is formulated as part of an intrinsic and pre-social men's condition. There is no escape from it: "It is biological." This justifies men being excused for exercising and sustaining patriarchal relations.

The initial ambivalence caused by the feminist legitimacy breaks down completely. As in the other two focus groups from the beginning, the discursive limits of the men's group are inscribed within the narrative of feminism as aggressive and a social problem. For instance, M4 claims the existence of a "war against men" motivated by a revanchist desire which is politically supported by the Spanish left-wing party Unidas Podemos (UP). In 2019, after the success of the first Women's Strike in Spain, UP changed its name from Unidos Podemos (using generic masculine) to Unidas Podemos (using generic feminine). The Spanish right has traditionally criticized and mocked the use of the generic feminine based on the Academy of Spanish Language's (an institution with general legitimacy) interpretation of that strategy as an example of grammatical incorrectness. Furthermore, fear is shown in M4's reformulation of feminist activism. He perceives feminist accomplishments as an attack on men and masculinity, constructing masculine victimhood (Banet-Weiser, 2021). Although masculinity is always a process of failure (Allan, 2016), the perception of a crisis of masculinity caused by feminism is quite present in today's nationalist and far-right movements (Cabezas Fernández, 2022a; Hakola et al., 2021)—a very similar argument to that of the '80s antifeminist men's rights activists (Messner, 1997).

Radical(-right) men, like populist political masculinists, understand the ideological context of their interlocutors, feel freer, and present themselves as rule-breakers of feminist censorship (Löffler, 2020). Feminism has become fundamental in organizing the public and

political debate in recent years. But its power is fragile, as it shows how easy it is to abolish its legitimacy through small dissents. Feminist power, like other counter-hegemonic movements, “seems small beer in comparison with the systematic diffusion and imposition of neo-liberal discourse” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 20).

Once an antifeminist group-negotiated legitimacy is established, situational antifeminist censorship turns the tables: the ambivalence is no longer used to express dissent from feminism but from antifeminism. In this vein, there is a need to first articulate a critique of the feminist movement to then defy the new antifeminist censorship:

[Excerpt-3]

M6- I'd like to take up what we were talking about before, about this aggressiveness with which... I have the feeling that we were saying that the feminist movement is aggressive now, right? I'll never accept the aggressiveness either on their part or on ours [referring to men]. I believe, after so many years, they have been, how can I say it...? [...] as in a second, third, or fourth level. So, I think that, at this moment... Excuse me, I don't justify the aggressiveness, but I understand it. I can understand that they want to recover rights that they shouldn't have had to recover, but that they should have had from the beginning.

This is M6's first intervention in the discussion, barely containing his discomfort with these new antifeminist limits behind a mask of politeness and performing a conservative breach. He begins by ensuring his complete rejection of aggressiveness, neither from feminists nor from men, enabling him to maintain an understanding discourse toward feminism within the new discursive boundaries. His rejection of aggressiveness and discursive interjections of apology and forgiveness (e.g., “Excuse me” or the continuous pauses in his speech) show how M6 is subdued by the new censoring regime. At the same time, this draws new borders of acceptability and configures the first crack in the antifeminist negotiated discursive legitimacy.

4.3. Patriarchal Subjugation: The Masculinist Victory

The legitimacies and the new discursive censorship models—that consist of an aggressive antifeminist stance and the discomfort in showing understanding for the feminist struggle—must be consolidated to protect the antifeminist discursive regime. After M6's disagreement and a small talk about the fear they have of being accused of sexism by the mere fact of being men, M3 goes back to M6's first intervention to confront him about the claims he made “in favor” of feminism:

[Excerpt-4]

M3- He [referring to M6] said: “Women were in a second, third, fourth level.” No, here there were two levels: the man and the woman. It was the approach. There is nothing between the man and the woman, right?

M6- Until the arrival of the children.

M3- Excuse me?

M6- Until the arrival of the children or the dog.

[Laughter.]

M3- The debate on sexes, which is what we were asked about... There are two levels, and you already put the woman as “[femme] fatale,” or something like that. You pointed out that it is wrong to have 90 % and 10 % on the board of directors or whatever. But you also pointed out that the solution is much worse: there must be women in this by decree. Therefore, you said you were in favor, but the belligerence to solve it isn’t good. The good thing is to contribute...

M6- No, no. I didn’t say that I agreed, huh?

M3- No, you said that the belligerence seemed normal to you. Yes. Yes, you said that.

M6- No, no. I said that I understood it.

M3- That you understood it... Well, whatever you want to call it.

M6- That I understood it in the sense that when... I don’t know... Try to put yourselves in a situation in which you are for a long time [...] inhibited, subdued, as we were saying before. There comes a time when you even use violence.

M3- I put myself in that situation because I have also lived among women. I am married, I have three daughters and a son, and they agree with me, they are not subdued under any circumstances. But we are subjected to this dictatorship of belligerent feminism. I insist because the provided solutions aren’t the right ones, they aren’t going to solve the problem. They are only going to turn the tables.

M6 replies to the first M3’s attack with a joke (“until the arrival of the children or the dog”) to de-escalate the recent contentious situation and redirect the conversation to a non-belligerent place against him. This is not enough: M3 goes on and reaffirms his intention to narrate M6’s position as supportive of feminism and, therefore, as an outsider of the new discursive borders. The *patriarchal subjugation* of any kind of dissent is installed in the group.

M6 excuses himself by rejecting his support for feminist aggressiveness. He saw the limits of the interaction and tried to go back to them. But M3 continues to portray him as a *feminist defender* and rejects the idea that women are subjected. Instead, he argues that men, as well as non-feminist women, are repressed by a belligerent feminist dictatorship, just like the far right and antifeminism usually do, that is, sticking feminism to communism (Mayer & Sauer, 2017). This argument is held by a discursive social proximity level: his female relatives,

who are represented as antifeminists and therefore become a source of legitimation of his antifeminist stance.

M3's discursive attack works perfectly to stop the objections and to accept, through M6's silence, the new viable rules, and limits, to participate in the discussion. The antifeminist censorship is settled down and there is a clear constriction to speak up for equality between men and women. The far-right men in the group managed to silence conservative and moderate voices, shifting the discourse and thus the overall thinking of the group from ambiguity toward feminism to clear opposition to feminism. As some authors note, the power imbalance between conservatives and radicals, and peer-group dynamics favor this discursive escalation (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994).

In this stage, radical right-wingers feel free to overtly expose their ideas and criticisms against the Gender-Based Violence Law (GBVL). The law is perceived by them as a promotion of inequality and discrimination against men. According to them, GBVL is an unjust norm that leaves men helpless in the face of a woman's accusation (presumed to be false in their discourse):

[Excerpt-5]

M3- This is an anecdote. A close friend left money to a common female friend, and she didn't return it. Then he, who is the most polite person on the planet, required her to return his money. What did she do to get rid of this debt? She reported him for gender violence. They [the police] went to look for him and he spent 48 hours in jail. And he was ordered not to go near or call this girl again. Therefore, he has been left without money and, on top of that sued for... gender violence. This is not a case that a friend or a neighbor told me about. I have experienced it first-hand. So, this shows that we're doing something wrong. The solution can't be this GBVL because it is too, let's say, overwhelming for men.

M3 performs a "men-under-threat" discourse to attack GBVL (Messner, 2004). This feeling of being in danger (losing their privilege) is not completely caused by feminism and its social advances, "but by the apparent loss of entitled masculinity, a masculinity that affords power for no apparent reason other than 'biology as destiny'" (Allan, 2016, p. 36). Kimmel, in his remarkable book *Angry White Men* (2013), refers to this as men's "aggrieved entitlement". This affective strategy is commonly deployed by the far right and masculinism in several countries against feminist, queer, and antiracist movements (e.g., García & Díaz, 2022; Gökariksel et al., 2019).

M3, as well as other participants, admits his lack of knowledge about the GBVL. However, he uses a discourse from a social proximity level, the "close friend," to fill this information gap. The affective closeness with the involved subject gives him an authority

that leaves the argument unchallenged: they all accept it, in spite of its clear flaws—GBVL includes only those aggressions that occur within the heterosexual couple, it does not include violence among friends.

Participants rely on an inconsistent narrative of injustice, ineffectiveness, and uselessness of the GBVL—in line with Vox’s masculinist reinterpretation of the law (Cabezas Fernández, 2022b). This has the objective to invalidate and reject the efficacy of this law, while constructing a discursive field of male vulnerability and grievance, exposing the fragility of masculinity (Allan, 2018). There is no resistance to this discourse: the rest of the group accepts it or keeps quiet. This occurs until the moderator directly questions M6, the group’s “dissenting” agent, to intervene:

[Excerpt-6]

Moderator- How do you see it over there? You’re very quiet.

M6- Yes, I was listening. Let’s see... About the GBVL... There have always been people who have taken advantage of the laws.

M5- Every law has a loophole.

M6- Exactly. So, we are going to see them [these flaws in the law], and we are seeing them. You have told us a case [excerpt-5, M3] and it is a case... I believe it. It can be a clear example of how to take advantage of the GBVL. But we also must see the cases that have benefited from that law.

Moderator- And you, [...] What’s your feeling? Does it contribute more than it harms?

M6- I... My feeling is that... But well, it’s my feeling, you can totally disagree with me. We were talking about that before. There would be cases, but well, before there was not the information we have now. There was no internet, there were no social networks, there was no... So, of course, now everything, the slightest thing, boom! My feeling is that the GBVL is necessary [...].

M6 understood and assumed the current discursive parameters and preferred not to intervene until he was questioned. In his intervention, he points out that people take advantage of every law and GBVL is no exception. He truly believes that GBVL is necessary for today’s society. M6 performs different discursive strategies (accepting M3’s false story, inviting the others to disagree with him, and deploying a speech full of hesitant pauses and interjections) to accommodate his dissenting voice without being harshly sanctioned by the group, particularly by M3.

The confrontation and tension between M6’s conservative profeminist stance and M3’s radical antifeminism are present. This tension increases when M6 interrupts and confronts M5 and M3 about how many women and men have died since the GBVL approval:

[Excerpt-7]

M5- [...] Children are much more defenseless. They are the most vulnerable of all and there is no specific Child Protection Law. I understand that there are women who may be subjected, beaten, and abused by the greater strength of the male. They must be protected, but we don't talk about that, we talk about gender violence.

M6- How many women have died?

M3- With the gender law in force. It's worthless.

M6- And how many men?

M3- Excuse me?

M6- And how many men?

M5- Some.

M4- There are also some, huh?

M6- Well, if you all want, we can compare.

M3- Let's see... I wanted to point out, I had it written down here, that the GBVL... It is intrafamily or domestic violence. I reject that the law is gender-based. I think it is a misconception.

Just as M3 had done before, M6 tries to regain his "macho leadership" (Eksi & Wood, 2019) through interruptions and aggressiveness toward M5 and M3. M6 surprises M3 when he overtly confronts his discourse. Once the patriarchal subjugation is settled and the discursive limits are clear, M3 does not expect anyone to reproach him.

The antifeminist legitimacy flounders but does not break up completely: there is a complicity between M4 and M5 to defend M3. Nonetheless, M6 does contest this time and offers them to compare the real data about the GBVL's efficacy. If M6 was self-censored before, this time M3 has to silence this fracture through a drastic change of subject: he starts a conceptual debate. Although slightly different, certain fractures settle in the discursive field of the group. Two distinct but right-wing models of sexual politics are confronted: an overtly radical attack toward feminism and a conservative understanding of gender relations:

[Excerpt-8]

M4- We don't know how many [men's] suicides there are for not killing the woman. It's something that... the psychological abuse of women... I leave it here... I mean, they [the women] have always been the snakes, right? She [a woman] abuses her husband, but psychologically. So there comes a time when you throw yourself out of the window because you don't want to grab her by the neck... [...].

M3- [...] I'm against GBVL but, above all, I'm against violence against women. But it's true, the woman is very smart and turns you around, and drives you crazy, and knows how to poke you, and so on and so forth. Well, you have lost. You better go to your mother's house or wherever, but don't put your hand on a woman, that's never justified. [...]

M6- That's the point of GBVL.

M3- I don't understand you. I don't follow you...

Moderator- Yes, aha, develop a little bit. I can imagine where you're going, but... [...].

M6- I mean... You never have to consider killing a woman. No matter how psychologically abused you have been.

M3- That's why I say I don't think about it. I don't think about it, of course.

M6- But it has happened. It happens.

There is a clear confrontation, a fight to establish the acceptability line between the conservatives and radicals. While masculinist victimhood is performed by radical antifeminists, conservative stances try to de-radicalize these discourses claiming that it is not normal to think about killing a woman because she is psychologically abusing you. M6 completely breaks with the radical antifeminist constrictions and tries to reverse their victories through the invalidation of their discourses. M6 performs a conservative opposition toward those radical discourses.

4.4. Conservative Mediation: Sexual Violence as a Catalyst

So far we have seen how M6 is the only one dissenting from the antifeminist consensus, but this changes completely when the group addresses the problem of sexual violence:

[Excerpt-9]

M6- Why does a woman have to be afraid to go home at night and a man does not? I mean, it seems to me... I mean, we are degenerate!

M4- It's cultural.

M3- But is there anyone who thinks it's right that women have to be afraid? I'm sure no one is okay with that.

M6- Yes, but it turns out that there are... I've never heard of a case of a woman in a van insulting, or trying to put a man in a van, and I do know many cases of the other way around. It's a very serious problem. [...]

M3- It isn't a question of sexism and feminism. It's a question of insecurity. [...]

M6- More insecurity, but just in one direction.

M6's indignation about gender inequality is overt and escalates when some of the radical participants claim that sexual violence has nothing to do with sexism or gender inequality. The frustration about these claims makes M6 expose the *absurdity* of the situation and comprehend sexual violence as a structural gender issue. However, it is an "outside-the-family" structural gender issue, leaving the (Spanish) heterosexual family as a safe place and locating the sexual predator outside of it (Bernstein, 2012)—a person from the Global South, Muslim most of the time. M6's indignation creates a situation where M3 must highlight that no one wants women to be scared, but he reframes the problem: this is not a gender issue, but a security one. M6 continues not accepting this claim and replies to M3 ensuring that insecurity is only "in one direction."

Sexual violence seems to work differently—it follows a different pattern from gender violence-based violence. Since conservatives usually see sexual violence as an attack against the family, they have traditionally been "frenemies" of feminism in this fight (Whittier, 2018). Sexual violence is understood as an attack on women caused by an outsider, comprehending this violence as a violation of rights, not only of the victim, but of the family and, therefore, of the male authority. There is a "paternal conservatism" (Eksi & Wood, 2019) that proposes a moderate gender discourse to hold the (political and gender) power, moving conservative participants to refute the legitimacy of radical antifeminist stances:

[Excerpt-10]

M5- We started with gender violence, abuse, and this kind of thing. Now we have moved on to another field which is sexual issues. I believe that in sexual violence there must be zero tolerance, but absolutely zero. She can be drunk, she can be in bad clothes, she can be where it isn't convenient for her to be... But everyone must be protected: there are no exceptions. There, I believe in this explicit consent very clearly.

Moderator- If it's not yes, it's no...

M2- Of course.

M5- If it's not yes, it's no.

M2- It's no, indeed.

M5- If it's not yes, it's absolutely no.

M5 explicitly exposes that sexual violence is different from the rest of the topics, such as GBVL or feminism. There are no exceptions regarding sexual violence (outside of the family) and women must be always protected. Suddenly, M5, a conservative middle-aged upper-class man, repeats and supports two important and well-known feminist mottos: first, only explicit consent is a valid one ("if it's not yes, it's no"); and second, the context does

not justify any act of sexual violence (“she can be drunk, she can be in bad clothes, she can be where it isn’t convenient for her to be... But everyone must be protected”).

These two feminist claims were popularized in the last years by the feminist movement and the progressive and social-democrat Spanish government; and they were disrespected, rejected, and mocked by the Spanish right wing (including the conservatives). This shows how the political confrontation against radical right-wingers makes *active* conservatives hold, support, and assimilate some feminist demands, and even use a similar vocabulary. Conservative men freed from radical discursive limits and struggle to maintain their familial gender-equality stance:

[Excerpt-11]

M1- But it’s a matter of education and respect, and we have to respect...

M5- ... But if we put...

M4- ... But how is that girl alone?

M5- If she wants to be alone, let her be.

M4- ... Drunk...

M5- Let her be drunk and alone. No one has to rape her.

M1 and M4 attempt to answer the argument about the role of gender in sexual violence acts. They refute concepts such as consent under morally reprehensible situations or indicate that the problem has an educational origin. Thus, there is tension in the conversation about the role of consent and risk in relation to education, being the latter repeatedly used to blame women for being sexually assaulted:

[Excerpt-12]

M4- [...] Possibly the daughters of protective parents aren’t going to be raped. On the other hand, the daughters of “bah!” parents (parents that “don’t care”) have a bigger possibility to be raped.

M5- No.

M1- No.

M2- No, not that... [...].

M6- No, no, no, no. I don’t want to polemicize. But you can take your daughter to the pub, and you can go and get her...

M5- But meanwhile...

M6- Let me finish. And you can go to get her at the pub, thinking that your daughter has been there all the time, but who knows where she has been.

M1- Or she has the bad luck to cross paths with someone...

Moderator- With the wrong person.

M1- Of course.

[Speaking at the same time.]

M6- She has all the right in the world to go home alone, just like you do, and that nothing happens to her.

M5- If she wants to come back drunk, let her come back drunk.

M6- Exactly, exactly.

M1- That's the struggle of all women for a long time.

M4- Don't you think that you educate your daughter...?

M6- I educate her. I assure you that I educated her. But she indeed has all the right in the world to go home alone just like you and me.

M4 creates a relationship between the role of parents in their daughter's education and their risk of suffering sexual violence. Thus, he blames the unconcerned parents for their daughter's rape. This does not only have consequences on the sexual level (men are free of charge), but also on the socioeconomic one: he consolidates a moral standard, the always-careful parents—either through the parents' presence or the outsourcing of care tasks (with the economic, sexual, and racial implications involved in the global chain of care)—, which worker-class families are not able to fulfill due to material and time restrictions (Hennessy, 2009). However, within a disputed censor model between conservatives and radicals, this argument completely crosses the acceptability line. Even radical participants, who until now were positioning the origin of sexual assaults in the role of education (see excerpt-11), reject the argument that blames uncaring parents (“bah!” parents”) for their daughter being sexually assaulted. M1, for instance, first defends a lack of moral and values argument in younger generations to justify gender inequalities, to later express that “the struggle of women for a long time” is to go home alone without being raped, even if they are drunk.

In conclusion, sexual violence, together with the always-present M6's dissension, worked as a conservative catalyst. Conservative participants did not allow a debate on sexual violence and de-radicalized the discussion. Antifeminist legitimacy was refuted and abandoned, and a conservative gender-equality approach modulated the speeches of all participants.

5. Discussion and conclusions

In this analysis, we have seen how when right-wing men discuss gender issues, different ideological and gender arguments, disputes, and positions emerge (see table 1). As mentioned above, feminist, conservative, and radical gender proposals coexist, like “tectonic plates” (Enguix, 2022b), to argue their political positions. First, the socially legitimized feminist stance configured initial censorship that prevented the participants from overtly and frontally attacking feminism. There was an ambivalent stance between the *necessity* or the *aggressiveness* of feminism and therefore an ambivalent moral judgment of this social movement. Once the participants realized they were among their peers, new legitimizations and censorships were negotiated. The result was a continuous discursive escalation until the consolidation of antifeminist and reactionary discourses. Ambivalence was then performed by those who rejected this patriarchal radicalism and turned into a minority as the conversation advanced. Thus, we were able to see how gender functions as a mechanism of hegemonic struggle on the right wing (Navarro & Redondo, 2021), allowing the expansion of radical discourses over conservative ones.

It is surprising how the structural censorship of feminism only occurred in the men’s focus group. In the women’s and mixed-gender groups, the participants felt the confidence to position themselves against feminism since the beginning. However, in the men’s group, the weakness of feminism as a discursive hegemonic force rapidly became apparent. In a few interventions, the narrative of *feminism as aggressive* allowed antifeminist situational censorship to emerge.

The new men’s group’s discursive limits established a new mechanism to censor those not-enough antifeminist discourses. This censorship was performed through silencing, mockery, and aggressiveness toward those who tried to defend, or at least understand, the relevance of feminism. Despite these patriarchal boundaries, sexual violence against women worked as a limit of decency, establishing some discursive and political connections between conservative and feminist stances (Celis & Childs, 2018; Whittier, 2018). Conservatives strongly and unambiguously stood up against the antifeminist censorships which permitted the implosion of its negotiated legitimization system. This conservative opposition to antifeminist radicalism allowed them to *rescue* some radicalized participants from the *antifeminist vortex*.

	Initial ambivalence	Censorship's restructuring	Patriarchal subjugation	Conservative mediation
Discourse	Feminism	Feminism & legislation	Legislation	Sexual violence
<i>General legitimacy</i>	Mainstream feminism	RAE (Academy of Spanish Language)	Police & lawyers	-
<i>Social proximity</i>	-	Female relatives	Close friends' experiences	Wives and daughters
<i>Incoherencies</i>	Feminism is needed and useless	- Superiority in formal equality (constitution & penal code), but GBVL Discriminates - GBVL discriminates, but GBVL is useless		Sexual violence is gender-based, but other acts against women aren't
Censorship				
<i>Structural</i>	Feminism is needed	Far-right	Far-right	Far-right
<i>Situational</i>	Feminism is aggressive	Antifeminism	Antifeminism	Familial gender-equality
Social Relations				
<i>Complicities</i>	-	Aggressiveness and fear of feminism (M2, M3, M4 & M7)	Masculinist grievance (M4 & M3)	Sexual violence is gender-based (M2, M5 & M6)
<i>Tensions</i>	Feminism is aggressive (M1) vs. Feminism is needed (structural censor)	Feminism is aggressive (M3) vs. "It's feminism time!" (M6)	Men are victims (M4, M3 & M5) vs. Men are not victims (M6)	Consent (M5 & M6) vs. Education (M4)
<i>Constrictions</i>	Antifeminism	Gender-Equality	Gender-Equality	-

Table 1. Stages of social discursive practices in the men's focus group.

Source: elaborated by the authors.

Gender (discourse) has been fundamental in the right-wing's identification process and works as a parameter to differentiate between conservatives and far-right radical antifeminists (Cabezas Fernández, 2022b). The results of this analysis show how gender violence discourses, especially about GBVL, create a political landscape that favors a process of masculinist grievance and, therefore, radicalizes the political position of the whole group. However, this specific discussion also shows how some gender struggles (in this case, around sexual violence) establish a political border in the right wing that serves to construct political

identity and differentiate between conservatives and radical right-wingers. The right wing is not a solid and monolithic ideological space, but rivalries, roots, and different moral and political values are constantly in conflict in it (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018).

Sexual violence moved the conservative men of the group to abandon their safe non-interference position in order to defend, and even pronounce, feminist arguments. According to our analysis, the *conservative* understanding of sexual violence as an *outside-the-(Spanish)-family* issue protects heteronormativity and traditional male roles (Bernstein, 2012), but it also functions as a de-radicalization element. The embodiment of conservative masculinities enabled them to work as *mediators* and *de-radicalization agents*. M6's mediation role is only possible because he is conservative, a man, and part of this peer group of men.

We would like to finish this article by mentioning the dilemmas that feminism faces in the context of the normalization of far-right antifeminist discourses. Fine-grained dissents between conservative right positions and radical far-right positions—as the ones exposed in this article—could be turned into opportunities to contain the radicalization of right-wing men and their alignment with the far right. In Spain, feminism has achieved social legitimacy: we can think then that if antifeminism is being used as a political trigger by the far right, it is also plausible to think that part of the right wing will disagree with the antifeminist drift of the far right. The goal is not to let conservatives lead the feminist project, nor to take for granted that the mainstream right is a moderate and pro-gender-equality space, but to make them accountable for their share of responsibility to stop far-right antifeminist politics and their de-democratizing effects. If conservatives claim to be liberal-democratic political actors, this is the right time to prove it. So far, their alliances with the far right to govern some territories show the opposite tendency.

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