



WHERE HAVE ALL THE NORMAL MEN AND WOMEN GONE?

THE REPRESENTATION OF MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY IN THE ANTI-FEMINIST DISCOURSES OF THE WOMEN'S FAR RIGHT ORGANISATION *ANGRY MOTHERS*

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**CITATION: CONJUNCTIONS: TRANSDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF CULTURAL PARTICIPATION, VOL. 7., NO. 1, 2020
DOI: [HTTP://DX.DOI.ORG./10.7146/TJCP.V7I1.119853](http://dx.doi.org/10.7146/TJCP.V7I1.119853)**

KEYWORDS

FAR-RIGHT, MANOSPHERE, OPPOSITION TO GENDER, MASCULINIST DISCOURSE, HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY, CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER, VISUAL ANALYSIS

ABSTRACT

FAR-RIGHT SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, WHOSE POPULARITY IS ON THE RISE IN EUROPE, ARE OFTEN DESCRIBED AS MALE-DOMINATED ORGANISATIONS. CONSEQUENTLY, MASCULINITY IN THE CONTEXT OF FAR-RIGHT ORGANISATIONS AND THE MANOSPHERE HAS RECEIVED SCHOLARLY ATTENTION. HOWEVER, MOST STUDIES FOCUS ON MALE ORGANISATIONS AND MALE LEADERS, GIVING THE IMPRESSION THAT "MASCULINIST DISCOURSES" ARE REPRODUCED ONLY BY MEN (KIMMEL, 2013, 2018; MILLER-IDRISS, 2018). YET, IT BECOMES INCREASINGLY DIFFICULT TO CONTINUE TO IGNORE THE PATRIARCHAL DISCOURSES OF WOMEN ENGAGED IN ACTIVISM IN FAR-RIGHT ORGANISATIONS. THEREFORE, THIS EXPLORATORY STUDY FOCUSES ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IN THE ONLINE COMMUNICATION OF THE CZECH FEMALE ORGANISATION ANGRY MOTHERS. THE STUDY PROVIDES A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF HOW WOMEN CAN CO-CONSTRUCT THE MANOSPHERE, WHICH IS DEEMED TO BE A FUNDAMENTALLY MISOGYNIST ONLINE SPACE. TO ANSWER MY RESEARCH QUESTIONS: HOW DOES THE ORGANISATION USE VISUAL LANGUAGE TO CONSTRUCT GENDER IN THEIR ONLINE COMMUNICATION? AND WHAT TYPES OF MASCULINITY/FEMININITY ARE PORTRAYED AS SUPERIOR AND WHAT TYPES OF MASCULINITY/FEMININITY ARE PORTRAYED AS SUBORDINATE?, I ANALYSED MATERIAL PUBLISHED ON THE ORGANISATION'S FACEBOOK PAGE USING THE METHOD OF VISUAL ANALYSIS (ROSE, 2016), INFORMED BY CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS (CDA) (WODAK & MEYER, 2016). BASED ON THE FINDINGS, I ARGUE THAT THE ACTIVISTS' VIEWS PRESENTED IN THEIR POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AIM TO PRESERVE A MASCULINIST, PATRIARCHAL STRUCTURAL ORDER IN SOCIETY, DESPITE THEIR SELF-IDENTIFICATION AS PROTECTORS OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS. HOWEVER, THROUGH THEIR DISCURSIVE PRACTICES, THEY SIMULTANEOUSLY PORTRAY WOMEN AS POWERFUL ACTORS IN THEIR TRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES.

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Introduction

Mobilisations such as the Arab Spring, Occupy movements and Indignados that were largely organised online offered great hope for political change. During this period of cyberutopianism, several scholars argued that the new public space created by digital media provided a completely new terrain for political participation (Pavan, 2015), and they characterised these events as a new leaderless form of digital revolution (Gerbaudo, 2017; Nagle, 2017). However, this gave rise not only to revolutionary protest movements, but also to a new phenomenon commonly known as “the Manosphere” (Nagle, 2017). The notion of a “manosphere” refers to anti-feminist masculinist political subcultures that largely overlap with online far-right, racist and nationalist projects (Nagle, 2017). These spaces are occupied with the notion of beta and alpha males – members of these online spaces construct an imagery of a world in which some performances of masculinity are superior to other performances of masculinity, for which Raewyn Connell (2005) coined the terms *hegemonic* and *subordinate masculinities*. In other words, they interpret all human interactions through their understanding of hierarchy among gendered performances (Nagle, 2017). While these online spaces are considered to be male-dominated public spheres whose aim is to maintain patriarchal social structures and oppose gender progressive politics and women’s liberation, in this article I argue that not only men but also ultraconservative women can contribute to this patriarchal project by exploiting their female identity and claiming that feminism is harming women and is fundamentally against their own interests.

To do so, I look at the Czech far-right organisation *Angry Mothers*, which self-identifies as women who are deeply concerned with the state of Czech democracy, as they claim on their website: “we want the voice of us, normal and reasonable women, to be heard because we do not feel represented by our politicians”.¹ This organisation, which according to its website has 5,200 members, was officially registered in February 2016 and it made a noticeable appearance at the anti-Islam and anti-immigrant protests that took place during the peak period of the so-called refugee crisis from 2015 to 2017. Despite its appearance during these demonstrations, the organisation mostly operates behind the scenes. It publishes books, sends letters to politicians, organises public debates and is particularly active on the Internet, running its own website, blogs and, most importantly, public Facebook pages where it publishes its own articles, comments on political events, shares posts from other pages and presents its political views. While it might appear to be a small insignificant group outside the online world, its Facebook page was shut down for spreading hate speech and fake news by the Facebook authorities in August 2018, when it had over 45,000 followers, making it one of the most followed far-right Facebook pages in a Czech context.

The agenda of the organisation consists of a diverse range of topics, including a struggle against the so-called ‘Islamization of Czechia’ and women’s oppression in Muslim culture, as well as parents’ rights, abortion, contraception, anti-LGBTQI campaigns, education, free speech and home births. Its political communication on the internet combines the opportunistic language of feminism with ideas of ethno-nationalism and gender essentialism. To promote its ideology, the organisation uses populist ‘common sense’ logic and claims to protect the ‘natural order of things’, especially when it comes to gender, race and national identity. Its strategy is to discursively construct divisions within society. It does so by constructing a group of ‘normal Czech people’ and ‘corrupted elites’ (including politicians, NGOs, journalists and academics) that promote multiculturalism, LGBT rights and so-called ‘gender ideology’ (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). Despite the fact that the members’ self-identification as ‘mothers’ could be logically associated with a rather old-fashioned ‘mother-style’ type of posts drawing on moral indignation, their online activism largely draws on the alt-right online aesthetics of meme culture – they are playful, use faux irony and humiliate their opponents with wit and savvy language (Nagle, 2017). The activities of this supposedly female group are useful for the Czech far-right scene. They not only attempt to mobilise their followers, but also contribute to spreading emotion-based support for far-right political actors by softening the public face of far-right politics. As a result, the women’s contribution is warmly welcomed by the male activists, as one of the prominent faces of the Czech far-right scene claimed himself in his blog: “I knew that we would win when we manage to awake and gather together all self-confident, strong and brave women. I knew they wouldn’t hesitate to protect their families and children.”²

While other scholars have mostly focused on either how men perform and construct masculinity on the far right (Kimmel, 2018; Miller-Idriss, 2018) or women perform femininity on the far right (Mulinari & Neegaard, 2017), I will contribute by showing that the organisation’s discourse co-constructs both masculinity and femininity, as these are not performed in a vacuum but necessarily complement each other. As Connell (2005) rightly observes, “masculinity and femininity are inherently relational concepts, which have meaning in relation to each other, as a social demarcation and a cultural opposition” (p. 43). I

will argue that the aim of the discourse constructed by them is to engage in a symbolic struggle and defend conservative values and patterns of domination. However, while the construction of hegemonic masculinity is in accordance with traditional views on masculinity in far-right discourses, *Angry Mothers* has added a new, non-conventional understanding of femininity in the far-right context. I aim to answer two research questions: *How does the organisation use visual language to construct gender in its online communication?* and *What types of masculinity/femininity are portrayed as superior and what types of masculinity/femininity are portrayed as subordinate?* As its online communication is based on alt-right aesthetics, expressing itself in the kind of DIY culture of memes and user-generated content (Nagle, 2017, p. 12), I draw on visual analysis (Rose, 2016) informed by CDA (Wodak & Meyer, 2016).

In this article, I first contextualise the group's activism within the online space of the manosphere and introduce the theoretical concepts of hegemonic masculinities and emphasized femininities. I then proceed to the theorisation of the meme-based communication style typical of social media. Subsequently, I describe the methods used for data collection and data analysis. I finish by presenting the findings of the analysis.

The Manosphere and Hegemonic Masculinities within Far-right Discourses

Angry Mothers uses Facebook mostly for political participation and for articulating and negotiating its political opinions and identities. By running its own Facebook page, members of the organisation not only practise political participation themselves but also create an opportunity for their followers to 'participate' in the Czech public sphere, as the affordances of social media allow comments on political posts (Shifman, 2014, p. 120) and contributing to or sharing content from their page.

What is specific about their style of Facebook page is that it is largely inspired by discourses produced in the so-called manosphere, a phenomenon that emerged on the Internet after 2010. It is an online space where aggressive anti-feminist rhetoric and far-right fantasies of strong men who need to protect and feed their beautiful, obedient women intersect. According to Nagle (2017), manosphere is "the nastier corners of the Internet, filled with involuntary celibacy-obsessed, hate-filled, resentment-fuelled cultures of quite chilling levels of misogyny" (p. 145). The ideology that underpins such spaces is described by the concept of 'masculinism', a "logic or discourse that justifies and naturalises male domination" (Brittan, 1989 in Nicholas & Agius, 2018). This ideology takes differences between men and women for granted and perceives heterosexuality as the only 'normal' way of being sexual (Nicholas & Agius, 2018). Masculinism does not only marginalise women, but "operates to exclude all those who are feminized, whether women or men" (Peterson & Runyan, 2010, p. 63 in Nicholas & Agius, 2018).

In the light of this, the existence of women's groups such as *Angry Mothers* that contribute to such spaces seems to be paradoxical. Even though there have always been women who opposed feminism and claimed that feminists exaggerate male patriarchal practices (DeKeseredy et al., 2015), *Angry Mothers* has made it clear that it opposes immigration from Islam countries in the name of women's rights. Therefore, it seems almost impossible to imagine that it would deliberately contribute to spaces, where women are referred to as "worthless cunts", "attention whores" and "riding the cock carousel" (Nagle, 2017, pp. 148–149).

Yet, *Angry Mothers* does use social media to legitimise certain views on the male dominance over women. Similarly to other far right projects, drawing on the nationalist and ethnocentric discourses that are used to exclude and "other" everyone whose performances of gender do not fit the far-right imaginary of the nation as extended family (Yuval-Davis, 2002; Nagel, 1998), they promote gender-specific division of labour and heteronormativity – the constructs of femininity and masculinity are therefore essential within these discourses (Valkovičová, 2017). However, at the same time *Angry Mothers* portrays women as powerful agents empowered by their stereotypical roles.

To describe these hierarchical gender relations within the social structure, Connell introduced the concept of *hegemonic masculinity* in the 1980s. She defines masculinity as "a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage in that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture" (2005, p. 71). However, masculinity is not understood as static and unitary. It is subject to change and depends on other variables. Therefore,

instead of approaching masculinity as a universal phenomenon, she writes about ‘masculinities’, which allow her to acknowledge that masculinity changes according to the context, since gender intersects with other categories of difference, such as class or race; as examples, she mentions working-class and middle-class masculinities, or black men’s and white men’s masculinities, or homosexual and heterosexual masculinities. To point out how some ways of performing masculinity are perceived as superior to others within certain cultural contexts, she draws on Gramscian theory of ‘hegemony’, i.e. the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 831).

The concept of hegemonic masculinity is then understood as a configuration of discursive practice that allows men’s dominance over women and other ‘emasculated’ men (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832) and sustains the patriarchal order. Hegemonic masculinity involves persuasion of the population that the organisation of social institutions is ‘natural’ and ‘normal’, even to those who are portrayed as subordinate (Tapscott, 2018). Consequently, hegemonic masculinity is viewed as normative – “it embodies the currently most honourable way of being a man” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). At the same time, it is important to highlight the fact that there is not a single man who could completely fulfil the normative definition of hegemonic masculinity; it is only a socially constructed representation of manhood, which men can represent only to a certain extent. However, the existence of this discursive representation sustains the existence of patriarchy.

Finally, there is not only a hierarchy among the ways in which men can perform gender; there are also ways of performing femininity that are valued more than other ways of doing femininity. Connell (1987) calls it “emphasized femininity” – the form of femininity most valued by hegemonic masculinity (Tiidenberg, 2015). As I will show through my findings, there is a close, reciprocal relationship between the discursive practices in far-right discourses: while “emphasized femininities” can be shaped by the lenses of men who represent hegemonic masculinity, hegemonic masculinities can also be dictated by the women who represent emphasized femininities.

Meme-based Discourse and its Specificities

The nature of social media platforms allows *Angry Mothers* to blur the boundaries between interpersonal and mass, professional and amateur, and bottom-up and top-down communication (Shifman, 2014, p. 7). This is extremely useful for such organisations whose discourses could be easily attacked for racism and discrimination. Due to the jokey and humorous communication style often performed on social media, the admins can use faux-irony, affective visuals, savvy language and satire. These help it to make the ‘problematic aspects of their ideology inherent to their ideology’ implicit. The most significant feature of such communication is so-called memes.

Memes are Internet phenomena that communicate messages through images combined with short written texts, conveying the central message through parodies, remixes or mash-ups (Shifman, 2014, p. 2). They combine humorous and serious components and are also strongly intertextual (Ross & Rivers, 2018, p. 5). While they seem to be trivial pieces of pop culture, memes can be, and often are, political by default. Their creators and users participate in a normative debate about what the world should look like and the best way to get there (Shifman, 2014). In a way, Internet memes can be treated as (post)modern folklore, in which shared norms and values are constructed through cultural artefacts such as photoshopped images or urban legends (Shifman, 2014, p. 15).

As the nature of the online meme-based communication style suggests, the language used in such messages is not necessarily straightforward, especially when it comes to the far right. Therefore, when analysing messages communicating through such visuals, one must take into consideration the many layers of meaning that are embedded in alt-right savvy aesthetics based on so-called far-right “meta-discourse”. This meta-discourse presents and justifies the dark, racist, homophobic and misogynist humour that is often used in such messages (Billig, 2001). As Billig (2001) has already pointed out, it allows these actors to prevent their hatred being criticised by claiming that their posts are ‘just jokes’.

Making Sense of the Visual Representation of Gender in *Angry Mothers'* Discourse: Methods

To analyse such data, I use the method of visual analysis (Rose, 2001) informed by CDA (Wodak & Meyer, 2016), which takes both the visual elements and verbal context of images into consideration. This means that besides explicitly uttered messages and images, I am also interested in how these messages are informed by social and political practices, and by the wider context.

The material studied in this article is memes posted on the *Angry Mothers'* public Facebook page, including memes reposted from other social networks, as well as original content produced by the members of the organisation. Prior to the analysis, I conducted an interview with the founder, who is also one of the many admins of the page and an official chairperson of the organisation, through which I acquired permission to use material published on the page. The material used in this article was published between February 2016, when the group registered itself as an official organisation, and 26 August 2018, when the page was shut down by the Facebook authorities. In total, the initial selection procedure generated a collection of 399 images.

As mentioned before, the Facebook page serves to cover a diverse range of topics. As this study's aim is to analyse the discursive construction of masculinities and femininities, I decided to focus only on posts that explicitly commented on gender, gender roles and performances of gender and gendered bodies. To do so, I went through the collected posts several times and selected those where the admins used keywords such as "woman", "femininity", "man" and "masculinity", or where images of women were contrasted with images of men, or one way of being a man/woman was contrasted with another way of being a man/woman, which was deemed as explicitly touching on the topic of gender via its visual representation. Based on this procedure, 37 images were selected for analysis.

This study is based on an interpretative approach. After I detected repetitive patterns among the selected posts that repeated themselves many times, I divided the posts into groups based on the observed patterns. I first observed what was being depicted in the pictures and then more closely observed which characteristics were attributed to the persons in the images. I particularly looked at what semiotic means were used to construct positive or negative presentations of different ways of performing gender. In the analysed material, I detected the discursive construction of a dichotomy between masculinity and femininity, which were certainly not perceived as two equal phenomena: rather, the male gender was portrayed as being superior to the female one. However, the posts on the Facebook page further emphasised that being "a man" or "a woman" was not enough. There were discursively constructed ways of performing one's masculinity and femininity, and one way of doing so was seen as superior to another. After going through all the collected data, I identified three umbrella themes: *unacceptable performances of masculinity and femininity*; *desirable gender performances*; and, finally, *empowered femininities in which women are portrayed as subordinate yet powerful*. I have decided to present the two most representative memes for each of the themes that I identified in the analysis.

However, it is important to note that *Angry Mothers* is a political project and its gendered views are connected with its political views, which represent its political opinions – it uses criticism of certain individuals, their bodies and gendered performance to construct a bigger picture of what is wrong with society. It was, therefore, necessary to look not only at the individuals shown in the pictures, but also to disentangle the bigger picture that these memes are supposed to signify. As Wodak and Meyer (2016) point out, discourses are context-dependent semiotic practices, both socially constituted and socially constitutive and necessarily related to a macro-topic (p. 235). Therefore, throughout the analysis, I attempt to embed the images in the bigger context of far-right discourse by conducting an analysis informed by the literature on the far right and nationalism, long-term ethnographic observations of far-right groups in Czechia and information I gathered through interviews with activists.

Feminine Manosphere Where Some Women Deserve Men's Respect

Nightmares of the Far-right: Unacceptable In-betweenness



Naštvané matky
May 16 at 5:00pm · 🌐

Někdy prostě nejde vývoj správným směrem... 😞

See Translation



Fig 1 & 2

1) "This picture of ministers of defence in different countries explains a lot."

2) "Czech ministers of defence from 1938 and 2018. Something has f**ked up."

As mentioned before, nationalist ideology is strongly tied to the idea of gender binarism, which *Angry Mothers* often expresses by ascribing certain roles and personality features to men and others to women. It often expresses the belief that men have natural leadership qualities and are protectors because they are strong, rational, emotionless and cold – as portrayed in the picture (Figure 1): men wear a uniform and make no facial expression. In contrast, women are portrayed as gentle, caring and emotional by default, and therefore not fit for politics (Figure 1). Or, put even worse, they perform behaviours inappropriate for such a serious post, such as the Czech defence minister in Figure 2. Furthermore, according to this far-right ethos, politics should be about showing power and strength to the enemies who should be in fear and feel threatened. On the other hand, women should know what their role in society is and not put themselves into unsuitable positions. Hence, women engaging in politics are threatening, because they do not respect the dichotomy between men and women.

Besides gender binarism, these memes further express a dichotomy between the 'good old days where everything was in order' and 'modern, deviant times where things are upside down' which is uttered by the caption "something has f**ked up" in Figure 2. The ultimate enemy – feminism – is to blame. Due to women's empowerment, instead of listening to their natural instincts and fulfilling their duty of being mothers, women do politics and make the whole nation weak.



Kvůli těm vpravo už neuvidíš ty vlevo



Figure 3 & 4

3) "Because of the one on the right you will not see those on the left any more."

4) "I am studying Gender Studies. The development from first year to third year."

Similar kinds of 'condemnable' people are women who do not 'know their place', but even worse, they do not even 'look like women', meaning women who do not live up to 'the traditional understanding of feminine beauty' ascribed to 'emphasized femininities' (Connell, 1987). These memes put forward an image, it seems, where women's only duty is to be desirable to the male gaze. Women not complying with these ideals are ridiculed because they fail to perform the role of desirability to the other sex and fail to look like the woman on the left in Figure 3 - skinny, symmetric, white, long-haired, exposing female curves. In more candid terms, what is threatening to society here is not so much the political activism of feminists and gender scholars, but rather the idea that feminism makes women 'ugly'; it makes them 'nasty women'.

Again, the strategy of depicting 'feminist femininities' is executed by contrasting the traditional way of performing femininity with femininity performed by 'the other', degenerated femininity, in sarcastic memes using images from popular culture. The admins of the page express a fear of being threatened by their own, traditional femininity not being desirable anymore, and feminism ascribing new beauty norms which are not doing women justice.

Naštvané matky
March 22 at 11:00am · 🇸🇰

Pánové, je váš šatník připraven na jaro? 😊

P.S.: Jestli tohle někdo bere vážně, je to pošuk. 😊



MÓDA VTEDY A TERAZ



NIEČO SA SKUTOČNE POS*ALO

Figure 5 & 6

5) "Men, are you ready for spring? :-). P.S. If somebody takes this seriously, they are nuts."

6) "Fashion before and now. Something has fu**ed up for real."

However, according to members of *Angry Mothers*, the most condemnable people are men who no longer resemble men, emasculated 'beta men' who 'committed the crime against masculinity' by looking feminine. At the core of this theme is a conspiracy theory that due to women's liberation, the modern world is experiencing a crisis of masculinity and the collective emasculation of men on a massive scale. In other words, real masculinity is slowly disappearing and becoming extremely rare, and real men, meaning white heterosexual men, are an endangered species. To convince the followers of their page that this crisis of masculinity is not a hoax but a real threat, *Angry Mothers* often posted pictures of men in non-conventional clothes, dressed in colours and garments that are deemed feminine, and accompanied them with harsh comments whose aim is humiliation. To do so, they positioned 'the good old-fashioned looking men' in contrast to 'modern, supposedly emasculated men'. In this way, the admins again drew on nostalgic feelings that nothing is as it used to be. This 'tragic development' is allegedly a consequence of the governance by liberal 'neo-Marxist' elites and evidence of the degradation of modern society. The only possible outcome of this development is extinction of the white race, commonly referred to as a "white genocide" in such discourses.

In such images, the organisation portrays the subordinate masculinities and femininities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) in a way that they violate the natural order and are against common sense. To make the theme stronger, the admins of the page exploit their female gender identity in order to humiliate the so-called "beta men" from the women's perspective. They do so by using the voice of masculinism (Brittan, 1989 in Nicholas & Agius, 2018) that allows them to exclude feminised men and women from public spaces and complain that feminism and cultural liberalism have robbed them of the possibility of finding proper, attractive partners, and fathers, for their potential children and, therefore, their fundamental right to be mothers. They, thus, portray themselves as the "emphasized femininities" (Connell, 1987) that have the power to decide what type of men should represent the "hegemonic masculinities" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Far-right Fantasies of Desirable Bodies

Real, Desirable Men



Figure 7 & 8
8) "French president on the left. Hungarian president with his family on the right."

In contrast to the previous themes, in Figures 7 and 8 we deal with the desirable, i.e. the ideals of the heteronormative order. Here, the hierarchy is created by contrasting two different ways of doing masculinity – heterosexual vs queer, non-white masculinity. The superiority here is achieved by performing a macho style that is often related to leaders who use a right-wing populist style to gain power.

By populist style here I mean constructing themselves as charismatic alpha males, drawing attention to their bodies and

performing their potency, often showing themselves in the company of beautiful women and feeling superior enough to judge women's beauty. For example, as American president Donald Trump, often praised on the *Angry Mothers'* page, claimed in a leaked recording of a private conversation, he can do anything to any woman. As Moffitt (2016) points out, these leaders often want to demonstrate that they metaphorically "have balls"; in other words they are tough, daring and decisive, even openly misogynistic. In contrast, the women in the picture in Figure 7 serve only as a representation of mindless objects decorating the leaders' aim, which for them is to be beautiful but silent.

On the other hand, Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban, in the image in Figure 8, represents a good, moral, conservative, Christian man who proved his manhood by becoming a father. At the same time, his virility is highlighted by the large number of children. Fatherhood is a marker of masculinity often represented in the performances of populist leaders. For example, already mentioned Donald Trump often shows off with his successful daughter Ivanka and brags about her beauty. To highlight the qualities of these right-wing leaders, they are displayed in contrast to French president Emmanuel Macron, who is surrounded by people representing queer – perceived as perverted and deviant – masculinity.

The fact that the people surrounding Macron are non-white contributes further to the far-right fantasies built around white masculinity. By reposting these memes, *Angry Mothers* tries to give the impression that the European Union's aim is to cleanse the white race. It often describes the European Union as being run by cultural neo-Marxists who have lost all common sense and do not respect the 'laws of nature' but impose their own multiculturalist views on normal individuals and try to artificially create multi-race rainbow families.

In a wider socio-political perspective, these pictures do not only represent the depicted individuals but also serve as a metaphor for masculine and feminine state power. Emmanuel Macron (together with Angela Merkel) is often portrayed as a signifier of the European Union in the discourses of the far right in Czechia. Thus, these memes serve as a means to portray the European Union and its leaders as a weak, emasculated, feminine hybrid body that does not come from "the people" but is imposed top down on nation-states, as are its abnormal values.

Women as Warriors: The Power of Women within the Patriarchal Project

Powerful Women: Women Who Make Men Better

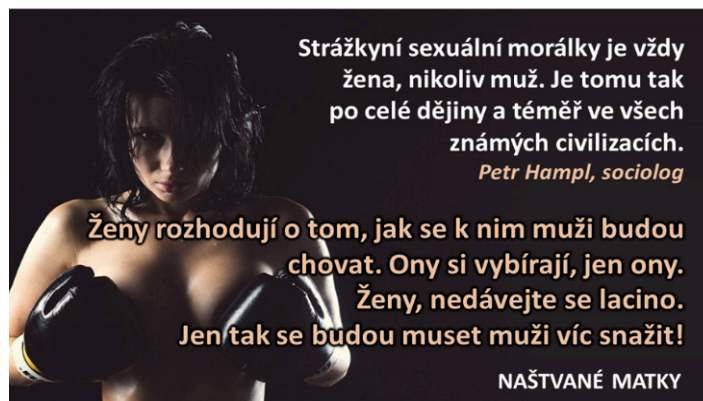


Figure 9 & 10

9) "The protector of sexual morals is always a woman, not a man. It has always been like that in almost all cultures. (Petr Hampl, sociologist). Women decide how men will treat them. They choose, only them. Women, do not give yourselves away so easily. Only in this way men will have to try harder! (*Angry Mothers*)

10) "From an invitation to the Tantra Festival, Prague. In a society where women do not have vitality, are weak and unhappy, there are no strong, brave and vital men. They are equally weak and lack vitality, as much as women. In contrast, where women are loved and respected, men become strong and heroic and spirituality blossoms. Women, nurture your happiness and strength, because otherwise we will be surrounded only by weak men!" (*Angry Mothers*)

In this theme, women are portrayed as a means for a man to prove his masculinity and potency. Yet, they are not necessarily portrayed only as passive objects. In contrast to the “mindless objects” standing next to the “alpha leaders”, they are portrayed as warriors with strength, wearing tantra costumes and boxing gloves (Figures 9 & 10). Despite their bodies still being potential objects of sexualisation, women can and therefore should dominate. They are the “protectors of sexual morals” in society. While men are portrayed as sexual predators by default, women are deemed to be the ones whose duty it is to be selective. Otherwise men will stop being competitive and stop trying to chase them and become weak. This interpretation of women’s agency fits into a broader far-right narrative that blames the sexual revolution and women’s liberation for the decadent development of Western society. Nowadays, it seems far too easy to get with a woman and they can be as promiscuous as they wish as sex is no longer perceived only as a means for reproduction. Therefore, men have no need to stick to one woman and to take care of her. Therefore, a strength of a woman lies in her attractive looks, meaning that she should still expose her curvy body, but abstain from sex in order to keep herself desirable and special for the ideal, chosen man.

Ultimately Powerful Women: Mothers



Figure 11 & 12

11) “I always thought that the most important task for women is to raise their kids. But it is not true. The most important task for a woman is to choose the correct partner.” Marek Herman, psycholog.

12) “Man can find himself in a paradise through family, household and children, in which he can see the work of God and angels every day.”

The previous images suggested that men, in order to be men, needed to be heterosexual and potent, and this would not be possible without the presence of a woman who could make them fathers. That gives women the greatest power in society. Indeed, the women who are depicted as the most powerful according to the imagery of *Angry Mothers* are – not surprisingly – mothers. The women depicted in Figures 11 and 12 portrayed as mothers – accompanied by their children, shown in an intimate position, eyes closed, being kissed and hugged by their loved ones – are supposed to represent generic, white young mothers and to evoke emotions that are associated with motherhood – happiness, warmth and tenderness.

While motherhood has always been a strong theme within nationalist discourses, since it guarantees the continuity of imagined communities and women are always depicted as the biological and cultural reproducers of the nation (Yuval-Davis, 1997), there is something more to the strategy of situating women in the role of the mother. Not only do they give birth, but they are further in the lead, because in their role as mothers, they should be listened to. Women as mothers are no longer supposed to stay at home and take care of children and their husbands. Quite the opposite. Motherhood is perceived as a privilege that gives them the right to be angry, to go out and be loud, because without them there would be no nation and no men would be men. Thus, they ought to be respected even in the patriarchal system. Such ideas are clearly demonstrated in the speech given by the founder of the organisation during the anti-Islam demonstration on 12 September 2015 in Vencislav’s Square in Prague. First announced as a representative of the so-called “gentle gender” (a common Czech metaphor for women), in her speech

she was anything but gentle, as mostly emphasised by her anger:

“Yes, all women are angry. It is no wonder. Today, I wish to speak on behalf of women, mothers and, most of all, angry mothers. Because we women are more sensitive when it comes to injustices. We are not afraid to use our instinct that helps us to protect our kids from danger and threats. And we feel very threatened these days”.³

This strategy cultivates a strong subject position for women who can claim they are defending the traditional family, their children, and ultimately the national culture. It allows them to reframe women’s rights as a struggle for the rights of mothers and motherhood. In this sense, this strategy helps them to use their identity of strong, empowered women to support a fundamentally conservative patriarchal project which decides which men deserve to be in power. By doing so, *Angry Mothers* ascribes the women who represent “emphasized femininities” (Connell, 1987) a certain level of agency and power. In a way, then, women are still portrayed as subordinate to men, but as having power over them at the same time. Only because of them can men become real men. As the chairperson of the group claims in her blog:

“In the end, all frustrated and confused feminists will be walked all over by any self-confident woman that draws her energy from a successful relationship with a man and motherhood. A woman with a resolved partnership and well-behaved children is the best!”⁴

Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to deepen our common knowledge and understanding of how gender is communicated by far-right discourses on social media. To do so, I analysed a Facebook page run by a Czech female organisation, *Angry Mothers*, and asked how masculinity and femininity are constructed by women who paradoxically produce and reproduce the ideology of a fundamentally misogynist project. The analysis showed that unlike established far-right parties that operate in the public sphere and need to perform as serious politicians as well as cover their racist and homophobic agenda, the grassroots organisations operating online have access to a different style that is common for online communication on social media. It allows them to use memes with a mocking tone and irony that enable them to maintain a high number of followers who not only follow the page to get their feed on the political situation in the country, but also to be amused. Not only does the organisation attempt to visually express the desired gendered performances as they ought to be, but it further shows images of individuals who according to it fail to be proper men and women. Not so in a way that shows them as frightening enemies of society, but rather as a laughing stock that deserves humiliation.

The analysis of the discourse expressed in the visual material showed that feminism is perceived as the ultimate enemy, because, according to the organisation, it is liberating women from their subordinate positions and robbing white, heterosexual men of the opportunity to become “real men” by being able to perform a macho style or becoming fathers. Furthermore, it is also harming women. Due to feminism, women are becoming “slutty” and less attractive. *Angry Mothers* expresses beliefs that this development has serious consequences as it emasculates men. Men no longer desire women as they are masculine and emancipated, but they also no longer have to compete for them as women give themselves away too easily. Additionally, feminism is portrayed as a neo-Marxist, totalitarian ideology, the aim of which is to change the gender identity of both women and men on a massive scale. This narrative becomes particularly prominent in the context of a post-Soviet state such as Czechia where the organisation can refer to the past experiences of totalitarian state in which language had been changing artificially and everybody’s life was under state control.

On the other hand, the finding showed that the “feminine version of nationalist projects” can serve as a guide as to how to empower women within a fundamentally patriarchal project that deems them subordinate to men. By leading a sexually ascetic life and selecting their partners properly, they have the power and privilege to make men not only better but also allow them to become fathers. Hence, they can have authority over men by keeping themselves attractive and desirable, and providing men with offspring. *Angry Mothers’* strategy of exploiting motherhood is not new. In fact, we can find vast evidence of the strategy of veiling right-wing agendas in the “mothers’ struggle”. For instance, it has been used by “right-wing feminists” such as Sarah

Palin, who deliberately self-promotes herself as a “hockey mama” with the motto “mother knows best”, or Pia Kjøesgaard, who used to be referred to as mama Pia (Meret, 2015), or so-called *Mothers’ movements against war*, an American right-wing, pacifist organisation from the period of the Second World War (Jeansonne, 1996, p. 1). As Kathleen Blee (2002) correctly points out, depicting women as mothers can not only “expand to a politics of caretaking, justice, and resistance to capitalism (...) but also can become deeply entangled with reactionary and bigoted interests” (p. 112). Thus, women actively participating in far-right politics, such as *Angry Mothers*, can exploit their motherhood to avoid identifying with their supposedly desirable roles of obedient wives and become loud actors in grassroots politics. The contribution of the analysis sheds light on the myriad of ways in which gender norms can be redefined and contested in the echo chambers of closed social network groups, as well as in broader society.

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Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.nastvanematky.cz/kdo-jsme>
- 2 <https://www.ivcrn.cz/martin-konvicka-nejen-o-zenach/>
- 3 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gf7kVJsGZT0>
- 4 <https://www.evahrindova.cz/co-znamena-byt-antifeministkou>