

# Heterogeneous Views on Fourth-Wave Feminism among Young People in Valencia. Gender and Equality Discourse

*La juventud valenciana y su heterogeneidad ante la cuarta ola feminista.  
Discursos sobre cuestiones de género e igualdad*

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## Key words

- Activisms
- Social Discourses
- Popular Feminism
- Focus Groups
- Neoliberalism

## Palabras clave

- Activismos
- Discursos sociales
- Feminismo popular
- Grupos de discusión
- Neoliberalismo

## Abstract

The social discourses of young people aged 18 to 30 in Valencia were explored in the context of the emergent popularisation of feminism. Focus groups were used to analyse how youth address gender and equality issues. A structural sample was developed by considering two axes: the volume of global capital and the positions on the gender order. Nine focus groups were used to analyse the different discursive positions on feminism and gender issues, as well as the strategies for change provided. Discursive positions were analysed in relation to both the hypervisibility of feminism in the neoliberal context and the emergence of popular misogyny in opposition to the popularisation of feminisms.

## Resumen

Ante el contexto de emergente popularización del feminismo, exploramos los discursos sociales de las personas jóvenes de 18 a 30 años del territorio valenciano a través de la técnica del grupo de discusión para analizar cómo se abordan las cuestiones de género e igualdad. Se diseñó una muestra estructural atendiendo a un doble eje: el volumen de capital global y los posicionamientos respecto al orden de género. A través de 9 grupos de discusión se analizaron las diferentes posiciones discursivas frente al feminismo y las cuestiones de género, así como las de estrategias de cambio que despliegan. Las posiciones discursivas se analizan tanto en relación con la hipervisibilidad del feminismo en el contexto neoliberal como a la emergencia de la misoginia popular frente a la popularización de los feminismos.

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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

The popularisation of feminism has been unstoppable in recent times, with milestones such as the international #MeToo movement and the #YoSiTeCreo initiative in Spain transforming the ways in which feminism is seen. It has become popular, is something to be celebrated, and has moved from being a taboo word (especially in the public and media spaces), to occupying a central space in public and social discourses (Favaro and Gill, 2018). Celebrities, representatives of the political, cultural and business worlds all call themselves feminists. There has been an increase in the number of series, films, comics and books under the feminist label, and a variety of feminist merchandising can be found in any shopping centre.

This new level of visibility, which permeates popular culture and shapes the new contours of the media environment, has a different impact across generations. Young people have been socialised into a new interpretative framework of feminism that is a priori positive and widely accepted. In the global arena, the younger generations are setting feminist agendas, as was made clear in the Chilean social outburst which started with a university takeover with feminist demands in 2019 (Ibáñez and Stang, 2021) and the mass protests for the legalisation of abortion in Argentina that have taken place since 2018 (Tomasini and

Morales, 2022). In Spain, successive feminist mobilisations took place, leading up to the Feminist Strike on 8 March in 2018 and 2019. Previous highlights included the Freedom Train march in 2014 in protest against the proposed law restricting abortion rights; the State March against Gender Violence in 2016; and the protests in 2018 against the court ruling in the “La Manada”<sup>2</sup> case. Valencia has seen an expansion of the grammars of youth action. Feminist collectives and organisations have proliferated (including feminist student unions, neighbourhood assemblies, feminist art groups, etc.) with a diverse range of activist practices.

On the other hand, there has been a patriarchal and openly misogynist reaction that takes feminism as the central object of political struggle. That is to say, in the face of its hypervisibility, a misogynist reaction has appeared in which this movement, but also the laws on gender identity and LGTBIQ+ rights, have become the object of criticism in social and political debates.

The contextual framework of this research on the discourse of Valencian young people begins after the 2018 protests and ends with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020). The younger generations have witnessed and played a key role in changing perceptions of feminism. This change has been characterised by greater social acceptance, greater inclusion of playful elements and the popularisation of feminism within mainstream culture.

The aim of this article is to analyse the social discourses of Valencian young people on the status of gender equality. The specific objectives of this study were: 1) to analyse how young people perceive feminism and its legitimacy; 2) to identify the dis-

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<sup>2</sup> During the Sanfermines festivities (Pamplona) in 2016, five men raped a woman in the doorway of a building. The case was particularly high profile in the media and mobilised public opinion against the judicial system that handed down a sentence for sexual abuse, not gang rape.

cursive positions that are dominant and in dispute in relation to gender equality; and 3) to analyse the different strategies of social transformation used by young people. A qualitative methodology was designed using focus groups to collect data in order to analyse the circulation of discourses, the main arguments of consensus and their limits.

## **PARADOXES AND CONTRADICTIONS IN THE POPULARISATION OF FEMINISM IN NEOLIBERAL TIMES**

The 2019 Macro-survey on Violence against Women (CIS, 2019), designed for a sample of 10 000 women over 16 years of age in Spain, studied existing sympathy towards the feminist movement. On a scale from 0 (no sympathy) to 10 (total sympathy), for the age group 16-24, 84 % ranked themselves between 6 and 10 on the scale, and 54.1 % ranked themselves as being between 9 and 10. In the 25-34 age group, 78.2 % positioned themselves between 6 and 10, and 37.8 % between 9 and 10. These patterns of opinion were corroborated by the results of the 2019 INJUVE Survey. A total of 82.7 % Women aged 15-19 identified with feminism. This figure rose to 83.1 % in the 20-24 age group and remained at 77.2 % in the 25-29 age group (INJUVE, 2021: 260). These figures differed significantly from the responses provided by young men, with 51.5 % in the 15-19 age group, 61.1 % in the 20-24 age group and 72.2 % in the 25-29 age group stating that they strongly identified with feminism. The surveys reflected both broad support for feminism and a gap in the views of men, especially younger men.

A markedly ideological and gendered polarisation has emerged in the context of increased visibility and greater legitimacy of feminism, (García-Mingo, Díaz-Fernández and Tomás-Forte, 2022). Cultural analyses have warned of a twofold contradiction in the

popularisation of feminism: as it has been gradually included in the dominant culture and has become somewhat devoid of political content. This gradual inclusion (Gorosari, 2021) has led to a patriarchal reaction that is seen as a defence against the values promulgated by feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

In this process, feminism has gone from being considered unnecessary in the dominant discursive framework in the 1990s (McRobbie, 2008) (as it was assumed that gender equality had already been achieved), to securing a frontstage position again as something to be defended and celebrated (Gill, 2016, 2017). The popularisation of feminism and its acceptance outside progressive environments has been made possible by adopting a markedly individualistic popular discourse (Gill, 2017), centred on empowerment (Banet-Weiser, 2018), the culture of trust (Orgad and Gill, 2022) and free choice. There is a growing presence of a popular feminism that makes it possible to be a feminist in neoliberal conditions (Rottenberg, 2018). This has been achieved through the dissemination of a discourse that dispenses with relevant recognition, redistribution and participation policies (Fraser, 2005). The struggle for the emancipation of minority groups present in the different social and political struggles of feminism has been depoliticised in its media version. This has been seen, for example, in the global debates on the *Me Too* movement, where structural analyses of inequality have been blurred by the discussion of individual cases (Maseda and Gómez Nicolau, 2018). This has also been apparent in the dissemination of cultural products about women with successful careers in which the idea of merit is reinforced (Litter, 2017). This is, following Banet-Weiser (2018), one of the keys to the success and dissemination of popular feminism is that adopting it does not entail transforming the social order.

These new modes of recognition of feminism acquire meaning in a specific context of rampant individualism, neoliberal subjectification and the psychologisation of life (Gill, 2017; Cabanas and Illouz, 2018; Ahmed, 2019). The powerful ideas of empowerment, resilience and freedom of choice are articulated through self-monitoring practices and psychological work for better management and organisation of life. The extension of managerial discourses has generated a depoliticised discourse in which overcoming structural barriers becomes a matter of overcoming personal challenges, of self-improvement leading to empowerment (Medina-Vicent, 2020). Self-development and self-improvement are considered the paths to happiness (Benigno, 2023), one of the neoliberal imperatives and distractors from a critical questioning of social injustices (Han, 2021). The dissemination of these cultural narratives of feminism as a neoliberal identity coexists, however, with diverse feminist projects in academic, political and activist settings that have been catalysed into a heterogeneous and pluriform feminist movement (Martínez, 2019).

The other side of the coin is the emergence of a reaction. Sarah Banet-Weiser argues that, although the discourses of popular feminism do not affect the essential structures of power, given their imbrication with capitalism and market culture, their hypervisibility has been taken as symptomatic of an outbreak of hatred and violence towards men. It is men who have co-opted the role of the victim, an idea that leveraged populist discourses and translated into global electoral and political successes (Banet-Weiser, 2018). There is a growing tendency towards a form of polarisation within which anti-feminism and traditional gender views are common features in the ideological foundations of radical right-wing populist parties (León and Aizpurua, 2023). Reactive discourses proclaim, among others, the idea of the traditional family and up-

hold the maintenance of a gender order in which sexual and gender diversity is seen as a threat. These ideas are out of step with the increasing visibility of non-binary, transgender and other individuals who reject the essential binary distinctions of male and female (Risman, 2018). They are also at odds with the growing acceptance of sexual and gender diversity among younger generations (INJUVE, 2021).

An overtly misogynistic and racist culture is thus taken shape, one which holds women (and feminism) responsible for the loss of meaning that modern men seem to experience. In the face of the advancement of the rights of women and other minority groups, the traditional masculinity model feels threatened (Kimmel, 2013; Keller and Ryan, 2018; Sanfélix, 2020; Ranea, 2021). Misogynist discourse is characterised by resentment and the idea of rights having been lost or thwarted (Kimmel, 2013). Religious movements (Núñez Puente and Gámez Fuentes, 2017), the online space (Ging, 2017; García-Mingo, Díaz-Fernández and Tomás-Forte, 2022) and populism have been key elements in the spread of misogynist discourses. Jordi Bonet-Martí proposed separating anti-feminism from misogyny; he characterised the former as an organised counter-movement featuring greater cognitive sophistication, a high capacity to adapt to the cultural and historical context and a dialectical relationship with the feminist movement's demands and forms of expression (Bonet-Martí, 2021: 62). This is expressed in the anti-feminist popular literature (Medina-Vicent, 2023).

This counter-movement has many levels: from the deformation and transformation of gender as an analytical category that explains power relations as a "threatening ideology", to a mindset that permeates and is integrated into our lives and our "everyday conversations" (Cabezas-Hernández and Vega-Solís, 2022). "Genderphobia" catalyses diverse anxieties and becomes

a thread that articulates the complexity and diversity of the reactionary ecosystem (Fassin, 2022). And it finally coalesces into a kind of “glue” where broad-spectrum right-wing coalitions converge (Grzebalska, Kováts and Peto, 2017).

Despite advances in equality, which have gone hand in hand with a new institutionalisation of the feminist agenda in Spain, social and value change is slow (Moreno, 2021). The patriarchal reaction has become an anti-establishment discourse (Rivas, 2021) as part of the contradictions and paradoxes of the expansion of contemporary feminism (Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg, 2020).

## RESEARCH APPROACH AND DESIGN

Although this article is only concerned with the analysis of discourses referring to feminism and gender equality, the research carried out between 2019–2020 addressed the analysis of discourses on the social concerns of Valencian young people. The geographical delimitation allowed us to take into account some aspects of its territorial configuration with a wide range of rural areas. These are dynamic and depopulated in varying degrees, and are traversed by an identity conflict linked to the Valencian language and culture that is interwoven into the political configurations of the region. The interest here lies in the absence of previous studies of this nature and the opportunity of exploring the particularities of this geographical area (Domínguez, 2023). These have been exacerbated by the substantial political change that occurred between 2015 and 2023. After years of conservative governments, new political actions were implemented regarding young people and equality which were somewhat reflected in the discourses of these groups.

In order to capture young people’s social discourse, the study design included the use of focus groups. As an open prac-

tice of social research, the focus group makes it possible to capture the fields of meaning that run through social discourses which permit individuals to be positioned differently (IOÉ, 1996: 86). Ensuring both heterogeneity and homogeneity in the composition of groups, participants can generate their own questions, frameworks and concepts, and prioritise them in their own terms and using their own vocabulary (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1999: 5).

Qualitative sampling seeks to systematise discourses (Conde, 2009) for subsequent relational analysis. Theoretical sampling (Kitzinger, 1995) was used to select people by using key criteria that encouraged the emergence of collective imaginaries rooted in living conditions. We agree with Barbour (2013: 89) that sampling decisions have an impact on the analysis, as they influence the main axes for comparison and enable processes for abduction reasoning based on pre-analytical conjectures (Conde, 2009: 123–138). “Young People” was defined in our study as the population from 16 to 30 years old. These limits are arbitrary but necessary to mark social position and trajectory as (and among) young people (Martín-Criado, 1998). The age of 23 was the central cut-off point to create two separate groups: a young person engaged in the process of education and a young person in the process of emancipation. Only those over 18 years of age were ultimately selected for operational reasons related to the signing of the informed consent form.

Nine focus groups were held with young people aged 18 to 30 from the Valencian region, taking into account: place of residence, education, employment, family background and gender diversity, which could give rise to different discourses with respect to the object of study. The literature indicates that key predictors of pro-egalitarian and feminist attitudes include employment, younger age, higher education and urbanicity (León and Aizpurua, 2023).

**TABLE 1.** *Structural sample of focus groups*

ID	Group name	Age	Education Level	Employment	Family origin	Habitat	Composition	Place and date FG was held
FG1	Young people at risk of vulnerability	18-23	No education, compulsory secondary education (known as ESO in Spain), Entry-Level Vocational Training (VT), Intermediate-level VT.	Unskilled jobs and unemployed.	Low income. Unemployed, on social benefits.	Urban, impoverished neighbourhood	Mixed (5 women and 5 men)	Gau de Castelló, 09 March 2019
FG2	Entrepreneurship-prone young people	18-23	Pursuing (business-related) higher education courses in public or private institutions.	Not employed. Occasionally work in family business.	High income. Entrepreneurs and liberal professionals.	Urban	Mixed (4 women and 3 men)	Valencia, 11 April 2019
FG3	Emancipated young people with jobs commensurate with their education	24-30	Higher-level Vocational Training, University Degrees.	Working in positions that are commensurate with their education.	Lower-middle income. Civil servants, self-employed people, employed people.	Urban	Mixed (3 women and 4 men)	Alicante, 30 May 2019
FG4	Young people working in the wellness industry	24-30	Diverse educational pathways in formal and non-formal education.	Work in the wellness industry as an employee or self-employed (yoga, physiotherapy, nutrition...).	Affluent classes, medium-high income. Liberal professions or entrepreneurs.	Urban	Mixed (4 women and 3 men)	Valencia, 02 October 2019
FG5	Young activists	24-30	Master's degree, Bachelor's degree, Higher-level VT.	Employed and not employed.	Diverse backgrounds (main criterion: active in social movements).	Urban	Mixed (3 women and 3 men)	Dènia, 13 June 2019
FG6	Young newcomers to rural communities	24-30	Master's degree, Bachelor's degree and Higher-level VT.	They work in rural development either in precarious or non-precarious jobs.	Diverse backgrounds (main criterion: rural development work).	Rural	Mixed (5 women and 3 men)	Castelló de la Plana, 28 January, 20/20
FG7	Traditional young men in rural areas	24-30	Bachelor's degree, Higher-level Vocational Training, Intermediate Vocational Training.	They work in the agricultural and livestock sector. Self-employed or small entrepreneurs.	Family entrepreneurs in the agricultural and livestock sector.	Rural	Non-mixed (6 men)	Utiel, 09 May, 2019
FG8	Masculinities	24-30	Master's degree, Bachelor's degree, Higher-level Vocational Training, Intermediate Vocational Training.	Studying, working, actively seeking employment. Various statuses.	Diverse background. (Main criterion: sexual and gender diversity).	Urban	Non-mixed (8 women)	Castelló de la Plana, 04 February, 2020
FG9	Femininities	24-30	Master's Degree, Bachelor's Degree, Higher-level Vocational Training, Intermediate Vocational Training.	Studying, working, actively seeking employment. Diverse statuses.	Diverse origins. (Main criterion: sexual and gender diversity).	Urban	Non-mixed (9 men)	Castelló de la Plana, 27/01/20

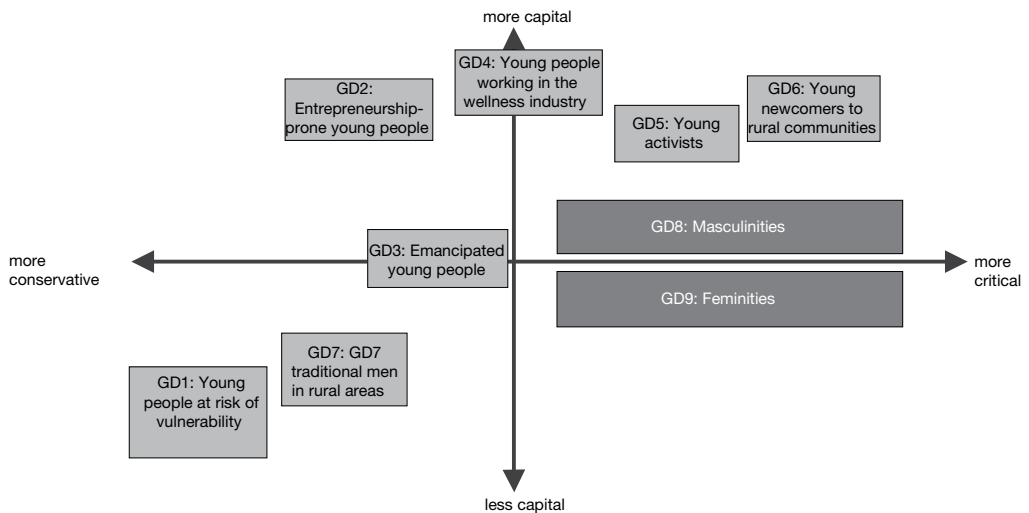
Source: Developed by the authors.

Most of the fieldwork was carried out with mixed groups composed of both men and women. This methodological decision was made because it enabled us to observe the limits of the legitimacy of feminism in mixed environments, on the understanding that this can prevent the emergence of overtly misogynist discourses. The contours of political correctness and the limits of what can be said were therefore analysed. The three non-mixed groups were designed to accommodate perceptions and opinions that, on the one hand, allowed for discussion and the comparison of gendered experiences among peers (in the case of FG8 and FG9) and, on the other hand, to capture a more conservative discourse in the case of FG7 while respecting the mas-

culinised rural environment (Camarero and Sampedro, 2008).

The fieldwork did not seek to provide balance or allow comparability by age bracket. Given the difficulty in delimitating the concept of youth, it was decided to design only two groups with 18-23 year olds as opposed to seven groups with 24-30 year olds. The 18-23 age groups are a social space in which many issues related to gender inequalities (labour market, life/work balance and joint responsibility, couple relationships, etc.) have not yet been tackled. These two groups were in diametrically opposed situations in terms of global capital, designed to produce discourses linked to processes of social vulnerability (FG1) and discourses linked to narratives of social success (FG2).

**FIGURE 1.** Location of groups on the two axes: global capital they possess and position within the gender structure



Source: Developed by the authors.

The selection of participants for groups FG2, FG3, FG4, FG5 and FG7 was done through a social research company, as we did not have our own network in these areas. In the groups held in Castelló (FG1, FG6, FG8 and FG9), our own networks were used, as it was felt that we could control the

composition of the group. An informed consent form was signed and the participants' data was processed confidentially. Participants were rewarded with a gift voucher (worth 40 euros).

In FG8 and FG9, sexual and gender diversity was included as an eligibility require-

ment. This does not mean that there were no LGBTIQ+ people in the other groups. In order to avoid bias, we sought to include people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, especially children of migrants (from Latin America, Maghreb, Eastern Europe). There was no such diversity in the two rural groups (FG6 and FG7). The nine focus groups can be ordered on two axes, according to the volume of capital they possess (in Bourdieu's sense) and according to their position within the gender structure (Risman, 2018). The overall volume of capital was inferred from education, employment and family background. We inferred gender structure position through the classic predictors of pro-egalitarian attitudes (employment, higher education) to which we added sexual and gender diversity as a key predictor, as well as participation in progressive activism and social movements.

The groups were conducted and examined in the light of a sociological analysis of the discourse system (Conde, 2009). They focused on an interpretation of the discourses from a textual and contextual perspective, and in this way the significance of the text produced was related to the social context (Alonso, 2013). The Atlas.ti programme (version 9) was used for the analysis, applying three groups of codes (legitimacy of feminism, gender relations and strategies to achieve equality) that yielded a total of 35 specific codes.

## **ARGUMENTATIVE THEMES FOR DISCOURSE ANALYSIS ON FEMINISM AND GENDER EQUALITY**

The groups tried to broadly capture the discourse about young people's situation. Feminism and gender issues were not identified by the moderator as the main theme in order to assess how these issues emerged

freely in the groups. The initial trigger was "this is an invitation to talk about young people's situation". The theme was brought up spontaneously in all groups except in FG7 (traditional men from rural areas). In this case, the topic was introduced by the moderator by asking a specific question.

The main topics discussed were: the labour market and emancipation, representative democracy and the party system, gender issues and feminism, and climate change. The part of the corpus devoted to the object of study occupied about one third of the total volume of transcripts, although this varied substantially between the groups. The first focus group was held on 9 March 2019, one day after the second feminist strike in Spain. The last focus group took place six weeks before the COVID-19 lockdown. The main elements on which there was consensus and disagreement, respectively, are addressed according to three axes: the legitimacy of feminism, gender equality and strategies for action against gender inequality.

### **On the legitimacy of feminism**

In terms of the hypervisibility of feminism, feminism appeared spontaneously in all groups except one (the all-male FG7). The dominant position can be summarised around the idea that "we are much better off thanks to feminism". According to this core position, which could be said to be the dominant discourse about which the other discursive positions discuss, "feminism is an engine of change". This was represented as an unstoppable force that has boosted young people's political participation. According to this position, young people perceived themselves as more feminist than older generations and believed that this trend will be strengthened further in future generations. In particular, they stated that there has been a change in the social



perception of gender-based violence (including explicit references to the case of “La Manada”) and the identification of male chauvinist behaviour.

I5. Woman: I think that feminism has recently taken a bit of a turn and there are a lot of young people who have realised the full extent of the problem; that it’s no longer a private problem, that it’s something public, that the assaults, the sexual assaults that have been happening lately, when they happen to young people, people your age, are transmitted by the media, it touches you a bit... it’s like, “OK, this is happening, this is real and it could happen to me, just like it happened to this girl”. So I think it’s true that we are becoming aware of this problem\*<sup>3</sup>.

FG5. Young activists.

The central idea on which the arguments are built is that there is a process of generalised “awareness” that modifies the ways of interpreting social reality through a feminist prism. Although men and women share this idea, women are challenged by the existence of gender-based violence of various kinds that affect them specifically, such as street harassment and insecurity in public spaces.

I3. Woman: [...] I do see that, I do believe that nowadays young people have taken a leap forward in terms of political interest, in terms of taking an interest in social life, because now, for example, we are all more or less educated on feminism, at least on the subject, we go out on the street, we do stuff, we are capable of distinguishing some behaviours...

I1. Woman: But because now there is much more communication.

FG2. Entrepreneurship-prone young people.

This dominant discourse engendered a debate in which some views were expressed that took distance from the previous complacent opinions. Some participants argued that

not all feminism is legitimate. These positions were not dominant and were mostly found in the groups that were only made up of men and in the group of young people at risk of social vulnerability (FG1, FG6, FG8).

I6. Man: True equality.

I2. Man: Sure, but where is... walking towards? When will we achieve true equality? What are the objectives of true equality? What? For example, inclusive language. There are people who say yes to inclusive language. Some people say, bah, language is already inclusive enough. And there are a thousand mini-topics that are being dealt with, and it seems to me that this is a mess that, in other words, nobody is completely clear about. And that bothers me.

FG8. Masculinities.

This fragment is based on the consideration that feminism seeks real equality between women and men, which forms part of the core argument of the dominant position. In the face of this, a reactive position emerged which, *a priori*, accepts that feminism has been useful in condemning situations of oppression and inequality and defending some feminist demands, such as the fight against gender violence. However, there is fear of a feminist agenda that is seen as less useful.

In these debates, a separation between good feminism and bad feminism was made apparent. Herein lies one of the main knots in the argument of anti-feminism in the Spanish context in which, without delegitimising it as a social movement, it is considered that its current postulates are no longer reasonable.

I4. Man: [...] he’s never laid a finger on a woman in his life, you know? No matter how often he sees this happen around him both now and ever since he was a little boy.

I2. Woman: Well, I think that this attitude is already being stopped by the feminist movements that are coming up, I think. But I don’t know. I don’t know.

<sup>3</sup> The fragments marked with an asterisk (\*) are our own translation of the original in Valencian.

14. Woman: Well, that's still to be...

12. Woman: Because in feminism there are some things that you say, what the...!

FG1. Young people at risk of vulnerability.

In the vulnerable group, anti-feminism was expressed by both men and women and, in fact, it is two women who took the most determined stance. This fragment shows how the idea of illegitimate feminisms is intertwined with the invalidation of all of them.

Within the discourse appears men's sense of loss and anxiety in the face of a feminist backlash against past attitudes and ways of embodying masculinity. Some young men felt that they are burdened with the deeds of past generations and this was considered unfair:

11. Man: [...] but I think that one of the problems with feminism is that, ok, so basically, there is a lot of information, its foundation is, I mean, it's very good. It is perfect, equality. The problem is that it doesn't follow through in parallel. There are sectors that define themselves as feminists, which is what is most visible, that say they hate men, especially repressors, revenge for the past...

15. Man: That's female chauvinism.

11. Man: That is something else. It puts a lot of labels on everything. What a way to complicate everything...

FG8. Masculinities.

According to some participants, illegitimate feminism would be that which hates men, seeks revenge, is rabid and "identifies men as the enemy". The end of the fragment quote above shows the feeling of loss that some men have when challenged by arguments that they do not quite understand. Masculinity in crisis (Sanf elix, 2020) or a breakdown of masculine identity (Ranea, 2021) is presented as being the result of the de-legitimisation of masculine values, which destabilises men's subjectivation processes.

The celebration of feminism was also discursively strained, as seen in views that were critical of its popularisation. The visibility of feminism was reassessed and the vacuum behind the discursive changes was criticised, based on the argument that they do not correspond to real changes in the gender order. They debated whether anyone can be a feminist and paid attention to the potential co-opting by the powers that be.

11. Woman: [...] when I hear that Queen Letizia will go on strike on 8 March, I say "Really? Watch out then!". This freaks me out.

FG5. Young activists.

This extract raises the contradiction inherent in the uncritical assumption of feminism without including a broad social change, as well as the risk of de-politicisation of feminism in its process of becoming mainstream (Favaro and Gill, 2018; Rottenberg, 2018; Banet-Weiser, 2018). Feminist work relates to a grassroots social movement that does not feel represented by celebrity feminism, neo-liberal feminism or feminism that is only concerned with the symbolic dimension, not the structural one.

Within the critical positions, it was believed that there is an extension of feminism thanks to which numerous forms of violence and inequalities have been made visible, but far from being complacent with this phenomenon, some participants identified some limitations and contradictions of the extension of feminism that even have a negative impact on the lives of young women:

11. Woman: [...] I mean, I feel that there are things that are being put on the table, but that there are no profound changes, and I am concerned, for example, about what it's like on the street, you know? Like everything that is happening around rape, aggression, how all of this is being made into a big media story and I feel that I am more afraid to go out at night than my mother was. On the one hand I feel like I'm empowering myself as a woman, that's cool! And on the other hand it's

like, it's scary to go home alone, you know? I feel that I am more afraid now than I was 5 years ago\*.

FG9. Feminities.

On the one hand, the fragment highlights the lack of profound changes despite the visibility of the feminist agenda. On the other hand, it shows that the hypervisibility of events such as the case of "La Manada" has had consequences for women, as it leads to their domestication through the discourse of fear. This idea was reinforced by the participant in the excerpt. It exemplifies the theory put forward by Nerea Barjola (2018) on the disciplining of women through sexual terror which, in turn, raises how the concept of "empowerment" can be void of content.

Lastly, the fact that "certain simplistic feminist discourses" feed misogynist discourses came up in the discussions:

I5. Woman: What I don't like is that it is extrapolated, you know? That a discourse is being made along the lines of "men are bad and violent *per se*". If this happens, people who are uninformed may take VOX's discourse...\*

FG5-Young activists.

By simplistic discourses they refer to the celebrations of female power, of *girl power* which, at the same time as being essentialist, can be interpreted as female chauvinist which fail to achieve any transformation beyond a simulacrum of female empowerment, while also generating disaffection among some population sectors. This approach was largely found among the group of young activists (FG5) and the group of diverse women (FG9), social spaces in which discourse is informed by feminist reflections.

### Gender inequalities in discourse

Young people's discourses identify inequalities at the structural, relational and indi-

vidual levels (Risman, 2018), including the wage gap, sexual division of labour, low male presence in reproductive tasks, low female presence in places of power, gender-based violence, harassment, sexual violence, double standards, body-related sexism. The dominant discursive position, however, is that "we are heading in the right direction", "step by step", "it is a question of evolution". When these convictions take hold in the discourse, the challenges to inequality disappear.

I1. Man: So, well, I think at the end of the day, this is done little by little and step by step, and some progress is being made.

FG3. Emancipated young people with jobs commensurate with their education.

The dominant discourse among the young participants stressed that steps are being taken on the path to equality. Given this interpretation, there is no way back. Progress on gender equality was considered to be uncontested and a matter of time. This consensus position was quickly reached in FG3 and FG4 and was part of the discussions in the other groups.

Within the arguments of this social discourse that is dominant among young people, people who take a stand against equality were considered to be otherness. The semantic field used to denote people who are decidedly against equality included "isolated cases", "troglodytes", "male chauvinists", "reactionaries", "people who live as they did 400 years ago".

This dominant framework was contested by the most conservative positions regarding gender who were resistant to feminism. It was argued that "we are already equal", albeit from two different argumentative nodes. A neoliberal fraction emerged (discussed in FG2) that expressed that the fact that there are women at the highest levels of power is a symptom that real equality is already effective. In their view, public

space is the proper place to measure and demonstrate gender equality. Positive actions (such as quota systems) were rejected on the grounds that women have already demonstrated their abilities through hard work and entrepreneurship. From this perspective, inequality was not perceived in either an individual or a social dimension. It is only about working hard, taking charge of their lives and looking ahead to success.

14. Woman: But of course, but what, well, that seems silly to me. Like, why do I have to...? For example, on Women's Day there was a strike, like, people didn't go to work, but why?

12. Woman: I didn't understand.

14. Woman: I don't understand.

12. Woman: I can see the point of the demonstration, but...

11. Man: To show the role of women in today's world.

14. Woman: Yeah, but I think I show the role better by going to work and showing what I'm worth than... you know?

FG2. Entrepreneurship-prone young people.

This group did not reach a consensus on the legitimacy of the feminist strike (neither that of 2018 nor of 2019) but two positions emerged: one maintained that the strike made women's work and their role in society visible (an argument defended by both men and women in the group); and another one that held that a women's strike removes women from the positions of responsibility in which they prove their worth every day. There was an underlying critique of the very concept of having a strike (perceived as something annoying) and a debate about the possibility of being a feminist without sharing the methods of protest, thus making it apparent that being a feminist is compatible with being neoliberal (Rottenberg, 2018). Actions that go beyond the symbolic and

are actualised in the political sphere were considered unnecessary, based on the assumption that equality already exists. That is why the demonstration held on 8 March was legitimised by this group (as it was deemed to be symbolic and celebratory), but the strike was not.

Other neo-conservative arguments arose in the course of the debate held by the group of young men from traditional rural areas (FG7). Positive actions were criticised, but not based on the argument that equality has already been achieved, but because it starts from the assumption that there is a certain essentialist gender difference which upholds the role of women as carers.

In the debate there was still consensus on improving equality ("society has changed") and, to further elaborate on this, the issue of men's participation in domestic and care work was discussed as part of unfinished business. While some participants advocated moving towards equal participation in the productive and reproductive spheres, others presented arguments that reinforced the idea that "we must not do the same in order to be equal". This discursive fraction lamented the loss of men's earning capacity that allowed the family to be maintained under a strict sexual division of labour in which men worked outside the home while women took care of the domestic chores. In their view, the traditional family is at risk because of precariousness, which demands a double income. This discourse somewhat glorified the idea of the traditional family, conceptualised as a company that works for the common good in uncertain times of crisis when there is a loss of meaning (Sanf elix, 2020). This view included anti-neoliberal and neoconservative positions:

11. Man: Yeah, but now we've changed. Now we both work outside the home and we both have to work inside the home, but, even so, I think it's wrong that not enough value is given to the work of...

I2. Man: Women's work.

I4. Man: And also tasks could have been shared a bit more. Because I go out in the morning and you go out in the afternoon.

I1. Man: Well, the thing is, if I'm trimming the edges, for example, I don't want my wife to come with me to chip stones or trim edges, you know? Bloody hell, if I can, I prefer to do it myself, it's not male chauvinism or feminism or anything.

FG7. Young men from traditional rural areas.

In the last statement of the fragment, women are portrayed as subjects to be protected from the hardships of certain jobs in the countryside. As part of this argument, the care work done by women is showcased, but especially in order to promote that women will continue to do it.

The dominant discourse that claims that progress on equality is unstoppable was also debated among progressive positions. Equality was seen as a long way off and there was even a belief that there has been a backlash. The key idea was "we think we are better off than we are", based on the reproductive dynamics of inequalities that give rise to a feeling of powerlessness and a sense that reality cannot be transformed.

In FG5, FG6 and FG9 there were shared concerns about the emergence of misogynist and new male chauvinist discourses that are disseminated throughout society (even included in progressive discourses), such as, the idea that there has been an increase in false accusations made by women against their partners or ex-partners.

Reference was made to the persistence of inequalities in the area of employment and women's presence in society, with particular emphasis on the slow pace of the change in values (León and Aizpurua, 2023). Thus, some issues were identified where there is stagnation or even regression, specifically in connection with the increase in gender violence among young people and

the persistence of male chauvinist patterns in the relationships of some young people.

There was therefore a perception that no profound changes have taken place in gender relations that will lead to further equality. Participants noted the lack of male involvement in the ethic of care, and remarked that more men are reproducing "traditional roles" than challenging them:

I5. Woman: I think there's a bit of everything, isn't there? There are people who are aware that things are changing, new masculinities, and there are a lot of people who really follow the traditional patterns.

I1. Woman: Parents.

I5. Woman: Yes, yes, I think there's a bit of everything, I would say that there are fewer people that reflect new masculinities, who want to break away from certain roles because they really...

FG5. Young activists.

From this point of view, progress in terms of equality has therefore failed to transform people's behaviours and feelings, and some participants expressed frustration and pessimism about the future. The young people in the groups issued alerted about the lack of substantial transformations, which was based on arguments about the reproduction of the social order: we learn inequalities and reproduce inequalities.

### **Strategies for change in the face of inequalities**

Following Christina Scharff (2021), identifying and talking about inequalities does not mean confronting inequalities or seeking change. In some of the discussions produced there was an absence of proposals and actions to pursue social change. As Benigno (2023) pointed out, "passion in itself is not enough to bring about change" (2023: 13). Regarding the idea of going "step by step", only education was seen to be a solution. Improving

education was an empty concept widely referred to in the groups, which caused narrative closure. The reference to education externalises responsibility and exempts young people from holding clear positions. This line of discourse was particularly featured in the groups situated in the most conservative part of the gender order (FG1, FG2, FG3 and FG7).

While these positions are clearly non-activist, social media appeared to be a driver of change. In the era of *Me Too*, social media provide individual experiences that expose injustice which are disconnected from political and social actions. "Potential change" comes down to an individual action: posting and following those who post. This position was confined to the younger groups (FG1 and FG2).

Among the positions that were most critical with the gender structure (FG5, FG8 and FG9), there were young people "who are taking action for change" and are committed to "political and activist work". A whole range of feminist protest actions were discussed in these groups, which were more critical of the gender structure, including classic militancy in groups and assemblies, organisation of *puntos violeta* (stalls or spaces that provide information and support in connection with any form of gender violence, put in place by the Spanish Ministry of Equality), carrying out awareness-raising actions, participation in demonstrations and protests.

However, there was also a whole range of actions that expressed the cultural and psychic life of post-feminism (Gill, 2017). These are formal and informal therapies for self-improvement, for self-knowledge, for working on how to build relationships, for improving self-confidence, etc. FG4 was the most strongly committed to this type of practice, although neoliberal and self-management discourses also permeated the groups on the left of the spectrum.

The following excerpt, for example, called for learning to express what you want and to set limits. A discourse that also emerged as a way to improve couple relationships:

I1. Woman: But that's where communication comes in, also becomes part of a relationship. Before, well, during the process of the relationship, what do you expect, you know? Communicate: what are your limits, where is your life going, you know? See what common ground there is before taking it to a point where backtracking would be painful...

FG4. Young people working in the well-being industry.

Neoliberal feminism suggests that "the solution to injustice is to work on oneself rather than working with others for social and political transformation" (Gill, 2016: 617). Self-monitoring would be the key to avoid sexism: change starts with oneself (both for women and men). In these arguments, the gender structure almost disappears and it is the individual that is responsible for change, leveraging work on oneself to become "improved, non-sexist subjects". This discourse was especially found in the reference to new masculinities:

I7. Man: I am referring to analysing ourselves as a construction and how we have constructed ourselves as men, how society has influenced us to be the way we are, our behaviour, the way we think...

I6. Man: Masculinity.

I7. Man: Masculinity, exactly. Above all, masculinity. And that's where I was heading. I think that's the point, at least for me, I mean, I'm not going to tell women where they should be or what they should do and stuff. Women...

I2. Man: It is for us men to get to a turning point.

FG8. Masculinities.

It is certainly interesting to see how the deconstruction of masculinity was a cor-

nerstone of social change in these young people's discourses. Deconstruction could be understood as a set of practices implemented through workshops, training, readings and individual or collective reflection that will bring about personal and attitudinal changes that translate into new ways of being in the world. This proposal advocates engaging in activist practices "in the first-person"; in this process, however, the structural aspects of gender become blurred.

## CONCLUSIONS

Firstly, the analysis of the discourse systems highlights that the widespread acceptance of feminism coexists with the emergence of a popular form of misogyny. The role of feminism in promoting change was mentioned even within the most conservative and reactionary positions about the advances of feminism, albeit many reservations were expressed. "Feminists", on the other hand, felt legitimised to speak in mixed groups loud and clear and with pride and, when this happened, their positions were accepted by the group as a whole with little divergence.

In the argument nodes analysed in the study, a central discursive position appears in which feminism is celebrated and reclaimed, albeit superficially. This dominant position is confronted by resistant positions within a certain "popular misogyny" linked to vulnerability and, on the other hand, it is challenged by active feminist positions that highlight some of the contradictions and paradoxes of contemporary feminism.

Secondly, the social desirability of "equality" seems to defuse the most reluctant arguments and gives rise to a complacent dominant discourse. In fact, the key idea of the dominant discourses is that the achievement of equality will come about by simple evolutionary logic.

Thirdly, the conversation about inequalities does not involve acting on, contesting or challenging inequalities. As Scharff (2021) noted, "there is a risk that talk about inequalities becomes an end in itself, rather than a means to facilitate social change". This is the case in many of the discourses analysed, in which talk of inequalities was not accompanied by strategies for action. The hyper-visibility of feminism has put on the agenda many issues that become part of people's knowledge and reflections, even if they do not drive any kind of action on them.

Lastly, the emergence of self-development work to revise sexist practices stands out among the strategies of resistance identified. The set of solutions stemming from self-monitoring and psychological work for self-improvement to be "non-sexist subjects" is entrenched and especially visible in the discourse on new masculinities. However, alongside this, there is an undeniable presence of "everyday" activist practices, as well as more traditional activist practices based on collective dynamics. Especially among younger people, the online space appears to be the optimal environment to expose sexist behaviours, make feminist more visible and, ultimately, acquire an activist identity.

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