

# Male victims of violence and men's rights struggles

## A perfect match?

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### Introduction

In May 2018, the first women's shelter in Norway celebrated its 40th anniversary with a festive event opened by the King of Norway and attended by two ministers and the Mayor of Oslo. The occasion included a seminar on the history of the shelter movement, celebrating its pioneers and achievements. In the afternoon, the chairperson of Reform, a government-funded charity focusing on men's issues, published a blog entry where he described how he had left the event at lunch: 'I did it because I had had more than enough, and in increasing surprise, yes anger, that in this assembly my own sex was only assigned one single characteristic; as a perpetrator' (Saastad, 2018).

Objecting to men being cast as perpetrators, he lamented the lack of attention to male victims of intimate partner violence (IPV), thus insisting on the central role of male victims in the contemporary struggles over IPV and gender in Norway. The fact that the chairperson of an organisation that is generally seen as profeminist among those focusing on men's issues in Norway, got angry on behalf of his sex, is indicative of the affective climate within which the politicisation of male victims of IPV is taking place.

Male victims hold an ambiguous position in feminist research and in theorisations of IPV, including in critical studies of men and masculinities. This is due to the ways in which male victims of violence are framed in intertwined academic and political struggles over gendered patterns of victimisation. Studies on male victims of violence often address men's identity work related to balancing victimhood and masculinity (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Venäläinen, 2019). The growing academic interest in female perpetrated violence and male victims of violence by female partners is paralleled by claims of male victimisation as part of a growing antifeminist movement (Venäläinen, 2019). Research on male victims of IPV tend to fall into two different strands; one which empirically problematises the male victim position (Nybergh, Enander & Krantz, 2016; Williamson, Morgan & Hester, 2017) and the other focuses on men as hidden and misrecognised victims (Corbally, 2015; Kestell, 2019; Migliaccio, 2002). These two strands

represent both the research field's 'master narrative' of gendered violence and the 'counter narrative' insisting that men can be victims too (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004). The aim of this chapter is to move beyond these two perspectives, as we explore the intersection between male victims' personal narratives and the general narrative framing of male victimisation by men's rights activists (MRAs) and men's rights organisations (MROs). How could we understand and take seriously the experiences of individual male victims of IPV in this contemporary politicised context? Is it possible to do so without becoming part of the ongoing masculinist contestation of gendered patterns of privilege and disadvantage, including the struggle over the position of the IPV victim? We discuss this problem by studying the intersection of male victims' personal narratives and masculinist politics, and by analysing how the narrative framing and affective community offered by a masculinist and anti-feminist MRO works for individual male victims of IPV.

The analysis will shed light on the meeting between men's personal stories of victimisation and masculinist policies. In doing so, it highlights the ambiguities between MRO's mobilisation of collective emotions by bolstering an antifeminist narrative, and individual men's personal pain. The analysis thus serves to broaden our knowledge of the complex relations between masculinist policies and individual victim's feelings, allowing us to recognise the personal suffering of individual male victims, while at the same time challenging the masculinist politicisation of these feelings.

### **Masculinity politics, emotions and male violence victims**

The politicisation of IPV by MROs was formed in opposition to the feminist framing of violence as a gendered phenomenon, that is, as 'violence against women' or 'men's violence to known women' (Hearn, 1998, p. 17). In Norway, the framing of IPV by organisations focusing on men has shifted over the years. Ten years ago, the Norwegian men's movement was split between those that focused on men as perpetrators of violence and those organisations that dismissed IPV as false allegations against men and as part of a larger feminist attack on men (Bjørnholt, 2007). In recent years, the focus has shifted towards the recognition of men as victims of violence, both among profeminist and more antifeminist organisations. This struggle for the acceptance of men as victims of IPV is conflated and intertwined with struggles for fathers' rights.

Norway is considered one of the most gender-equal countries in the world. This egalitarian context represents a particular context for male victims of IPV. As part of a gender-neutral principle of gender equality, certain rights have also been extended to men. This is the case for male victims of IPV: with the *Norwegian Gender-Neutral Shelter Act* passed in 2010, the provision

of shelter services to both women and men became a municipal responsibility. The law and the process leading to it have been criticised by feminists (Hennum, 2010; Laugerud, 2014), but it has also been argued that it balances the rights of women and men exposed to violence, and those of children accompanying a parent to a shelter (Hellum, 2016). The gender-neutral terminology and legislation, as well as the provision of shelter services for men can be regarded as institutional expressions of the legal and social recognition of men as victims of IPV in Norway. There is also considerable political goodwill for organisations working with male victims, including MROs, several of which receive substantial public funding. MRAs and MROs have been influential in shaping family law in Norway since the 1970s, and, to a large extent, they have been seen by policy makers as allies in the struggle for gender equality; an alliance that has been described as ‘state masculinism’ (Bjørnholt, 2007).

Recently, there has been a rise in antifeminist mobilisation in Norway – mirroring international developments (Anderson, 2014; Boyd & Sheehy, 2016; Jordan, 2016; Mellström, 2016; see also Blais, this volume) – spanning from organisations and lobby groups, to looser groups on social media (Dragiewicz & Burgess, 2016; Dupuis- Déri, 2016). This is an important context for the contemporary politicisation of male victims of IPV and the increasing claims of male victimisation (Venäläinen, 2019). The rise of antifeminism in Western societies is part of a general polarisation of public discourse, an anti-liberal turn which is an amalgam of misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia and anti-gender fundamentalism (Kováts & Põim, 2015).

In line with this general pattern, and in the particular context of gender-neutral national legislation and international antifeminist mobilisation, Norwegian MROs offer a particular framing of the experiences of its members. Men are seen as subjected to discrimination, in particular as fathers and victims of IPV, but also, more generally, by a society where gender equality is argued to have gone too far and where public institutions of a female-dominated welfare state are seen as a resource that manipulative women can use against men. A ‘master narrative’ frames how narrators construct their stories in a given society and function as the backdrop against which a ‘counter narrative’ can be drawn up (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004, p. 359). In this sense, MROs offer an alternative to the prevailing narrative of women as victims and men as perpetrators. For MRO members, aligning with the MRO’s master narrative when presenting an individual story of victimisation becomes an important determinant of support. Nonalignment with the master narrative when presenting any story of victimisation might lead to disbelief and stigmatisation (Polletta, 2009). This relates to a general cultural logic where victimhood is constructed as part of political claims-making strategies wherein individuals are presented as ‘ideal victims’ (Christie, 1986) or ‘morally good people, (who) are greatly harmed through no fault of their own’ (Loseke, 2017, p. 79). Presenting men exposed

to IPV, and men in general, as ideal victims, is however not an easy task, as we discuss in the following section.

Emotions such as anger are pivotal in political struggles, including in contemporary men's rights activism, as has been poignantly captured in Michael Kimmel's book *Angry White Men* (2013). This anger is seen as partly being produced by the more or less deliberate channelling of individual men's feelings of vulnerability, grief and sadness into political rage, as exemplified by Kimmel, who analyses men calling in to an American right-wing radio talk show. He argues that 'What starts as sadness, anxiety, grief, worry is carefully manipulated into political rage' (p. 32). Todd Reeser and Lucas Gottzén (2018), reflecting on Kimmel's example, point out that we also need to look beyond the individual man and the specific context, in this case the radio show. They posit that 'affect may not simply come from that man calling in to the radio show or it may not just belong to that individual man, but rather it may be circulating through culture in difficult-to-locate ways' (p. 150).

Notions of critique and justice spring from, and are structured around, passionate experiences of anger (Fisher, 2002). Fostering collective anger by linking it to perceived injustices is central in political struggles as it forms affective collectivities. Jonas Bens and colleagues (2019) argue that 'outrage features as a moral emotion, affectively driving the individual from her or his personal emotion of injury to a morally grounded activity together with others who feel and think alike' (p. 56). However, outrage is not only used in the struggles for justice and freedom, but the same intensity can be observed in 'networks of outrage' (Castells, 2012) on the far right, and, we will argue, in misogynistic antifeminist groups. According to Jonathan Allan (2016), MRAs' use of affect serves a strategic and political function in that the strength of affective utterances means that they cannot be denied, since they are by definition wholly subjective and therefore cannot be questioned: 'If men are victims and if men feel bad, we cannot deny the state of victimhood nor the negative affect, so they believe. It is for this reason that men's rights activists have "feelings"' (p. 36).

However, expressing anger also risks compromising legitimacy. Amia Srinivasan (2018) discusses the normative conflicts related to individual and collective expressions of anger as a response to a perceived injustice. Using the example of the American civil rights movement she shows how members of social movements have the choice of cultivating anger against a perceived injustice or engaging in less confrontational strategies as political drivers for change. In the following, we grapple with the fraught terrain between personal experiences of victimisation and political claims-making, and the difficulties of politicising personal experiences of victimisation and collective claims of injustice against men as an oppressed group. We focus, not on the strategic and political uses of personal feelings by MROs, but rather turn our attention to the personal level.

## Method

This chapter draws on 13 qualitative interviews with male victims of IPV. Informants were recruited via social media and a large advertisement in an evening newspaper. Four men were recruited through Norwegian MROs. This chapter draws on the latter subsample recruited through a Norwegian MRO. These informants' stories share some commonalities, while they also differ in important ways. All four informants reported physical violence from their female ex-partners. All four had also been accused of being violent themselves, and they had all been involved in struggles over custody and visiting arrangements, which is similar to the findings of other studies of male victims of IPV (Nybergh, Enander & Krantz, 2016; Venäläinen, 2019). Among these four we have chosen two cases to illustrate how the framing and affective community offered by the MRO was both helpful and troubling for the men. These two cases were selected, as they are the clearest cases of men having been exposed to IPV.

## Male victims engaging with men's rights organisations

What happens to the individual male victim of IPV becoming part of an MRO? How do individual victims' personal narratives fit or not fit with the MRO master narrative of discrimination against men in Norwegian society, and how does this framing affect the individual male victim of IPV? The two informants, whom we will call Thomas (36 years of age) and Arild (51 years of age), described how they had been exposed to severe physical and psychological abuse from their ex-partners, while also being accused of being the violent ones in their relationships. A major difference between their stories is that Thomas lost custody, while Arild received full parental custody of his child. First, we discuss Thomas, whose story could be said to be a perfect match with the organisation's master narrative of men's victimisation in Norwegian society. We then present Arild's story, who we argue is a mismatched victim in the context of the organisation.

## A perfect match

Thomas describes his ex-partner Linda as an extremely jealous, aggressive and physically violent woman. Early on in their relationship he attempted to leave her, but he claims she made him stay by first faking a pregnancy and then by becoming pregnant. However, before their child was one year old, Thomas had contacted the shelter several times, where he was strongly advised to leave her.

They said we had to react quickly before the mother started 'spinning'. That's what they called it. Before the mother begins to say 'no, he is

the one who is violent'. Because if she starts spinning [they said] then the child will quickly be trapped with the violent [parent]. They really understood the dynamics of violence and such things. It's the first time I've talked to someone who somehow understood the feelings, how it was for me.

As we understand him, Thomas felt that the shelter recognised his entitlement to a victim position within the logic of gender equality. However, when he finally managed to leave Linda, Thomas decided to file charges against her, he had to struggle to be taken seriously by the police. She retaliated by accusing him of violence, and he was given a restraining order, which he found upsetting and scary. In Thomas' view, he was not taken seriously as a victim, due to gender stereotypes. He portrayed his ex-partner as 'manipulative', 'cruel' and 'selfish', and her behaviour as strategic.

It has been very easy for her to get sympathy and it has been easy for her to place herself in a victim role and get lots of services for free, to get people to do things for her. That's what she does. She lays down and screams until someone just comes and gets it done.

Thomas felt that the police, the child protection services and other services made their decision based on Linda's version alone, without even bothering to meet him. The court gave Linda full custody of their child. In his view, it was due to gender bias and because she knew how to manipulate the welfare professionals. Thomas ended up having very limited contact with his child, which he argued was a consequence of him being scared and unable to confront his ex-partner and 'the system'.

Thomas unambiguously positioned himself as the victim in his story, both in the relationship with his ex-partner and in regard to the welfare services: 'As a man in that system, you don't have a chance', he explained. At the time when he got involved with the MRO, he felt like a broken man, desperately wanting to spend time with his child. He found great support in the community, and his involvement in the organisation was a political eye-opener, making him understand his circumstances as part of a general pattern of discrimination against men. Social media is an increasingly important outlet for masculinist groups (Gotell & Dutton, 2016) and may be a way to create community through 'networks of outrage' (Castells, 2012). On the organisation's Facebook page, Thomas learned about numerous tragic stories of fathers who suffered, which made him increasingly angry. He directed this anger at the services and systems that he argued rendered men invisible as victims, in line with the organisation's narrative framing of his situation. In the process of fitting with the MRO's master narrative, his initial positive experience with the shelter was rendered irrelevant. Focusing on the negative experiences with other actors at a later stage, and the sad

outcome, he aligned with the master narrative of discrimination and gender bias against men in a ‘system’ that is rigged in favour of violent and manipulative women.

We know from similar research with male victims of IPV that non-conditional recognition as a victim can be hard to achieve (see Hines, Brown & Dunning, 2007; Kestell, 2019). Accordingly, in our reading of Thomas’ story, his suffering is twofold: firstly, his story speaks about the pain and despair arising from being a *victim* of IPV and secondly it describes the pain and despair of being a *male* victim of a welfare and judicial system that he believes can easily be manipulated by women. This reasoning also has some academic leverage in what Melissa Corbally (2015, p. 3117) calls ‘second wave abuse’, namely the violent female partner’s use of the gender bias in society against male victims of IPV to target partner (see also Lien & Lorentzen, 2019 for a similar analysis in a Norwegian context).

Thomas’ hurtful experiences, both from IPV and from not being recognised as a victim by the police, thus became politicised through his engagement with the MRO. In the process, his experience was also adapted to the organisation’s master narrative of discrimination against men in Norwegian society. The MRO welcomed Thomas as a *male* victim, and as part of men as an oppressed group in a society that favours women in the name of gender equality. He was often told by other members of the organisation that ‘it doesn’t really matter what you do, the mother wins either way’, a narrative that resonated well with Thomas’ experiences of being denied contact with his son.

Nevertheless, despite the supportive ambiance of this community, Thomas soon found that their collective anger and the emotional intensity it spurred were too much for him to handle. When asked about why he recently decided to disengage from the social media of the organisation, Thomas said that preparing himself for the research interview had opened his eyes to how angry and bitter they all had become.

I have withdrawn a bit lately; it became too awful. I used to go to meetings and stuff – I’ve heard enough, I get the picture, their stories are very similar. Those who write things there [on the organisation’s social media], many of them seem are so angry. But it is bottomless despair, really. Maybe it turns into anger, but it is powerlessness and desperation and serious violation that they have experienced. And maybe they were not like that to begin with. As time goes by, they end up like that.

Thomas described the MRO as a community of ‘angry and bitter men’, while at the same time arguing that this anger was a proper response to the injustice inflicted on them by female ex-partners and a system that favours women. But Thomas seemed to be asking himself what if this collective anger could be contagious and counterproductive on a personal level, adding to their

initial burden rather than replacing it? The emotional cost made it impossible for him to move on, as he felt trapped in a pain that he experienced both individually and as part of a group of people with similar experiences.

The dialectic between individual and collective pain and anger played out in the interview itself, where Thomas seemed to struggle with suppressing his anger, seemingly in order to be able to communicate his pain in what he thought would be more 'sympathetic' ways: 'Yes, I too will become like that if I continue there (with them). I just have to [...] even this conversation ...'. He said this with his voice shaking, he sighed and was unable to continue. This reflection on how he became someone he did not want to be by moving into rage aptly demonstrates Sara Ahmed's (2004) argument of how affect shapes not only its object but also its subject. By moving into this feeling, he became 'the angry man' he did not want to be.

### **The mismatched victim**

Arild described how his ex-wife Oksana used severe violence against him, including throwing furniture at him, cutting him with a kitchen knife and threatening his life. At one point, Oksana fled with their two-year-old son to the women's shelter, claiming that Arild had abused them. Arild told the child welfare services and the social workers at the shelter that his wife was mentally unstable and in need of help, and that he feared that their son would become traumatised from spending time alone with her. Later, when his ex-wife filed for custody, he also tried to 'talk sense' to her lawyer, with the support of his own lawyer.

We tried to tell her lawyer that this is a person who has huge problems and the dumbest thing you could do is to take this through the judiciary. Because it will only totally ruin the mother. But it just did not work out. And then you get into a situation that forces you to crush the one you've been fond of. Because that's how that system works.

The result of him 'crushing' her through his testimony, aided by expert witnesses and that she also made 'a fool of herself', was that Arild was seen as both an IPV victim and the most suitable parent. Consequently, he received full custody of his son. Eight years later, at the time of the interview, Oksana had limited contact with their child, as the court had found her 'unfit, unstable and potentially dangerous' as a mother. Arild found this outcome sad and problematic, and he blamed the shelter for not having provided adequate help to his ex-wife and son at the time.

If the mother had gotten the right kind of help, it would not have been the way it is today. For my part, I want to say that I ended up as the big winner, having the child all the time and so forth. But that was not what

I had in mind. I did not want to expose her. I'd rather say: why didn't she get the right kind of help?

According to Arild, the custody case led to changes in shelter procedures so that they now routinely inform the child protection services when a parent takes a child to their facilities. A few years later the gender-neutral shelter law was passed, rendering services accessible also to battered men. In this sense Arild's story is a narrative about positive systemic change both from a child's perspective and that of male victims.

Several years after these events, Arild came in contact with the MRO. He found it interesting to learn about other men's challenges on their social media platforms, and that the MRO seemed to provide a sense of belonging and peer support for men who had experiences of false accusations from a female ex-partner. But Arild soon also learned that his 'success-story' and his more nuanced arguments and ways of seeing were not always well received: 'I felt that sometimes, it did not fit in there. My answers did not fit with their ideology' [that mothers always get custody].

As Arild felt that he had been listened to and trusted as a well-intentioned father in court, he had trust in the legal institutions. He also expressed a more general confidence in the child protection services, the police and even the shelter – at least after the new shelter act was passed. His experiences of winning custody and causing systemic change did not fit well with the MRO master narrative, which in Arild's view was based on the idea of men and fathers as a discriminated group in a country where the legal system and the welfare services are part of a feminist conspiracy against men. He found that the MRO and its participants tended to 'pour gasoline instead of water on the fire' and he thought that this did not necessarily contribute positively to their own cases. He saw the organisation as uncompromising and too focused on principles of numerical justice, such as equally shared physical custody, rather than working for solutions 'that everyone can live with'. In particular, he was critical of what he saw as a general hostility in the organisation towards women, and mothers in particular.

In that group, they constantly talk about how awful mothers are. All you see is the other, but you also need to consider your own role in the conflict. If you find yourself in such a difficult situation, taking to the streets yelling and screaming for fathers' rights might make you feel better. But it doesn't solve your problem. Maybe you will find that the wound gets even bigger that way.

Arild's position is a version of what Srinivasan (2018) refers to as 'counter-productivity critique', calling for his fellow activists not to linger in the past and nurture their anger, but rather to deal with their own situation in more prudent and 'constructive' ways. Expressing collective anger, blaming 'all

women' and 'pouring gasoline instead of water on the fire', is unproductive in Arild's eyes, even if the anger expressed by the organisation on behalf of offended individuals might be a proper and legitimate response to injustice at an individual level. Arild also found that the MRO's collective outrage misdirected, towards a grand state feminist conspiracy, rather than towards a welfare system that may be flawed. For Arild, it was not the expression of collective anger in itself, but rather the antagonism and one-sidedness of this anger that made him turn away from the organisation.

Unlike Thomas, who was offered help by the shelter, Arild started out feeling discriminated as a man. He felt that the shelter acted unilaterally on his wife's story and would not listen to his concerns for her mental health and its impact on their son. In his view, this happened simply because he was a man, the stereotypical IPV perpetrator, and she was a woman, the ideal IPV victim. At that point in his life, he had not yet found a community presenting a master narrative of male victimisation that resonated with his situation. When he found it, years later, Arild did not identify as a victim. Even if his ex-wife may have used severe violence and also made serious false accusations against him, he ascribed this to her mental illness, and he saw her as the real victim and felt sorry for her. This reasoning resembles that of other victims of IPV, who have been found to show considerable empathy for perpetrators who they perceive as being ill or otherwise in marginal and difficult positions (Bjørnholt & Helseth, 2019; Donovan & Hester, 2014).

Not only was Arild's story a mismatch with the MRO master narrative; the emotional intensity of the MRO was also a mismatch with Arild's own feelings at the time. He did not seek recognition as a victim, nor did he harbour pain that could be 'translated' to anger, nor mobilised politically. Notably, both Thomas and Arild were negatively affected by the atmosphere of resentment in the MRO.

## Discussion

Through the analysis of male victims of IPV and their dealings with an MRO, we conclude that the politicisation of the personal in these cases reveals several inconsistencies between the personal and the collective. An organisation's communicative strategy to improve the positions of the members as perceived victims may force the victims to conform to the specific framing in order to receive support (Pemberton, Aarten & Mulder, 2019). Stories that challenge the master narrative offered in the organisation, like Arild's, are therefore not welcomed. His experiences with the MRO were flavoured by the disjunction between his story and his feelings, the MRO's master narrative and the affective intensity in this collective, and by the fact that he refused to embrace a victim position, thus ignoring an important prerequisite for inclusion within the MRO.

In order to understand male IPV victims' engagement with MROs, it is not enough to address the compatibility of personal stories and the narrative framing offered by the organisation. We also have to consider the timing. Arild, who felt he had managed quite well, against all odds, was alienated by the intensity of the victimisation discourse and the conspiratorial anger expressed by the MROs. In contrast, Thomas, who entered the organisation as a broken and traumatised man, first got heavily involved in the organisation's activities on social media, but he disengaged from it due to the emotional toll it took.

While Kimmel (2013) argues that the interaction with the radio host 'channels' the callers' pain into anger, we have shown that the encounter between individual male victims and MROs is more of a dialectic process, where the political rage and the personal pain become intertwined and may be mutually intensifying. Thomas, whose narrative was a perfect match with that of the MRO, could not carry the weight of the collective rage and conspiracy theories in the MRO, as he felt that he, too, was transmogrified into one of those angry and bitter men, without finding a way to deal with his pain. Rather than 'channelling' his painful personal experiences into political action, Thomas felt stuck with the cumulative reinforcement of collective anger and personal pain, unable to find a way to move on. In this sense what at first glance may appear as a perfect match between a frustrated man embracing a victim position, and the MRO claiming victimhood on behalf of his kind, his participation in this affective community mobilising outrage against a perceived injustice, did not transform or 'channel' the pain into political engagement. Neither did he feel energised by being part of this community of outrage. In contrast, for him personally, the collective pain and the negative affective atmosphere augmented his personal pain.

Finally, claiming victimhood at an individual level may be compromised when it becomes co-opted by a political movement constructing men as a discriminated group and aligned with a group that comes across as aggressive, misogynist and conspiratorial. Arild felt he had been 'soiled' through his interaction with the MRO, and both Thomas and Arild addressed this collective expression of anger and the MRO's one-sidedness as a serious obstacle to what they saw as the 'legitimate cause'; namely, drawing public attention to men as misrecognised victims in society. This disjuncture between the personal and the political may compromise individual victims' legitimate claims to the victim position, and thus cause additional harm and distress for male victims of IPV.

As our analysis has shown, involvement in an MRO turned out to be a rather distressing and counterproductive experience for the individual male victims of IPV in this study. However, we cannot exclude that, for others, being part of a collective of outrage may be rewarding and energising. Further, on a political level, we should be cautious to jump to the conclusion

that policies of resentment, pursued by MROs, are counterproductive in obtaining their political goals. MROs have gained considerable leverage in politics by drawing attention to men's pain, and the combination of IPV and custody struggles can be seen as a particularly potent mix in contemporary masculinity politics. Hence, we need to further explore the dynamics of affective politics of masculinity as potential drivers for social change.

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