# ARE FEMINIST HETEROSEXUAL COUPLES HAPPIER? THE MEDIATING ROLE OF PARTNER CHOICE

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Feminism is considered an obstacle to heterosexual relationships, yet, this issue has rarely been investigated. Using a sample of 419 female university students ($M$ = 20.7y, $SD$ = 2.22), we tested the following hypotheses: single women are more likely to be feminist than women in a heterosexual relationship; feminists, when in a couple, are more likely to have a relationship with a pro-feminist man; this is associated with a better relationship. Results confirm our hypotheses: single women are more likely to be feminist than women involved in a couple. When feminists have a partner, they tend to choose a pro-feminist man; these relationships are more likely to be satisfactory and free from violence. Mediation analysis revealed that feminism indirectly plays a protective role against low-quality relationships, by helping to avoid anti-feminist partners. The study provides evidence for the protective role of being feminist in heterosexual relationships, and points out the importance of disseminating and supporting the feminist perspective.

Keywords: Feminism; Young women; Heterosexual couple relationships; Intimate partner violence; Pro-feminist men.

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As Emma Watson remarked in her talk at the United Nations Headquarters in 2014, being a feminist is still unpopular. The word "feminist" seems outdated, linked to old battles that have allowed us to live more freely in a world where gender equality has been achieved and where it is no longer necessary to fight for women's rights. In addition to feminism being considered useless, many social problems, from a high divorce rate to the underachievement of children in school, are attributed to the movement. Feminists are often described as angry and aggressive women with a neglected appearance and even as man-haters wanting to "put down" and de-masculinize men (Lamoureux & Dupuis-Déry, 2015).

Yet, data on different sectors of our lives — employment, income, political power, media content — indicate that women continue to face discrimination (World Economic Forum, 2018), and feminism is still necessary (Adichie, 2015). A case in point is gender violence against women, a widespread problem, with serious consequences on women's life and health (World Health Organization, 2013): overall, 35% of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence, or non-partner sexual violence. According to a European survey, 19% of women have experienced physical or sexual violence from a male partner during their life, and one third has experienced various psychological abuse (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights [FRA], 2014). To combat the phenomenon, radical measures

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are needed, at the cultural, social, and legislative level (World Health Organization, 2010). An international comparative analysis showed that the critical factor to activate anti-violence measures in a country is the presence of a strong feminist movement (Htun & Weldon, 2012), a trend confirmed by a more local study (Schuler & Nazneen, 2018).

Considering this situation, it is worrisome that young women appear to accept many negative stereotypes on feminism, even if their lives are informed by feminist ideas (Anderson et al., 2009; Burn et al., 2000). The social identity of many young heterosexual women is still based on being in a romantic relationship (Mahalik et al., 2005; Papp et al., 2017): particularly in this period of their life, they may be strongly driven to have a male partner and build a romantic couple relationship (Chung, 2005). If feminism is described as a movement of "man-haters," that fights against the individual man rather than against patriarchal society (Anderson et al., 2009), as well as an obstacle to a romantic heterosexual relationship, it is not surprising that many heterosexual women do not endorse feminism (Rudman & Fairchild, 2007).

## FEMINISM AND COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS

Few studies have directly tested whether being a feminist has an impact on couple relationships. When choosing a partner, people tend to choose someone with similar values (Montañés et al., 2013). Studies have shown that feminist women prefer egalitarian relationships; their ideal partner is a man who does not conform to the traditional masculine norms of violence, power over women, "playboy" behavior, and self-reliance (Backus & Mahalik, 2011). Research with large samples of men and women in 19 nations showed that men are more likely than women to express hostile sexist beliefs (Glick et al., 2000); this implies that feminist heterosexual women may have difficulties finding partners who share their values. Yet, as far as we know, the hypothesis that feminism may be linked to relationship status (single or in a heterosexual couple relationship) has never been explored.

Prior research suggested that men endorsing traditional norms are far from being ideal partners: they tend to oppose gender equality, have difficulties at the intimate and relational level, and are more likely to be violent against their partners (Herrero et al., 2016; Reidy et al., 2009; Rochlen & Mahalik, 2004). In addition, traditionally masculine men are more likely to be psychologically distressed (Mahalik et al., 2005) and to abuse substances (Mahalik et al., 2007). Men with high scores in ambivalent sexism scales, especially hostile sexism scales, are more likely to endorse attitudes that legitimize wife abuse (Glick et al., 2002) or to perpetrate violence against a woman partner (Renzetti et al., 2018). Not surprisingly, women in a couple relationship with a man adhering to traditional norms are more likely to be depressed, anxious, and have nonsatisfactory relationships (Burn & Ward, 2005; Rochlen & Mahalik, 2004).

According to Backus and Mahalik (2011), being feminist may protect women against being involved in unsatisfying or even violent relationships. Yet, only Rudman and Phelan (2007) directly investigated the impact of feminism on the quality of the couple relationship. With one question, the authors examined the respondent's feminist identification, and with two other questions, they asked how much the participant liked feminists and career women. The same questions were asked to rate the partner's feminism. In contrast to the common belief that feminism is incompatible with romance, having a feminist partner had a positive impact on women; men with feminist partners rated their relationships more stable and with a greater degrees of sexual satisfaction.

### AIMS OF THE PRESENT STUDY

The study has various aims. In a sample of female University students, we analyze knowledge about feminism, self-identification as feminists, and transmission of knowledge on feminism at the family level. Another goal is to investigate whether identifying oneself as a feminist was, first, linked with relationship status (single or in a couple), and, second influenced partner choice and the quality of the relationship. More precisely, we formed the following hypotheses:

H1: Feminist women will be single more often than non-feminist ones.

H2: Feminist women, when in a relationship, are more likely to have a romantic relationship with a pro-feminist man.

H3: Being a feminist and having a pro-feminist partner is associated with a better relationship in terms of getting along, satisfaction, and absence of violence.

To attain these goals, we developed and validated two scales assessing the respondents' and their partners' feminism, respectively.

### METHOD

#### Participants and Procedure

Anonymous, self-administered questionnaires were gathered from 419 female students ($M = 20.7$ years, $SD = 2.22$, range = 18-39). Participants were recruited from classes of the Humanities (27%), Psychology (29%), Law (24%), Pharmacy (7%), Economy (8%), and Political Science (5%) departments of the University of Trieste (Italy). Departments were unevenly distributed across the sample ($\chi^2 = 158.06$, $df = 5$, $p < .001$) and associated with the age distribution (ANOVA, $F(5,410) = 6.640$, $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = 0.08$), with scientific disciplines having the youngest students.

The majority of the students, 376 (90%), were Italian; the number of students of other nationalities was too small to allow separate analyses. Students were aged between 19 and 26 years (95%). Three-hundred and seven (73%) were in a heterosexual relationship during the previous year, and 248 (59%) reported a stable long-term relationship lasting 12 months or more. The majority (199, 70%), rated their relationship as "good" or "very good," and only 25 (9%) reported a "difficult" or "very difficult" relationship.

Fieldwork was carried out between November and December 2015. The research assistants presented the study, asked for collaboration, and pointed out the possibility of not participating; after completing the questionnaires, participants placed them in a closed box, were thanked, and received leaflets with the name of the researchers and information about the local services for victims of violence. It took 20–30 minutes for the students to complete the questionnaires. Data were collected during regular university hours in the classroom. All students agreed to participate and filled out the questionnaires correctly.

#### Materials

There are no available scales regarding the support for feminist instances in Italian samples, so we developed scales from those used previously in the United States (Fassinger, 1994; Fisher et al., 2000; Henley et al., 1998; Morgan, 1996; Rickard, 1987), and adapted them to the Italian feminist cultural background.

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The aim was to develop two brief and easy measures to allow us to evaluate support for feminist instances and feminist values.

*Feminism Scale* (Scale F) measures female participants' support for feminist instances. Participants responded to 14 items using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) (see Appendix A for detailed items). To construct the measure, negatively worded items were coherently reversed, so higher scale values correspond to the more feminist answers.

*Feminism Scale of the Partner* (Scale Fp) measures the partner's support for feminist values, as evaluated by the female respondent, using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The response option "I don't know" was also available; it was disregarded for the analyses because it was rarely used by respondents (< 6%, on average) (See Appendix B for detailed items).

Two single questions were added to allow respondents to self-label themselves and their partner as: pro-feminist; neither pro-feminist nor antifeminist; anti-feminist; or "don't know."

*Ambivalent Sexism Inventory* (ASI; Glick & Fiske 1996). To evaluate the concurrent validity of the Scale F with a more established scale tapping into related constructs, we used the ASI (Glick & Fiske, 1996), a 22-item self-report measure that assesses both benevolent and hostile sexism, in its Italian version validated by Manganelli, Volpato, and Canova (2008). Items from the hostile subscale include "many women are actually seeking special favours, such as hiring policies that privilege them over men, under the guise of asking for equality," "there are actually many women who get a kick out of teasing men by acting sexually available and then refusing male advances." Examples of benevolent component items are "a good woman should be put on a pedestal by her men," and "people are not truly happy in life without being romantically involved with a member of the other sex." Participants were asked to respond on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

*Knowledge of feminism*. Responders were asked to name any women's or feminists associations they knew and to specify if they participated in any of them. They were also asked to report whether or not their mothers or fathers had talked to them about feminism, and if so, in which way (positive, negative, or neutral).

*Couple relationship and quality*. Students were asked in a single item if they were in a heterosexual couple relationship. Those who replied affirmatively were then questioned about the quality of the couple relationship and about intimate partner violence. The quality of the relationship was assessed with the consensus and satisfaction subscales of the Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS; Busby et al., 1995), slightly modified for our young sample. Participants were asked to indicate on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*always agree*) to 5 (*always disagree*) the extent of agreement with their partners about: friendship, demonstrations of affection, sexual relations, conventionality (correct or proper behavior), career or study decisions (studying abroad, staying at home during the weekend to study, …), entertainment and leisure.

Students were also asked how often, during the previous year: "have you considered terminating your relationship," "your partner made you think that he wants to break up," "you regret that you are in a relationship with him," "you and your partner quarrel," "you and your partner get on each other's nerves." They responded again using a 5-point scale from 1 (*always*) to 5 (*never*). The sum of the six items of the consensus subscale and the five items of the satisfaction subscale was then calculated separately, with higher scores indicating greater conflict and greater satisfaction, respectively.

*Intimate partner violence*. The presence of violence in the couple was assessed using the nine items developed by Romito and Grassi (2007) and Romito, Beltramini, and Escribà-Agüir (2013) for studies with high school and university students. Items concerned: domination and psychological violence (preventing the partner from doing certain things, making scenes, controlling, strongly criticizing, insulting, threatening

him or her); physical violence (slaps and shoves, punches and kicks); and sexual violence (pressure, threats or blackmailing to obtain sex). Answers to these questions were: *no*; *once or twice*; *more often*. The sum of the nine items was calculated, with higher scores indicating that more intimate partner violence was experienced.

*Demographic*s. Participants reported their age and nationality. The questionnaire was tested by administering it to a small sample of students (not participating in the study). Based on this pre-test, we discarded or modified unsatisfactory questions.

## Analysis

Preliminarily, we conducted a validation analysis of the new measures developed for the present study. Specifically, we analyzed the construct validity of Feminism Scale, Feminism Scale of the Partner, consensus, satisfaction, and intimate partner violence. Concurrent validity of Feminism Scale and Feminism Scale of the Partner with sexism (ASI) subscales were also analyzed.

To test Hypothesis 1, the means and standard deviations of feminism scores when being involved (or not) in a relationship are investigated. Hypothesis 2 is addressed by computing the Pearson correlations among feminism and partner feminism measures; multivariate and simple linear models are used to investigate if Partner's feminism is predicted mostly by a specific feminism subscale.

The last research question, Hypothesis 3, is tested by computing the Pearson correlations among intimate partner violence, satisfaction and conflict measures, and feminism and partner feminism subscales. Multivariate and simple linear models helped in identifying the most relevant predictors promoting better intimate relationships in terms of agreement, satisfaction, and absence of violence. For all these analyses, women's age and department were statistically controlled. Finally, the direct effect of feminism on the quality of the relationship and the effect mediated by the partner's feminism were investigated using a path analysis model with the *lavaan* package (Rosseel, 2012) for the R statistical environment (R Core Team, 2016).

## RESULTS

### Construct Validity of Feminism Scale and Feminism Scale of the Partner

*Feminism Scale.* The first principal component analysis with Varimax rotation (PCA) was used to explore the factorability of the correlation matrix and the probable number of components (see Table 1). Factorability was also supported by visual inspection of Pearson correlation coefficients (percentage of correlations greater than .30 in the correlation matrix; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007), Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (KMO > .50; Kaiser & Rice 1974), and Bartlett's test of sphericity ($p < .05$; Bartlett 1950). Three components were identified with eigenvalues greater than one, accounting for 50% of the total variance and related to approval of equal opportunities between men and women — Feminism subscale 1 (F1), Items 1, 3, 4 — to positive beliefs about feminism — Feminism subscale 2 (F2), Items 2, 5, 8, 13 — and to negative stereotype on feminism — Feminism subscale 3 (F3), Items 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14. Internal consistency was evaluated with Cronbach's alpha and average inter-item correlations (see Table 1). To further evaluate construct validity, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with each item constrained to load only on one of the three (correlated) factors. Models estimation based on robust maximum

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TABLE 1
Descriptive statistics and internal consistency of measures used in the study

| | Labels | $N$ | $M$ | $SD$ | $Mdn$ | Min | Max | Skew | Kurtosis | Cronbach's Alpha | Average interitem $r$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Feminism** | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Approval of equal opportunities | F1 | 416 | 13.44 | 1.55 | 14 | 7 | 15 | −.96 | .97 | .65 | .39 |
| Positive beliefs about feminism | F2 | 415 | 13.72 | 2.10 | 14 | 5 | 20 | .00 | 1.27 | .64 | .31 |
| Negative stereotype on feminism | F3 | 414 | 15.36 | 4.18 | 15 | 7 | 30 | .15 | −.17 | .74 | .30 |
| Feminism | F | 412 | 30.17 | 6.20 | 30 | 14 | 52 | −.04 | −.17 | .80 | .22 |
| **Sexism** | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Complementary gender differentiation | gd | 418 | 9.22 | 2.28 | 9 | 3 | 15 | −.33 | .09 | .57 | .31 |
| Protective paternalism | pp | 419 | 10.97 | 2.87 | 11 | 4 | 20 | −.10 | −.02 | .64 | .30 |
| Intimate heterosexuality | ih | 418 | 12.34 | 3.78 | 13 | 4 | 20 | −.12 | −.61 | .83 | .55 |
| Hostile sexism | HS | 417 | 31.78 | 7.00 | 32 | 13 | 51 | −.17 | .11 | .85 | .34 |
| Benevolent sexism | BS | 417 | 32.53 | 7.38 | 33 | 11 | 54 | −.25 | .13 | .84 | .32 |
| **Partner's feminism** | | | | | | | | | | | |
| (Strong) anti-feminist attitudes and beliefs | Fp1 | 283 | 12.92 | 4.16 | 13 | 5 | 24 | .12 | −.52 | .68 | .28 |
| (Manifest) pro-feminist attitudes and beliefs | Fp2 | 281 | 15.01 | 4.30 | 15 | 2 | 24 | −.54 | −.10 | .67 | .28 |
| Partner's Feminism | Fp | 283 | 22.29 | 6.71 | 22 | 5 | 42 | .30 | −.44 | .73 | .20 |
| **Couple relationship, its quality, and violence** | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Conflictual relation | Consensus | 296 | 12.29 | 3.62 | 12 | 6 | 26 | .62 | .19 | .70 | .28 |
| Satisfaction of relation | Satisfaction | 298 | 19.61 | 3.32 | 20 | 9 | 25 | −.69 | .22 | .76 | .39 |
| Intimate partner violence | IPV | 307 | 1.08 | 1.38 | 1.00 | 0 | 9 | 1.79 | 4.52 | .64 | .19 |

*Note.* $N$ = number of valid cases; $M$ = mean; $SD$ = standard deviation; $Mdn$ = median.

likelihood was performed using the *lavaan* package. The goodness of fit evaluation included the following: (a) Satorra- Bentler likelihood ratio $\chi^2$ statistic; (b) root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and its 90% confidence interval (CI); (c) comparative fit index (CFI); (d) Bentler-Bonett non-normed fit index (NNFI); (e) squared root mean residuals (SRMR) and their $\text{TM} = \frac{1}{2}\left(Q_{50\%} + \frac{Q_{25\%}+Q_{75\%}}{2}\right)$, Tukey's trimean values, based on 1,000 bootstrap replicates.

Cut-off values for the CFI and NNFI > .95 and for the RMSEA and for the SRMR < .08 are indicative of acceptable fit of a model (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Examination of fit indices, $\chi^2$ (74) = 142.196, $p$ < .001; RMSEA = .050, 90% CI [.039, .060]; SRMR = .051 (TM = .052); CFI = .919 (TM = .907); NNFI = .900 (TM = .885)) suggests that the proposed factorial structure have reached acceptable fit. Estimated correlation between factors were the following: $\varphi_{F1F2}$ = .358, $p$ <.001; $\varphi_{F1F3}$ = −.530, $p$ <.001; $\varphi_{F2F3}$ = −.668, $p$ <.001. The overall sum of the items was also calculated, namely feminism global scores, with higher scores indicating adherence to feminist values. Despite less sustainability, $\chi^2$ (77) = 277.414, $p$ < .001; RMSEA = .079, 90% CI [.071, .088]; SRMR = .072 (TM = .072); CFI = .784 (TM = .773); NNFI = .744 (TM = .732), a single scale structure gave important hints about overall relations to other measures.

*Feminism Scale of the Partner.* Preliminary orthogonal PCA revealed a two-components solution, with two eigenvalues greater than 1 explaining 45% of the total variance. Cronbach's alpha and average inter-item correlations are reported in Table 1. The first component — Feminism subscale of the partner 1 (Fp1), Items 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 9 — measures (strong) anti-feminist attitudes and beliefs (e.g., "he believes that if a woman dresses sexy it is because she wants to be approached"). The second component — Feminism subscale of the partner 2 (Fp2), Items 4, 6, 8, 10, 11 — measures (manifest) pro-feminist attitudes and beliefs (e.g., "he appreciates the values of the feminist movement"). CFA revealed very good fitting performance for the intended structure, $\chi^2$ (43) = 40.097, $p$ = .598; RMSEA = .000, 90% CI [.000, .053]; SRMR = .057 (TM = .055); CFI = 1.000 (TM = .978); NNFI = 1.019 (TM = .978). Estimated correlation between Fp1 and Fp2 was $\varphi$ = −.742, $p$ < .001. A global measure, the Feminism Scale of the Partner (Fp), was also computed summing up all items, with higher scores indicating a more pro-feminist partner, $\chi^2$ (44) = 53.902, $p$ = 0.146; RMSEA = .044, 90% CI [.000, .078]; SRMR = .065 (TM = .062); CFI = .949 (TM = .924); NNFI = .937 (TM = .905).

### Concurrent Validity of Feminism Scale and Feminism Scale of the Partner

As previously noted, self-identification as feminist and ASI (sexism) scores were used to investigate concurrent validity on the Feminism Scale; perceived partner's feminism was used on the Feminism Scale of the Partner for the same purpose. ASI structural validity in this new sample was checked previously.

The orthogonal PCA revealed four components with eigenvalues greater than one, explaining 51% of total variance and regarding different aspects of hostile and benevolent sexism: hostile sexism (11 items), protective paternalism (four items), complementary gender differentiation (three items), and intimate heterosexuality (four items). Cronbach's alpha and average inter-item correlations are reported in Table 1. CFA sustained a four-factor solution, $\chi^2$ (203) = 440.012, $p$< .001; RMSEA = .053, 90% CI [.047, .059]; SRMR = .051 (TM = .053); CFI = .907 (TM = .897); NNFI = .894 (TM = .883) reflecting the original ASI scales (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Manganelli et al., 2008). Because of (strong) correlations among all latent subscales but hostile sexism (average $\varphi$ = .647; $p$ < .001), a two-factor structure with hostile sexism (11 items) and benevolent sexism (11 items) was also taken into account, $\chi^2$ (208) = 529.376, $p$ < .001; RMSEA = .061, 90% CI [.055, .067]; SRMR = .055 (TM = .057); CFI = .873 (TM = .864); NNFI = .859 (TM = .849). Estimated correlation between hostile and benevolent sexism was $\varphi$ = .524, $p$ <.001. Table 2 shows patterns of positive/negative correlations between Feminism Scale and ASI subscales which were theoretically consistent and statistically significant. Generally, negative stereotypical thinking about feminism (feminism subscale, F3) was positively associated with both hostile and benevolent sexism; whereas approval of equal opportunity principles (feminism subscale, F1) and a positive view of feminism (feminism subscale, F2) were negatively associated with sexism. Results from multivariate linear models predicting correlated Feminism Scales by ASI scores showed the importance of both hostile (MANOVA, approximate $F$(3,402) =

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31.968, $p < .001$; partial $\eta^2 = .19$) and benevolent sexism (MANOVA, approximate $F(3,402) = 11.595$, $p < .001$; partial $\eta^2 = .08$) in predicting feminism.

TABLE 2
Pearson correlations between feminism (F scale) and sexism (ASI scale) scores: Concurrent validity

|  |  | F1 | F2 | F3 | F | HS | BS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Approval of equal opportunities | F1 | 1.00 |  |  |  |  |  |
| Positive beliefs about feminism | F2 | .25*** | 1.00 |  |  |  |  |
| Negative stereotype on feminism | F3 | −.38*** | −.44*** | 1.00 |  |  |  |
| Feminism | F | .59*** | .70*** | −.92*** | 1.00 |  |  |
| Hostile sexism | HS | −.20*** | −.37*** | .48*** | −.50*** | 1.00 |  |
| Benevolent sexism | BS | −.14** | −.11* | .40*** | −.34*** | .42*** | 1.00 |

*Note.* Feminism and sexism scores were corrected for age and department. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Average feminism scores by self-categorization as pro-feminist matched the theoretical expectations of higher feminism on those who consider themselves as clearly "pro-feminist"; middle range values for "neutral" positions; and lower scores for declared "anti-feminist" positions (Figure 1 Panel A). Globally, results are significant for both global feminism measure, ANOVA $F(3,406) = 28.902$, $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .18$, and all three correlated feminism subscales, MANOVA approximate $F(9,1218) = 14.572$, $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .10$; separate ANOVA analyses, $p < .001$. Similarly, partner's feminism subscales scores were coherently different when compared to partner identification as feminist, MANOVA approximate $F(8,524) = 3.823$, $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .06$, and univariate ANOVA models reported significance for both partner feminism subscales (Fp1 and Fp2), $p < .001$ and $p < .05$, respectively. The same pattern emerges on global partner feminism measure, ANOVA $F(4,263) = 6.737$, $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .09$, a male partner perceived as manifestly anti-feminist was rated significantly higher (lower) on anti (pro) feminist subscales than on other classes (Figure 1 Panel B).

Consensus, Satisfaction, and Intimate Partner Violence: Construct Validity

These measures were tailored or created specifically for the present study and relative items were considered as reflecting single-factor structures: both exploratory and confirmative analyses supported these interpretations with just one eigenvalue greater than one, variance explained close to 50%, RMSEA ranging from .061 to .076, SRMR lower than .05, CFI greater than .95, and NNFI greater than .92. Intimate partner violence failed over the CFI and NNFI indices (< .80), which could be related to the specific estimation method for ordinal outcomes that was used.

*Respondents and their Partners' Feminism*

In our sample, despite a median score of "thirty" on the Feminism Scale (see Table 1), meaning that 50% of participants "agree" (Likert score = 4) with more than 7-8 out of 14 statements about feminism, only

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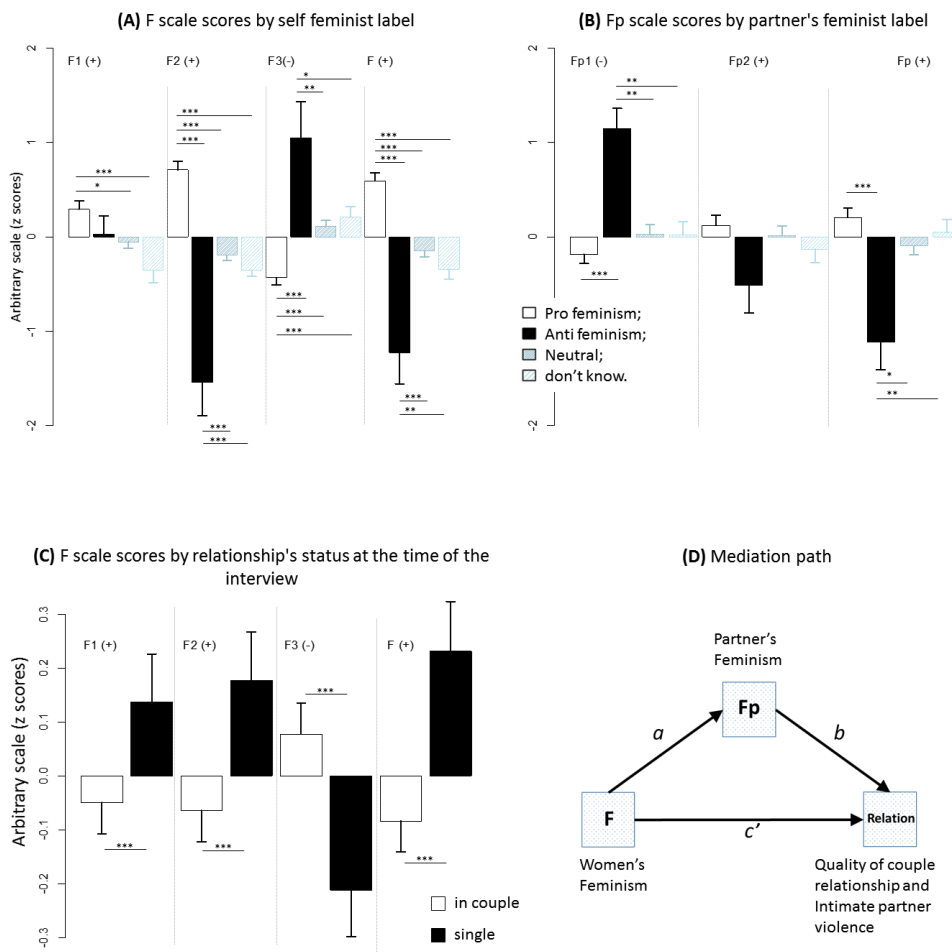Feresin, M., & Romito, P.
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FIGURE 1
Panel A. Average feminism scores by self-categorization as pro-feminist. Panel B. Partner's feminism scores compared to partner identification as feminist. Panel C. Feminism scores related to the status of being involved in a relationship. Panel D. Schematic illustration of the mediation model for quantifying the contribution of women's feminism and partner's feminism scores to the quality of relationship measures.
*Note*. Scores were corrected for age and department. Fp1 = (Strong) anti-feminist attitudes and beliefs; Fp2 = (Manifest) pro-feminist attitudes and beliefs; Fp = Partner's Feminism. F1 = Approval of equal opportunities; F2 = Positive beliefs about feminism; F3 = Negative stereotype on feminism; F = Feminism.
Bonferroni post-hoc correction for multiple testing. *p < .05. **p < .01. *** p < .001.

121 (29%) respondents defined themselves as "pro-feminist," with a majority (213, 51%) answering they are "neither pro-feminist nor anti-feminist," or (69, 17%) "do not know." A tiny minority (14.3%) of the sample answered they are anti-feminist. A similar trend was observed for the partner: a "pro-feminist" partner was reported by 92 (30%) female respondents, 105 (34%) females rated their partner as "neither pro-feminist nor anti-feminist," and 92 (30%) answered "not know." Only 13 (4%) respondents reported their partners were anti-feminist. Few respondents (16%) were aware of women's or feminist's groups; active participation was limited to 2%.

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*Parental Influences on Respondents' Feminism*

Looking at the family context, 29% of the sample reported that the topic had been dealt with. Particularly, only 10% of respondents reported discussing feminism with parents and receiving a positive impression; "a neutral conversation that did not leave any particular impression" was selected by 17%; and discussions with a degree of negative remarks by only 2% of them. Parental conditional distribution slightly differs in our sample, $\chi^2 = 18.348$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$, with mothers (15%) over fathers (6%) conveying positive attitudes toward feminism (Pearson residuals $\cong 2.74$, $p < .01$). Only discussion with mother about feminism is a significant predictor of feminism, MANOVA approximate $F(9,1176) = 5.017$, $p < .001$; partial $\eta^2 = .04$. The effect is pervasive on each feminism subscale with decreasing size effect from F2, ANOVA $F(3,395) = 13.555$, $p < .001$; partial $\eta^2 = .09$, to F3, ANOVA $F(3,394) = 6.369$, $p < .001$; partial $\eta^2 = .05$, and to F1, ANOVA $F(3,396) = 3.531$, $p = .015$; partial $\eta^2 = .03$. Particularly, "talks with the mother about feminism leaving a positive impression" is associated with significantly greater feminist attitudes and beliefs than talks with negative or neutral content, or no talks at all (data not shown). Notably, the last two categories have the same detrimental effects on acceptance of feminism as explicit negative comments. The same conclusions hold true for global feminism measure with an undimmed effect from a positive maternal attitude, ANOVA $F(3,392) = 11.537$, $p < .001$; partial $\eta^2 = .08$.

*Feminism and Couple Relationship*

To test whether feminist women will be more often single (Hypotheses 1) we compared feminism scores related to the status of being involved in a relationship (in couple, $N = 307$) or not (single, $N = 112$). Average feminism scores and their standard errors are shown in Figure 1 Panel C, along with Bonferroni corrected *t*-tests. All three correlated feminism subscales are significantly related to being involved in a relationship, MANOVA approximate $F(3,406) = 2.717$, $p = .044$; $\eta^2 = .02$; particularly, significance is related to the feminism subscale F2, ANOVA $F(1,411) = 3.890$, $p = .049$; $\eta^2 = .01$, and feminism subscale F3, ANOVA $F(1,410) = 5.702$, $p = .02$; $\eta^2 = .02$. Single women generally report higher feminism scores and are coherently characterized by higher positive beliefs (F2) and lower negative stereotype (F3) on feminism. The same conclusions can be drawn by using the global feminism indicator, ANOVA $F(1,408) = 6.548$, $p = .01$; $\eta^2 = .02$. Being involved in an intimate relationship is associated with significantly lower feminist scores, as in our first hypothesis.

To test the second hypothesis — that feminist women tend to be in a couple with men whom they perceive as pro-feminist — we computed Pearson correlations between feminism and feminism of the partner measures (Table 3). Data reported are limited to women engaged in a relationship lasting 12 months or longer ($N = 248$). The global feminism score positively correlates with the global partner's feminism score; coherently, this global feminism measure correlates negatively with (strong) anti-feminist attitudes and beliefs (Fp1) and positively with (manifest) pro-feminist attitudes and beliefs (Fp2). The two correlated feminism of the partner subscales are significantly predicted by F1, MANOVA approximate $F(2,237) = 3.986$, $p = .02$; partial $\eta^2 = .03$, and F3 subscales, MANOVA approximate $F(2,237) = 7.651$, $p < .001$; partial $\eta^2 = .06$. Specifically, separate univariate analyses of variance show that partner's anti-feminist attitudes and beliefs (Fp1) was negatively associated with approval of equal opportunity principles (F1; $p < .05$; partial $\eta^2 = .02$) and positively associated with a negative stereotype on feminism (F3; $p < .001$; partial $\eta^2 = .05$). Enlarging the scope to global partner's feminism (Fp), the leading role of women's gender egalitarianism principles (F1) as a positive predictor of partner's feminism is further defined ($p < .01$; partial $\eta^2 = .03$). As for our third hypothesis

TABLE 3
Pearson correlations between women's feminism and partner's feminism

|  |  | Women's feminism | | | |
|  |  | F1 | F2 | F3 | F |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Partner's feminism | Fp1 | −.22*** | −.10 | .28*** | −.27*** |
|  | Fp2 | −.07 | .13* | −.12 | .12 |
|  | Fp | .23*** | .11 | −.17** | .21*** |

*Note.* Fp1 = (Strong) anti-feminist attitudes and beliefs; Fp2 = (Manifest) pro-feminist attitudes and beliefs; Fp = Partner's Feminism. F1 = Approval of equal opportunities; F2 = Positive beliefs about feminism; F3 = Negative stereotype on feminism; F = Feminism. Feminism and sexism scores were corrected for age and department; data reported are limited to women engaged in a relationship lasting 12 months or longer ($N = 248$). * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

of whether being feminist and having a partner who is perceived as pro-feminist is associated with a better relationship in terms of less conflict, more satisfaction, and absence of violence, we first computed correlations among feminism and partner feminism scales with measures of quality of relationships (Table 4). Both women and partner's perceived feminism are negatively associated with conflict and violence and positively associated with satisfying relationship; however, only for partner's feminism is statistical significance achieved in all correlations (see Table 4). This is confirmed by a multivariate linear model using quality of relationship measures as dependent variables, and feminism and partner feminism subscales as predictor variables: only Fp1, MANOVA approximate $F(3,229) = 8.989$, $p < .001$; partial $\eta^2 = .11$, and Fp2, MANOVA approximate $F(3,229) = 4.780$, $p < .01$; partial $\eta^2 = .06$, reached statistical significance in explaining multivariate quality of relationships. Multiple linear regressions revealed how this relative importance of partner's feminism over women's feminism took place for each of the quality of relationship indicators (ANOVAs $p < .01$; with partial $\eta^2 s$ ranging from .03 to .10) and shed light on the possible role of women's feminism indirectly promoting good relationships via the mediating role of perceived partner's feminism.

TABLE 4
Pearson correlations between feminisms and quality of couple relationship

|  | Women's feminism | | | | Partner's feminism | | | Couple relationship quality | | |
|  | F1 | F2 | F3 | F | Fp1 | Fp2 | Fp | Consensus | IPV | Satisfaction |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Consensus | .02 | .11 | .02 | .04 | .20** | −.18** | −.22*** | 1.00 |  |  |
| IPV | −.08 | −.07 | .19** | −.18** | .35*** | −.19** | −.22*** | .41*** | 1.00 |  |
| Satisfaction | .11 | .08 | −.16* | .17** | −.21** | .20** | .14* | −.53*** | −.46*** | 1.00 |

*Note.* Fp1 = (Strong) anti-feminist attitudes and beliefs; Fp2 = (Manifest) pro-feminist attitudes and beliefs; Fp = Partner's Feminism. F1 = Approval of equal opportunities; F2 = Positive beliefs about feminism; F3 = Negative stereotype on feminism; F = Feminism. Consensus = Conflict in couple relationship; IPV = Intimate partner violence; Satisfaction = Satisfaction in couple relationship. Scores were corrected for age and department; data reported are limited to women engaged in a relationship lasting 12 months or longer ($N = 248$). * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Generally, the mediation model hypothesizes three paths, a, b, and c' (direct effect), between three variables, and that taking into account the indirect path (ab) should attenuate the total effect (c). Figure 1 Panel D traces these paths for our variables of interest. Table 5 reports the fitted mediation models for all Feminism Scale, Feminism Scale of the Partner, and quality of relationship measures combinations.

TABLE 5
Mediation analysis standardized coefficients

| | Women's Feminism | Partner's Feminism | Couple Relationship | Direct path c' | Paths a | b | Indirect (mediated) Effect ab | type | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Block 1 | F | Fp | Satisfaction | .153* | .205*** | .101 ns | .021 *ns* | NO | |
| | F | Fp | IPV | −.142* | .205*** | −.182** | −.037* | PARTIAL | 21% |
| | F3 | Fp | Satisfaction | −.147* | −.169** | .105 ns | −.018 *ns* | NO | 11% |
| | F3 | Fp | IPV | .158** | −.169** | −.181** | .031* | PARTIAL | |
| Block 2 | F | Fp1 | Satisfaction | .129 ns | −.275*** | −.161* | .044* | FULL | 26% |
| | F | Fp1 | IPV | −.093 ns | −.275*** | .313*** | −.086*** | FULL | 48% |
| | F3 | Fp1 | Satisfaction | −.120 ns | .277*** | −.161* | −.045* | FULL | 27% |
| | F3 | Fp1 | IPV | .103 ns | .277*** | .308*** | .085*** | FULL | 45% |
| Block 3 | F | Fp2 | Satisfaction | .151* | .116 ns | .170* | .020 *ns* | NO | |
| | F | Fp2 | IPV | −.162* | .116 ns | −.156* | −.018 *ns* | NO | |
| | F3 | Fp2 | Satisfaction | −.141* | −.121 ns | .173* | −.021 *ns* | NO | |
| | F3 | Fp2 | IPV | .170** | −.121 ns | −.157* | .019 *ns* | NO | |

*Note.* Fp1 = (Strong) anti-feminist attitudes and beliefs; Fp2 = (Manifest) pro-feminist attitudes and beliefs; Fp = Partner's Feminism. F1 = Approval of equal opportunities; F2 = Positive beliefs about feminism; F3 = Negative stereotype on feminism; F = Feminism. Consensus = Conflict in couple relationship; IPV = Intimate partner violence; Satisfaction = Satisfaction in couple relationship. Scores were corrected for age and department; data reported are limited to women engaged in a relationship lasting 12 months or longer ($N = 248$).
Reported *p*-values are based on robust (Satorra-Bentler) standard errors. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. *ns* = not significant.

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Specifically, mediation analyses were limited to significant relations between participants' feminism and quality of the relationship (total effect c), as indicated by correlation coefficients in Table 4. The classification of mediation as "No," "Partial," or "Full" followed guidelines given in Iacobucci, Saldanha, and Deng (2007). The indirect effect of feminism through partner feminism on quality of relationship was quantified by coefficient $ab = a \times b$ and reported in Table 5; mediation effect size was expressed as the percentage of the total effect explained by a (fully or partially) mediated path calculated as ab/(c'+ ab) × 100.

Using the global partner feminism score as a mediator variable (Table 5, Block 1, second column) produced two partially-mediated paths explaining 11% and 21% of their respective total effects over the four possible combinations. Women's feminism positively predicts perceived partner's feminism (Table 5, positive coefficient "a"); having a pro-feminist partner (or a partner perceived as such) protects against conflict or intimate partner violence (negative "b"). Globally, 6 out of 12 possible mediation analyses with mixed indicators ended with a "full" or "partial" mediation, with an average of 30% of total effects explained. Substituting the mediator variable with the Fp1 subscale — partner's (strong) anti-feminist attitudes and beliefs; see Table 5, Block 2 — leads to more impressive results with 4 out of 4 full mediations and an average effect size of nearly 36.5%: feminist women form relationships with men who are perceived as low in anti-feminism (negative "a" coefficients), and we know that men's antifeminism is linked with more conflicts and violence (positive "b" coefficients) and less satisfaction (negative "b" coefficients). Women's feminism indirectly plays a protective role against low-quality relationships, by helping to avoid anti-feminist partners. The relevance of the protective (avoidant) view of women's feminism over seeking compatibility in the partner's feminism is further clarified considering as a mediator the Fp2 subscale — (manifest) pro-feminist attitudes and beliefs; see Table 5, Block 3 — where there is practically no mediation.

DISCUSSION

We aimed to analyze the impact of feminism — conceptualized as supporting feminist values — on heterosexual couple relationships, more particularly whether feminism is linked to women's relationship status and, if in a relationship, is associated with the characteristics of the partner and of the relationship. Single women scored higher on the Feminism Scale (F scale) than those in a couple relationship; for women involved in a couple relationship, feminists were more likely to have a partner with high scores on the Feminism of the Partner Scale (Fp scale). The woman's feminism, and even more strongly, the man's feminism, predicted a better couple relationship, with more consensus and satisfaction, and less intimate partner violence. In agreement with Rudman and Phelan's results (2007), our data discount the common prejudice that feminism is bad for heterosexual couple relations.

As far as we know, our study is the first to investigate whether single women are more feminist than women in a heterosexual relationship, so we cannot compare our results with previous work. One interpretation of this association is in the woman's choice of partner. Women tend to prefer men who share similar ideas concerning sexism (Backus & Mahalik, 2011), and feminists are particularly skilled in recognizing sexist beliefs (Liss et al., 2001; Liss & Erchull, 2010): because men endorse more of these beliefs than women, feminists find it more challenging and time-consuming to select partners who share their perspectives. It appears that feminism, far from being bad for relationships, gives women the cognitive tools for better and more carefully choosing the men they want to be romantically involved with. Yet, another interpretation is that when in a heterosexual relationship, to maintain harmony and avoid cognitive dissonance, a woman may "water down" her feminist beliefs (Chung, 2005; Papp et al., 2017). Future longitudinal studies,

ideally with both quantitative and qualitative methods, would help disentangle these hypotheses and deepen our understanding of these processes.

For our second hypothesis —when in a couple relationship, a feminist woman is more likely to be with a pro-feminist man — our results confirm the trend found by previous studies indicating that women tend to have partners with similar characteristics (Backus & Mahalik, 2011; Montanes et al., 2013). In addition, our data highlight another facet of the process: feminist women choose men with similar values and even more importantly, avoid choosing men with (strong) anti-feminist attitudes and beliefs (men with high scores on the Fp1 subscale).

Our results also confirm the third hypothesis: supporting feminist values and having a partner that supports these values — or is perceived as supporting them — may result in a better relationship in terms of more consensus and satisfaction and the absence of intimate partner violence. Both women's and partners' scores on the Feminism Scale play a role in promoting these positive outcomes (consensus and satisfaction and preventing violence), but the effect was statistically significant only for partner's feminism. This finding was confirmed by a multivariate linear analysis of quality of relationship measures.

With the mediation model, we shed light on the role of feminism in young women's heterosexual relations. We found that women's feminism is good for the couple's relationship because it seems to drive the choice of a pro-feminist partner. The partner's feminism, and more specifically, the absence of (strong) anti-feminism attitudes and beliefs in the partner, directly affects the quality of the relationship. Indeed, the importance of this choice is clearer in terms of protection rather than a general search for similarities in a partner. Feminists seem to avoid anti-feminist men, protecting themselves against violence and sexist behaviors. Thus, disconfirming the stereotype that describes feminism as a source of trouble for heterosexual couples, we found that being feminist can be a protective factor that promotes less violent and happier relationships.

Other researchers have shown the negative impact on relationships of endorsing male traditional norms (Reidy et al., 2009; Rochlen & Mahalik, 2004), adhering to ambivalent and especially hostile sexism (Glick et al., 2002; Renzetti et al., 2018), or supporting the myth of romantic love (Papp et al., 2017). Because our Feminism Scale scores were strongly correlated with those of other instruments such as the ASI (Glick & Fiske, 1996), our results are not surprising. What our study contributes is that our scales more directly tapped feminism, a movement that has been and still often is attacked and despised (Lamoureux & Dupuis-Déry, 2015), but has been and still is instrumental in promoting necessary social change (Cobble et al., 2014; Htun & Weldon, 2012). Asking our respondents to subscribe (or not) to statements including the contested "F" word allows for concluding that supporting feminism (and not just distancing from traditional male norms or sexism) is suitable for good intimate relationships between men and women. Moreover, our results draw attention to the important, and positive, role of feminist men in a relationship.

Given these results, it is disheartening that only 29% of the young women interviewed in our sample chose the "pro-feminist" label, while 67% prefer the neutral "neither pro-feminist nor anti-feminist" or the "I don't know" option; very few (16%) can name a women's or feminist association, and even fewer (2%) are actively involved in it. This number is in contrast with the score on the Feminism Scale, because our respondents appear to support feminist instances, with 50% of them showing complete agreement on more than half of the items on the scale. Authors from the United States found a similar trend. Anderson et al. (2009), reported that 17% of the young women from their sample chose the feminist label; 52% declared themselves non-feminist; and 31% were unsure. In another study, only 11% of young women declared themselves feminist, 2% said they were committed feminists currently active in the women's movement, but 76% reported they agreed on all or some of the goals of the feminist movement (Burn et al., 2000). Liss et al. (2001) reported that 16% of their respondents chose the feminist label; 78% defined themselves as non-

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feminist, but among them most (81%) agreed with some or all of the aims of the feminist movement. When compared with these North-American studies, in our sample the young women who defined themselves "pro-feminist" were more numerous; this might be due to the softer alternative given to participants, who could choose the "pro-feminist" label-instead of the stricter "feminist" one.

Adhering to feminist values and goals but refusing the feminist label implies some social costs. Zucker (2004) showed that when women did not explicitly identify themselves as feminists, they had a lesser commitment to the women's movement, even if they supported feminist values. But this commitment is badly needed: it has been demonstrated that, at the macro level, the presence of a combative feminist movement in a country is the critical factor for activating policies promoting women's rights and contrasting violence against women (Htun & Weldon, 2012).

Few studies have analyzed the social characteristics that predict which women will develop a feminist consciousness. In the United States, learning about feminism through media or talking about it with close relationships are important tools for developing a feminist identity (Leaper & Arias, 2011; Zucker, 2004). After attending university courses on feminist issues, young women are more likely to have feminist behaviors, support feminist instances, and actively contrast gender discrimination (Eisele & Stake, 2008; Henderson-King & Stewart, 1999). Our results suggest that the mother is crucial in this process. Young women whose mothers talked to them about feminism in positive terms show more support for feminist instances. According to Roy, Weibust, and Miller's findings (2007), no differences emerge when the mother has talked about these topics in a negative or neutral way, supporting the notion that the baseline from which we judge feminists' issues is negative.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Our study has some limitations. The data are correlational, so it is not possible to make causal inferences. The sample was not representative of young Italian women because it included only university students who may have participated in the academic discussion about feminism; future studies should use more diverse samples. We considered only heterosexual relationships; further studies should analyze the impact of being feminist on the dynamics of couple relationships for people of other sexual orientations. We interviewed women and investigated the man's feminism via the woman's perceptions; future studies should collect data on couples to directly assess the support for feminism and evaluation of the relationship of both partners. Studying couples longitudinally would be important to assess long-term paths. Furthermore, qualitative studies are needed for a deeper understanding of the dynamics of feminist couples compared with non-feminist ones. In addition, given the central role of male feminism, we need to better understand how a boy who grows up in a sexist society may become a feminist man, focusing on the role of family, school, peers, and other social influences. Knowledge to date regards mostly the mother's influence (Epstein, 2013; O'Reilly, 2002; Romito & Grego, 2013): future studies should go beyond this relationship — however greatly important.

The study has strengths as well. The large sample and high response rate allowed for a sophisticated analysis. We created and validated scales of feminism that allowed for investigating its role in couple relationships in an Italian sample. To our knowledge, this is the first study of these issues conducted in a southern European country, and one of the few available internationally.

## Conclusions

Our study draws attention to the importance of female and male feminist attitudes and beliefs in promoting a satisfactory heterosexual couple relationship, highlighting the central role of pro-feminist men in avoiding violence in the relationship. Promoting gender equality with school-based, community, and media interventions is instrumental in violence prevention (World Health Organization, 2010), and involving men in these programs is a priority (Beltramini, 2020; Carlson et al., 2015; Flood, 2011; MenEngage, 2015). We need to broaden the discussion on how gender norms affect both women and men; talking about feminism may help deconstruct common stereotypes, allowing young women and men to develop a more informed and personal view regarding these issues.

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APPENDIX A

Feminism Scale (F)

1. Women should have the same working opportunities as men;
2. Feminism is a threat to society;
3. Women and men should have the same sexual freedom;
4. In a discussion, it is the men who should have the final say;
5. Feminism has promoted good laws;
6. Feminists are not attractive;
7. Ideally, when a man and a woman have a date, it is better if he pays;
8. Feminist women are interesting;
9. Equality between men and women have killed romance and passion;
10. By dint of talking about feminism, men today are experiencing discrimination;
11. Feminists are very likely to be lesbians;
12. Because of feminism, there is too much sexual freedom;
13. Thanks to feminism, there is greater equality between the sexes, and that is good;
14. Feminist women hate men.

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APPENDIX B

Feminism Scale of the partner (Fp)

1.  He considers homosexuality against nature;
2.  For him I must always look after my appearance or dress fashionably;
3.  He thinks that male sexual needs are more important than women's and that they should be always satisfied;
4.  He is interested in issues concerning violence against women;
5.  He refuses to have a woman as a/his boss;
6.  He believes that women should be protected;
7.  He believes that if a woman dresses sexy, it is because she wants to be approached;
8.  He would take part in an event for women (flashmob, petition, events, …);
9.  He believes that feminist women do not take care of their appearance;
10. He believes that women should have the same working opportunities as men;
11. He appreciates the values of the feminist movement.