

# Macho populists versus COVID: Comparing political masculinities

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/ejw](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/ejw)**Sharmila Parmanand** 

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## Abstract

This article uses a feminist lens to examine Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte and former United States President Donald Trump's responses to COVID-19. It argues that both populist leaders mobilised masculinity as a resource in statecraft. Both initially responded to the pandemic with dismissiveness and denialism. For the rest of his term, Trump diminished the harms of COVID and emphasised 'protecting the economy'. Duterte, however, eventually embraced the fear of COVID, imposed a strict lockdown, and secured emergency powers. This article first analyses differences in the masculinities the two politicians performed. It then explores how this performance of masculinity contributed to structuring public discourses in relation to the pandemic and situates it in neoliberal governance more broadly. For example, the performance of invincibility constructed others' vulnerability and illness as an individual weakness rather than socially and relationally produced. Trump's co-optation of the language of freedom encouraged protests against health measures and positioned medical experts as the 'real threat'. In contrast, Duterte's securitised approach made it difficult for citizens to protest repressive laws enacted by his government. Duterte's 'war on COVID' was marked by his demand for obedience and discipline, thereby constituting anyone who questioned the harmful effects of a police-led lockdown as a threat to national security. Finally, the article reflects on the ways China's growing role in global politics affects notions and practices of populist masculinities. Both leaders flexed diplomatic masculinity differently in relation to China: Duterte touted his personal closeness to China as a path to securing resources for the Philippines, while Trump's vilification of China constructed COVID as a 'foreign enemy' as opposed to a crisis he was responsible for. Ultimately, these masculine responses undermined dissent and centred muscularity, either in the form of individual resilience or securitisation and policing, as the solution to the pandemic.

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**Introduction: Masculinity and populism**

This article intervenes in scholarly conversations on the politics of health emergencies and populism more broadly by using a feminist lens to interrogate two populist leaders' responses to the pandemic, with a focus on the similarities and differences in their performance of masculinity and the ways in which these shape the public imagination. Former United States President Donald Trump, and Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, both responded to news about the pandemic by downplaying it. While both eventually had to acknowledge the disruptive reality of the virus, they took drastically different policy directions. Both leaders were elected in presidential political systems in different geopolitical locations, with Trump governing one of the wealthiest and most powerful nations in the global north, and Duterte heading a relatively poorer and weaker global south country and former US colony. Trump styled himself as a savvy celebrity businessman, while Duterte drew on the mythology surrounding his reign as a mayor of Davao City, where he 'got things done'. Both are known for a brand of populism that pits 'the people' against 'the establishment' and uses colourful and bombastic language against political opponents. Throughout their presidential terms, both have engaged in 'executive aggrandizement', or the gradual weakening of checks on executive power through a series of ostensibly legal institutional changes that shrunked the space for opposition forces (Bermeo, 2016; Thompson, 2021). Both are also uniquely configured vis-à-vis China, with Trump addressing China as a direct rival of the United States, and Duterte leading the Philippines' pivot towards alliance with China. This has played out in their pandemic responses and analysing it can enrich our understanding of how China's emergence as a global power is reconfiguring political masculinities. Moreover, both politicians have been publicly challenged on their health and virility: Trump for evading the Vietnam war draft and for his weight, and Duterte for his various ailments and old age.

This article argues that Trump and Duterte draw on masculinity as a symbolic resource to win public support, or engage in the 'political game' (Löffler, 2020: 11). Both faced criticism domestically for their approaches to the pandemic, and Trump has since lost his bid for re-election but not before inspiring riots from loyal supporters over his electoral cheating allegations against his rivals. While the Philippine public's net satisfaction rating for Duterte fell to 52% in September 2021, he is still one of the country's most popular public officials (Lopez, 2021). Understanding how masculinity operates to structure their appeal during the first year of the pandemic provides valuable lessons for thinking about pandemic politics and the politics of emergencies, more broadly.

Masculinity, in this context, is not meant as biological or as an essential quality possessed by actors. It is performative, or something actors enact or do, often with consistency and repetition (Butler, 1988). This repeated enactment and embodiment of specific ways of being that are marked as 'masculine' is not always intentional: in fact, it occurs within a rigid regulatory frame that congeals over time, which produces a sense of being

‘natural’ (Butler, 1990: 33). Therefore, this article does not make judgements about whether the performance of masculinity of populist leaders is ‘fake’ or duplicitous, although it is reasonable to assume that most public performances have some degree of deliberateness. This article is more concerned with understanding how these modes of masculinity structure pandemic responses. Connell (1995) defines masculinity as ‘. . . simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices on bodily experience, personality and culture’ (p. 71). Schippers (2007: 86) distils this into three components: (a) a social location that all individuals can move into, (b) practices and characteristics associated with men, and (c) that when these practices and characteristics are enacted or embodied especially by men, but also by women, this can have effects on social and political life. Masculinity is stabilised when these identifiable practices are collectively taken up, enacted and affirmed (Schippers, 2007: 86; Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009: 278). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005: 846) observe that multiple patterns of masculinity occur in different settings and with historically shifting configurations, but that certain masculinities are more ‘socially central’ or ‘hegemonic’ in every social system. An important part of their argument is that masculinity is relational: hegemonic masculinity subordinates not just femininity but also less dominant masculinities. Masculinity is generally expressed in qualities such as authority, physical strength, and desire for women (Schippers, 2007: 90), and is often defined in opposition to femininity or marginalised masculinities, expressed in qualities such as passivity, weakness, and emotional vulnerability. Young (2003: 3) notes that feminist theory tends to assume a model of masculinity that is deliberately dominating, selfish, and driven by sexual conquest and neglects the model associated with the male head of household or the ‘protector’. This protector is courageous and self-sacrificing and watches over the safety of his family. In return for protection, the members of the family cede power to their protector. The leaders discussed in this article have expressed masculinity in ways that conform to, combine, and reconfigure some of these models. With a view to Connell’s (2016) argument that our understandings of masculinity need to be reassessed in light of neoliberal globalisation and postcolonial development, this article examines Trump’s behaviour to generate insights into the relationship between neoliberalism and masculinity formation. It also tracks how Duterte’s position as a leader of a weak postcolonial state shapes his performance of masculinity. Both their approaches can be situated within a neoliberal world order – the set of political and social practices for governing people’s lives that construct individuals as bearers of capital and personal responsibility for their life outcomes (Brown, 2015).

Along with masculinity, the other slippery concept this article engages with is populism. Populism is contentious across academic disciplines. Populist leaders exist across the ideological spectrum, which makes it conceptually problematic to define populism based on political ideologies or specific policies. This article draws on Moffitt and Tormey’s (2014: 387) explanation of populism as a ‘political style’, or as ‘the repertoires of performance that are used to create political relations’. The defining characteristics of this style, regardless of ideological content, is an appeal to ‘the people’, usually through ‘us vs. them’ binaries, them being the ‘elites’ or ‘the establishment’, or ‘others’ such as immigrants and other social groups (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 391). Another defining

feature of populism is the evocation of a 'crisis' or impeding societal breakdown that is attributed to 'the enemy of the people', who are actors or institutions that are constructed as either directly causing the crisis or blocking its resolution. This crisis, therefore, requires a leader capable of delivering swift and decisive action (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 392). This article is attentive to the varied ways the 'crisis' has been defined and the 'evil others' have been produced by the different expressions of masculinity enacted in response to the virus. Finally, populism is characterised by the coarsening of political discourse (what Moffitt and Tormey refer to as 'bad manners'), such as the use of slang, swearing, or overly colourful language, which fits with appealing to 'the people' and establishing the urgency of the 'crisis', as it demonstrates that there is no time for political correctness and complicated bureaucratic conventions (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 392). Trump and Duterte's public statements often conform to the description of 'bad manners', and represent a departure from appropriate public engagement conventions for heads of state. Their public performances allowed them to simultaneously marshal the authority of their office, while connecting intimately and instantaneously with supporters, in a way that is perceived as honest and unfiltered. As will be discussed later, both sought to present themselves as strong and invincible in the face of the virus.

In addition to identifying the shifts and differences in the forms of masculinity performed by Trump and Duterte, this article interrogates the work that is done by masculinity in structuring populism in a time of pandemic. Drawing on Bacchi's (2007) framework for understanding policies, which proposes that government reactions and policies do not simply respond to problems that are already 'out there' but also 'construct' our understandings of the 'problem', this article argues that the responses of these leaders do not merely describe some pre-existing truth about the pandemic: the virus is indeed a material reality, but it is also produced through their language and practices as a specific type of problem that needs to be governed in specific ways and not others. This article attends to political masculinities as an essential part of populist leaders' responses to the pandemic that structures how their constituencies conceive of the body politic, 'freedom', and their sources of 'threats' and 'protection'.

## Methodology

This article uses critical discourse analysis approach to identify and analyse expressions of masculinity enacted by Trump and Duterte in relation to the pandemic. This approach views discourse as beyond linguistics: it is composed of language, images and a broader range of practices and nonlinguistic behaviours, such as the stylisation of the body, public gestures, movements and comportment (Fairclough, 2001: 122). The main sources of data were videos and transcripts of public speeches and press conferences, and social media posts (where applicable) of the two leaders between January and November 2020 and a few more after this period. Trump's speeches were exclusively in English, while Duterte's were in a combination of English and Filipino, which the author speaks fluently.

A loose textual approach combined with more sociological approaches was used to analyse the data. The first stage, patterned after Milliken's (1999: 231) recommendations for studying discourse in International Relations, consisted of looking at obvious

meanings of words used to describe the virus; the various stakeholders such as medical experts, health care workers, vulnerable populations, the police, members of the political opposition; and specific interventions such as wearing masks, enforcing lockdowns, and vaccine development and deployment. The second stage consisted of looking at the implicit meanings of words and nonlinguistic data and situating them in broader social and political contexts and discursive formations. The third stage involved identifying key themes and categories. These themes are discussed in the next sections.

## **Populists meet pandemic: Initial responses**

When the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19, a global pandemic in March 2020, Trump responded by likening the virus to the flu (McCoy and Traiano, 2020). He complained about media ‘hysteria’, professed that medical experts and the WHO ‘had it wrong’, and carried on with public gatherings (Kenen, 2020). Against the advice of the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention, he refused social distancing and defiantly shook hands in public, even in the same press conference in which he declared a national emergency over the virus (Rieger, 2020). In Asia, the virus was already causing deaths outside China in January 2020, months before the WHO pandemic proclamation. Therefore, when the pandemic was only beginning to be felt in most of Europe and the United States in March 2020, many Asian countries had already imposed regulations and were aggressively tested for COVID. However, in early February, despite over 300 flights between the Philippines and China weekly (Yinglun, 2019), Duterte dismissed the virus as ‘nothing to be scared about’ (Aguilar, 2020). When his critics, including the Vice-President, called for a ban on the flights from China to the Philippines, he condemned them as hysterical (Ornedo, 2020). While he eventually instituted a travel ban between China and the Philippines and began to acknowledge the need for a stronger government response, his bravado remained. In a press briefing, he joked about looking for the virus, so ‘he can slap it’ (Lopez, 2020) and in early-March, declared that he would not stop shaking hands and joked that he even preferred hugs to handshakes from women (Ornedo, 2020). He belatedly acknowledged the gravity of the virus in mid-March and instituted a lockdown in the Philippine capital.

Both Trump and Duterte were invested in shielding their national economies from a slowdown, especially as Trump faced re-election in 2020 and Duterte faced an International Criminal Court probe into his violent ‘war on drugs’. This concern for the economy was shared by most heads of state: for example, Singapore’s Lee Hsien Loong only announced a lockdown in April 2020 (over 2 months after COVID had ripped through Southeast Asia) and Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven’s government opted for the ‘riskier’ approach of not locking down and banking on ‘herd immunity’. However, it is important to note that in the initial stages of the pandemic, these two and many other world leaders acknowledged uncertainty and placed scientists at the forefront of government communication.

In contrast, the immediate reaction of Trump and Duterte was to confidently and aggressively deny any risk. Their initial responses reflect harmful health paradigms related to masculinity. Courtenay (2000: 1385) explains that health-related beliefs and behaviours are ways of expressing (as well as constructing) femininities

and masculinities. Social practices that undermine men's health are often signifiers of masculinity: by dismissing their health needs and engaging in risky behaviours, men affirm their status of 'stronger sex', which helps maintain and reproduce their power over women and 'weaker men' (Courtenay, 2000: 1397).

Both leaders' initial responses have foreclosed certain paths of action, while enabling others. While there had been domestic resistance to their denialism, both leaders have devoted followers and control over their governments, which gave them significant power over how events unfolded. Geva (2020: 30), building on Max Weber's notion of 'charismatic authority', describes it as the extraordinary quality of being able to incite admiration, desire, and emotional attachment from followers, which draws deeply on hegemonic masculinity unlike rational-bureaucratic types of authority. The mobilisation of gender was prominent in how Duterte and Trump engaged with critics and supporters. Both characterised calls for stronger action against the virus as a hysterical overreaction by the media, medical experts, and their political opponents. Throughout history, hysteria was a charge used to discredit and silence women who transgressed norms of femininity (Neville-Shepard and Nolan, 2019). Characterising people's anxiety as 'hysteria' positioned Trump and Duterte as 'rational' and authoritative, and cast their critics as 'dangerous' and 'out of control'. This generated a distinction between 'real men' who did not fear a microscopic virus and their weak and cowardly critics who were proposing to crash the economy. In this framing, the 'economy' emerged as the vulnerable entity that had to be saved from attack, not the 'public' that was vulnerable to a virus. This made it harder for calls for social distancing and better testing and healthcare equipment to gain traction in the early phase of the pandemic in their countries, which suffered from a lack of testing capacity and protective equipment for health workers relative to their global socio-economic counterparts (Albert, 2020; BBC, 2020). Woolhandler et al. (2021), for example, report that 'tens of thousands' of deaths due to COVID in the United States were preventable. This is partly because Trump's rhetoric also tapped into the militant Christian masculinity of the religious right. With a history of seeking to reassert a 'muscular Christianity', figures in the religious right have called for a return to traditional God-given masculinity in which followers of Christ idealised masculine leadership and fought 'real wars' and culture wars (Du Mez, 2020a). Evangelical pastors of this persuasion have urged people to continue congregating and characterised other religious leaders who endorsed social distancing as 'pansies', and 'losers' who have 'no balls' (Du Mez, 2020b), feminising and stigmatising careful approaches to public health. It has come to light that religious gatherings have served as superspreader events (Starr, 2020), and 'religious objections' are a common basis for vaccine refusal, despite Trump himself later getting vaccinated (Bokemper et al., 2021).

## **Protection, discipline, and consolidation of power**

Using different masculine modalities, Duterte and Trump established themselves as the people's 'protectors' against an 'enemy'. This section explores the mechanisms by which each of them represented the problem (Bacchi, 2007), which allowed them to assume a protector role and opened up possibilities for expanding their power and undermining dissent. It also examines the ways in which both Trump and Duterte constructed China



in the public imagination to legitimise their own protector status. It should be noted that the forms of protection performed by both leaders promoted narrow conceptions of care (predominantly care for the economy and care as control over the population), and in fact broadly devalued care work and social protection.

In the early phase of the pandemic, Trump was quick to blame immigrants, which is consistent with the 'fear of outsiders' invoked in his presidential campaigns and political strategies. Even in the absence of evidence to show that the spread of COVID in the United States was caused by migration policies, border control was a form of pandemic theatre that positioned Trump as the nation's protector against 'dangerous foreigners'. In March 2020, with over 30,000 confirmed COVID cases within the United States and a shortage of medical equipment and masks, Trump declared that it was immigration flows that posed grave public health consequences and his campaign broadcasted to his supporters that 'Pres. Trump is making your safety his #1 priority. That's why we're closing BORDERS to illegals' (Varela, 2020). Between 13 March and 15 September 2020, Trump described COVID in public as the 'China flu', 'China virus', 'Chinese plague', 'Wuhan virus', 'Kung flu', and so on, over 300 times (Kurilla, 2021). For the rest of his term, Trump regularly highlighted how well the US economy had been performing before Americans were victimised by a 'foreign virus'. This construction of COVID as a threat brought about by China fed into the historical negative stereotyping of Asians in the United States and allowed Trump to style himself as both the victim and hero of the moment, deflecting from his poor leadership and erratic response. Unsurprisingly, hate crimes against Asians in the United States surged during the pandemic, a continuation of a pattern where minorities are turned into scapegoats for political and economic anxieties (Gover et al., 2020).

On the other side of the world, Duterte reversed his position as public pressure mounted. Three days after the WHO declared a pandemic (and just 10 days after declaring that the virus would 'die a natural death'), Duterte, flanked by military and police officials, announced a 'community quarantine' for Metro Manila. Duterte's pronouncements highlighted the role of security forces in maintaining order and punishing those who failed to comply with quarantine. There were barely any references to public health and social welfare or discussions of targeted measures for reducing the spread of the virus and caring for those affected (Holmes and Hutchcroft, 2020). In the first 3 weeks, his regime arrested almost as many people for violating curfews as it had tested for COVID (Hartung, 2020). He designated the national defence secretary to lead a team of current and former military officers to draft the national action plan for COVID and oversee the disbursement of aid, which reflects a view of the pandemic as a security challenge and an opportunity to expand police powers. Roughly, a week after the lockdown, Duterte delivered a message to the nation, saying, 'I now call on every Filipino to participate in this war by following the guidelines set by the national government and your local officials. Nothing is more important [now] than your cooperation', which he reiterated in the same speech, 'I repeat: Stay at home. Do not be hard-headed. The outcome of this war depends largely on you as well' (ABS-CBN News, 2020a). This represented a crucial shift that sheds light on the trajectory of the pandemic response in the Philippines and helps explain how Duterte was able to further consolidate power. His use of war metaphors to describe the pandemic had close parallels with his posturing in his violent

'war on drugs', which has led to the killings of more than 27,000 individuals, mostly from poor communities, since 2016 (Holmes and Hutchcroft, 2020). The 'war on drugs' represents a top-down securitised approach to the 'problem of illegal drugs', which he portrayed in his presidential campaign as the cause of a looming societal breakdown that only a strong and iron-fisted leader could stop (Curato, 2016). He and his surrogates drew on family symbolism to justify broad police powers and violence against drug users. Styling himself as the father of the nation, his speeches regularly contained vivid imagery of women and children brutalised by drug-crazed rapists as a metaphor for a nation in need of protection (Parmanand, 2020b). Duterte is, indeed, fondly referred to by supporters as Tatay Digong (Father Digong).

Duterte's shift to a 'war' framework for COVID came with a familiar demand for discipline and obedience from the population. He praised Xi Jinping's handling of the pandemic:

When China says stop, it would stop. When China says open, it would open. Now Hubei, where the coronavirus originated, they are now open again. The airports are open – because when Xi Jinping asked them to stay home [they did]. They have cut the number of cases. Nobody went outside . . . You know . . . the regime demands total obedience. You cannot say 'no', or 'not this way'. You'll get arrested. (Presidential Communications Operations Office, 2020)

In the same speech, Duterte also bemoaned his inability to impose the same level of strictness in the Philippines: 'Here, I cannot do that because in a democracy, human rights are an issue'. He consistently attributed setbacks in preventing the spread of the virus and even the toll on health workers in the Philippines to individuals' failure to comply (*tigas ulo* or stubbornness), rather than his government's shortcomings in providing testing infrastructure and support for health workers. Indeed, when there was a surge in infections in Cebu City, he scolded the affected population using language reminiscent of an angry father scolding his children:

Visayans are so stubborn. You can't make them follow instructions. That's just the truth. I need to be honest with you. You are angry with me? I am angry at you! . . . Cebu is now the hotspot for COVID. Why? Many of you didn't follow the rules! (ABS-CBN News, 2020b)

Despite the absence of data showing that curfews and checkpoints reduce transmission (and some data that suggest they lead to many people cramming into public transportation, increasing exposure), Duterte continued to centre these strategies in 2021.

The war metaphor and Duterte's idealisation of discipline and obedience in China's pandemic response marked his shapeshifting from one masculine archetype to another: the invincible man to the tough protector of the nation. Bacchi's (2007) question of 'What is the Problem Represented to Be?' is a helpful tool in analysing this shift. In Duterte's initial response, he discredited those who called for timely measures against the pandemic by calling them 'hysterical' and cowardly. In his later response, however, he had displaced them to become the nation's most valiant protector against the virus; therefore, the critics of his securitised approach to the pandemic became the threats to national security (Parmanand, 2020a). Questions about the slow distribution of relief aid



to poor families, poor testing and contact tracing, and the selective implementation of lockdown rules were framed by his surrogates as a nuisance because they distracted from the ‘war’ (Parmanand, 2020a). His ‘protective turn’ during the pandemic provided a plausible justification that legitimised instances of democratic backsliding initiated by his government during the pandemic.

Once the pandemic had been reframed as a problem of adherence to a strict lockdown, this legitimised increased suppression, surveillance, and arrests of protesters and critics, who were seen as a danger to public health. In late March 2020, Congress passed the Bayanihan to Heal As One law (*bayanihan* is a Filipino word for working together to achieve a common goal). This law gave Duterte emergency powers and included a questionable provision on criminalising fake news. In the first month since the law was passed, 47 individuals who criticised the government’s pandemic response were arrested for supposedly violating this provision (Joaquin and Biana, 2020). In July 2020, Duterte signed the Philippines Anti-Terrorism Act into law, which expanded the government’s power and scope for defining ‘terrorism’. It gave him the power to appoint an Anti-Terrorism Council (ATC) without oversight from the judiciary or legislature. The ATC can order mass arrests without warrants and detain individuals without due process on the suspicion of ‘terrorism’ (Guevarra and Arcilla, 2020).

Trump also briefly endorsed a lockdown, but followed it up shortly after with a proclamation of victory in mid-April 2020, despite the US death toll surpassing 100,000 and infection rates surging. After declaring that the United States had ‘met the moment and we have prevailed’, Trump bragged about US testing capacities and unauthorised treatments (Shear et al., 2020). While he denigrated social distancing, masks, and lockdowns, Trump claimed credit for Pfizer’s vaccine, and insisted that the announcement had been withheld to deny him a ‘vaccine win’ before the November presidential election (Hart, 2020). Trump’s aversion to mask-wearing and social distancing is in contrast with his vaccine triumphalism. Ng (2020) argues that acts of ‘pharmaceutical bravado’ lend themselves more easily to macho war metaphors in that drugs ‘defeat’ or ‘kill’ pathogens in a way that masks do not. Taking drugs is also more consistent with individual liberties and benefits, while mask-wearing and other more communitarian approaches are often practised out of concern for vulnerable populations and social equality. Ultimately, Trump still claimed a protector role and presented himself as a saviour who delivered the vaccine to Americans, while continuing to mock advice from public health experts.

In contrast to Trump who consistently capitalised on the United States’ technological prowess to project his own personal greatness, Duterte negotiated his position as the protector of a significantly less powerful nation through a variety of ways. He used his own body as a source of power by offering to participate in trials for the Russian vaccine and receiving an early jab of China’s vaccine to inspire public confidence (Dela Cruz, 2020). In his December 2020 address to the United Nations, he lambasted rich countries for perpetuating a ‘gross injustice’ in access to vaccines (Rocamora, 2020). It is undeniable that vaccine inequality has been harmful; however, it was also revealed that Duterte’s government had missed a viable opportunity to secure many doses of more effective vaccines, in addition to failing to provide health workers proper support and protective equipment (Heydarian, 2021).<sup>1</sup> Thus, his attacks against structural injustice in global vaccine distribution simultaneously

ring true and mask his own failures. Similarly, throughout his presidency, Duterte has responded to international criticism of his violent war on drugs by invoking arguments against Western imperialism and hypocrisy on human rights. Finally, he publicly touted his closeness to Xi Jinping as a path to securing access to vaccines for the Philippines (Venzon, 2021). China's emergence as a global power has allowed populist leaders such as Duterte and Viktor Orban in Hungary some space to flex diplomatic muscularity against traditional powers. Both made a public show of rejecting the United States and the European Union in favour of supposedly 'no-strings-attached' and 'quick and timely' financial support and vaccine doses from China.<sup>2</sup>

While Duterte's discourse on 'protection' focused on his fatherly role of protecting an 'unruly and disobedient' population, Trump emphasised protecting the US economy, in a way that was bifurcated by gender. In an October 2020 campaign rally in Michigan, Trump specifically addressed sub-urban women voters by promising to 'get their husbands back to work': 'I'm also getting your husbands – they want to get back to work, right? . . . We're getting your husbands back to work, and everybody wants it' (Bump, 2020). This betrays a male-centric understanding of the economy and ignores women's job precarity during the pandemic and the work they never stopped performing in the 'private sphere'. Trump's gendered conception of work has predated the pandemic: in major economic addresses and State of the Union speeches, and in his job creation initiatives, he generally focused on male-dominated professions such as mining, construction, and manufacturing, and ignored workers in female-dominated (especially non-white women) care-oriented jobs such as teaching, nursing, health sector work, and other service sector jobs (Kurtzleben, 2020). Also noteworthy is his excitement at donning hard hats or sitting behind the wheels of semi-automatic cars when he promotes these industries (Kurtzleben, 2020).

Trump's strong emphasis on 'the economy' should be situated in the dominant neoliberal order which produces this kind of masculinist response to crises. In situations of risk, crisis, or chaos, Western 'manhood' is realised through domination over nature and risk-taking (Garlick, 2020). Harvey (2005: 170) explains that 'accumulation by dispossession' undermines women's power within traditional social structures and transfers power to male-dominated commodity and credit markets. While this may describe neoliberal policies and practices in 'normal times', the social hierarchies created by the 'economy first' mind-set were exacerbated during the pandemic. Trump's conception of 'caring for the economy' generally excluded workers in low-paid, precarious, or care-based employment, and it relied on extracting labour and resilience from women and feminised people such as health workers, teachers, grocery workers, and gig economy workers. It also preserved (if not deepened) the care burdens borne by these groups who had to take on more caring responsibilities for sick family members (both COVID and non-COVID cases) that could no longer be absorbed by the overburdened health care system. His preoccupation was with traditional indicators of economic success: quantifiable jobs, stock market performance, and profits for businesses, without any credible attempt to redistribute resources or offer protection to precarious workers.

## Invincible men and ‘freedom-fighters’

This section looks at both leaders’ performative displays of invincibility, including when Trump contracted the virus, and his deployment of the language of ‘freedom’ to resist lockdowns and regulations. It examines how this specific performance of masculinity resonated with his supporters, and how it perpetuated individualist notions of responsibility and survival.

Trump’s stubborn handshakes in the early stages of the pandemic were an essential public ritual in the performance of strength and fearlessness. For Trump, who has cultivated a version of ‘entrepreneurial masculinity’ (Connell, 2016) by touting his success as a businessman well-versed in ‘the art of the deal’, the handshake was even more defining. Hamilton (2019) explains that handshakes are cultural sites for the production of masculine subjectivities in business settings: firm and forthright handshakes are praiseworthy, while ‘limp’ handshakes are seen as submissive and feminine or emasculating (8). When faced with the possibility of a threat, Trump avoided the appearance of vulnerability. He regularly engaged in a ‘masculinity contest’ with presidential rival Joe Biden and shamed the latter for wearing a mask and avoiding public large crowds during the campaign. Trump’s performance of masculinity is dependent on the ‘other’ to sustain itself, which is manifested in his attempts to perpetuate a hierarchy of manliness, with himself above other men.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, for Duterte, who is well-known for his crass jokes that often depict him as enacting violence on perceived threats, such as critics of his violent ‘war on drugs’, or a volcano on the verge of explosion (‘I will pee on it and eat the toxic ash’), his jokes about ‘hunting the virus down’, and ‘slapping it’ propagate the myth of his dominance: he is simultaneously unbothered by COVID but personally capable of extinguishing it should he wish (Parmanand, 2020a). While Duterte soon enough embraced the fear of COVID, Trump regularly maintained that it was nothing to be afraid of, but also claimed credit for successes in testing and vaccine research.

Trump’s experience of contracting COVID in October 2020 was both an opportunity and a challenge to negotiate his status and power on a public stage. He sought to project an appearance of strength throughout his hospitalisation. For example, he tweeted images of himself working from the hospital and a video message suggesting a surprise for his supporters (‘patriots’), which turned out to be a short car trip outside the hospital so he could wave at them from behind the glass. After he was discharged, he tweeted, ‘Don’t be afraid of Covid’ and ‘Don’t let it dominate your life’, despite over 200,000 Americans having died from it at this point. Trump’s recovery has arguably reinforced the stance of some of his supporters that the virus is not dangerous. In addition, his chosen strategy of downplaying the severity of the virus and conquering it maintained a focus on individual strength and resilience, obscuring his reliance on the highest quality of medical care not available to ordinary citizens. It also perpetuated the fiction that individuals are responsible for their recovery, and valorised strength and ‘healthy bodies’ as the solution to the pandemic, juxtaposed against approaches that ‘destroy the economy’.

In her analysis of the UK government’s policy responses to the pandemic, Purnell (2020) argues that the ‘masculinised enlightenment-era dualistic knowledge about bodies’ internalised and perpetuated by Prime Minister Boris Johnson and the political elite through ramped-up public messaging about losing weight and developing healthy eating

and fitness habits 'construct the body politic as composed of strong, individual, masculinised bodies', which has the effect of 'blaming' particular bodies for 'failing' to stay strong and protecting the National Health Service. She argues that the myth of 'the individual sovereign body', or of individuals as the 'sole master of their body' is dangerous because it ignores the reality that bodies rely on each other to exist and to be healthy. Trump's rhetoric has the same effect of shaming 'weak bodies'. In doing so, he denied the social and relational bases of human survival and thriving, and drew attention away from his government's obligation to ensure inclusive social protection and strong and accessible health care system.

The other component of Trump's macho posturing is his fashioning of himself as a heroic 'freedom-fighter' (Parmanand, 2020a). His tweets, such as 'LIBERATE MINNESOTA! LIBERATE MICHIGAN! LIBERATE VIRGINIA', suggested that politicians and medical experts who supported shutdowns and other regulations were enemies of freedom. The freedom metaphor allowed him to retain his warrior/protector status – but against medical experts and state officials who were threatening people's freedom, rather than a pandemic that was threatening people's health (Parmanand, 2020a). The valorisation of individual freedom is essential to the political identity of many Trump supporters and even broader US society. It conjures up images of historical struggles where freedom was fought for and won by great men who were willing to give up their lives for a noble goal and thus, was a central theme in protests against COVID regulations (and vaccine mandates). Right-wing pundits also drew on Trump's pronouncements to ridicule even Republican leaders who had taken COVID-19 more seriously and backed stronger regulations (Peters, 2020).

## Conclusion

The exposition of the different modalities by which masculinities are expressed by populist leaders across different geopolitical contexts reveals key similarities and differences that can inform future research on populism and pandemics. This article has demonstrated that scapegoating, posturing and representing themselves as protectors were key features of Duterte and Trump's populism. Despite their different approaches to pandemic regulations, both Trump and Duterte constructed 'enemies' as a pretext for discrediting or worse, crushing, dissent, and deflecting responsibility. Duterte vilified human rights activists and ordinary citizens who did not (or could not) fully comply with strict lockdown rules, while Trump targeted China, immigrants, his political opponents, and medical and scientific authorities who called for pandemic regulations. These 'enemies' depended on their countries' geopolitical location and their own political agenda. Both also located responsibility for overcoming the pandemic in individual actions: for Duterte, the problem was the lack of 'discipline' and compliance of individuals; for Trump, it was individual weakness. In all cases, the 'problematic individual' was to blame for the strain on the health care system and suffering of essential workers. For Duterte, the solution was militarised 'protection', and for Trump, it was for individuals to 'toughen up' so that the economy could be saved. In both of these approaches, the interconnectedness of human bodies and importance of social protection and accessible health care systems were rendered invisible. Furthermore, Trump's unidimensional focus on 'the economy' exposes connections between aggressive capitalism and masculinity

and contributes to a broader conversation on the imbrications of populism, gender, and neoliberalism.

This article has also shown that China's increasing economic and political dominance has implications for populism globally: Trump rallied Americans against China's threat to 'America's economic and political way of life' (National Security Council, 2020), while Duterte framed the Chinese Community Party's (CCP) heavy-handed approach to the pandemic as worthy of emulation. The intensification of Xi Jinping's international diplomacy efforts (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2021) provides populist leaders such as Duterte and Orban access to symbolic capital and material resources, which allows them to flex masculinity 'by proxy' and dismiss domestic and international criticism of their assault on human rights.

Finally, while the leaders in this article emphasised strength, policing (Duterte), and technological prowess (Trump) in their nationalist rhetoric, it is necessary for future scholarship to explore the possibility of alternative populist trajectories underpinned by pluralism, inclusivity, and an ethos of care.

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### Notes

1. It should be noted that countries of comparable socio-economic status have outperformed the Philippines on these metrics.
2. Orban broke with the European Union (EU) policy and granted emergency authorisation for the China-made vaccine to be deployed in Hungary, touting it as an important victory that would allow Hungarians to 'leave the pandemic behind'.
3. This invocation of a 'hierarchy of masculinity' is reminiscent of Trump's infamous comment about Senator John McCain, 'I like people who weren't captured'.

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