

9. Gender Equality in Politics and the Media

Carla Martins

Abstract: In recent years, many countries approved gender quotas on the boards of the public sector and listed private companies. The objective is to set quantitative and time targets to achieve a better balance. Also, in many countries changes were made to the electoral law for local authority bodies (municipalities), which included extending the scope of application of the parity law, ranging from 33% to 50% of the setting of the gender parity threshold. These measures aim to promote equality between men and women in positions of leadership and greater responsibility. Indeed, the higher up one rises in the hierarchy of power, the greater the gender imbalances. These glass ceilings can be seen in companies, politics, and the media. Legislative initiatives have activated the gender equality agenda and contributed to making inequalities between men and women more socially visible and unacceptable. This chapter will specifically address the issue of gender equality in politics and the media with three underlying questions: How is female identity constructed in the political field? How is the media representation of female political identity constructed? How is female political identity socially perceived? It is also questioned whether politics is gendered from the point of view of journalists.

1. Introduction

In February 2017, the Portuguese Parliament started discussing the Government's proposal to introduce gender quotas on the boards of public sector and listed companies. In the latter, at the time of this debate, the disproportion was very evident: only 1 was chaired by a woman, and 13 others had no women on their boards. The proposal then under discussion set quantitative and time targets to achieve a better balance.

The new legal provisions were approved in June of that year, establishing Law No. 62/2017 of August 1. The regime balanced the representation between women and men in the management and supervisory bodies of entities in the public business sector and listed companies.

Moreover, in 2017, changes were made to the electoral law for local authority bodies, including extending the scope of application of the Parity Law, which was approved in 2006. In 2018, the Government presented a proposal to amend this latter diploma in the bodies of political power, increasing the setting of the gender parity threshold from 33% to 40%, as approved by Parliament in 2019.

These measures promoted equality between men and women in positions of leadership and greater responsibility. Indeed, the higher up one rises in the hierarchy of power, the greater the gender imbalances. These glass ceilings were evident in companies, politics, and the media. The noted legislative initiatives have activated or reactivated the gender equality agenda and contributed to making inequalities between men and women more socially visible and unacceptable.

This study specifically addresses the issue of gender equality in politics and the media with three underlying questions:

- How is female identity constructed in the political field?
- How is the media representation of female political identity constructed?

- How is female political identity socially perceived?

This reflection is based on the author's research on the relationship between media and politics from a gender perspective. In concise terms, the study questions whether politics is gendered from the perspective of journalists, and the answer is likely to be affirmative.

2. Late Feminization

The political and media fields are inseparable. Contact with the political field is indirect for most people and takes place through media and communication devices. However, politics is a very exposed field, with great visibility and permanent scrutiny of the respective holders of public offices.

National politics is the target of great media attention. According to the results of the annual monitoring by the Regulatory Authority for the Media, it is among the main themes of the evening news of the national generalist channels, accounting for approximately 26% of the television news line-ups.¹

The media (and specifically journalistic mediation) still have a decisive influence on how public opinion builds its perceptions of the political field. Political agents recognize the importance of knowing how media logic works to adapt to it by defining communication strategies.

Politics and media have in common the fact that they are two traditionally male social fields (where women entered late), with the mission of dealing with "women's issues." Further, women were perceived as having strangeness and exoticism, without being generically recognized as having the same competencies as men. In both fields, women must be affirmative to conquer their space and claim the right to be recognized as peers. They must face multiple discriminations based on their gender.

Women would only have access to suffrage and representation in political bodies in the *Estado Novo*, under more restricted conditions and with mandates especially geared toward welfare, the family, and the education of children. The first female deputies to the National Assembly were introduced with some solemnity by Oliveira Salazar in an interview to the newspaper *O Século* in 1932. Among the 90 names proposed, chosen for "their mental integration in the *Estado Novo* or conformity with the generality of its principles," there was a novelty. Salazar stated, "Some ladies will be part of one or other chamber, which does not mean that the state or the ladies themselves have now converted to feminism" (Apud de Sousa 1986, p. 429).

In the same year that the first woman voted in Portugal, 1911, Manuela de Azevedo, the first journalist with a professional title in Portugal, was born; she died in February 2017, at the age of 105. As noted in an interview with *Notícias Magazine* in 2013, she refused to write about women's issues: "When, around 1930, I arrived at the newspaper *República*, my first newspaper, there was a section specially created for me called "*Tribuna da Mulher*" (Women's Tribune). I immediately refused. That

¹ In 2021, national politics was the main topic of *Telejornal* (RTP1), *Jornal 2* (RTP2), *Jornal da Noite* (SIC) e *Jornal das 8* (TVI), with a weight of, respectively, 28%, 30%, 27%, and 19% (cfr. ERC—Entidade Reguladora para a Comunicação ERC—Entidade Reguladora para a Comunicação Social (2022), Regulatory Report 2021, p. 584). Notably, the first female vote in Portugal occurred in 1911, at the beginning of the First Republic; it was only possible for Carolina Beatriz Ângelo to vote by judicial decision, making history in Portugal and Europe. In fact, two years later, the female vote was explicitly forbidden by law.

would have been the last straw, neither men's nor women's tribunes, there were journalists there, and *whoever had fingernails played the guitar*. And they gave in."

The Revolution of 25 April 1974 was undoubtedly a milestone in the recognition of equality between men and women and the achievement of political and civil rights by women. The universal vote was consecrated. The turnout to the polls (close to 92%) for the 1975 Legislative Assembly elections was unprecedented in the history of Portuguese democracy. Many women (and men) voted for the first time, and 20 women were elected out of 250 deputies.

However, the feminization of political bodies (Assembly of the Republic, Government, municipalities) was slow in the following two decades (Martins 2012). Despite progressive legal and constitutional provisions, reality does not change by decree.

Journalism also continued to be a men's craft. In the same interview by Manuela de Azevedo, she recalls that, in the early 1970s, she was the only woman on the editorial staff of *Diário de Notícias*.

Perhaps a turning point, in politics and journalism, occurred in the 1990s. Regarding politics, the integration of the then EEC and its policies promoting gender equality should be valued. In 1989, the Council of Europe launched the concept of "parity democracy." In the first half of the following decade, the term gender mainstreaming was coined. In 1992, the "Athens Declaration" was drawn up at the European summit on "Women and Power" on the need for a balanced distribution of power. In 1995, the Fourth UN World Conference on Women was held in Beijing, resulting in the Beijing Platform for Action, which stated that "No government can consider itself democratic unless it guarantees women equal representation."

In the plan of international policies for the promotion of gender equality, increasing attention has also been given to the dimension of communication and media: defending a greater gender balance in media organizations and less formatted and stereotyped coverage of men and women.²

At the national level, in the second half of the 1990s, gender equality became a strong topic on the political agenda. The IV Constitutional revision in 1997 opens the door to the introduction of positive action mechanisms.

We know that the idea of introducing "quotas" in the composition of the electoral lists was controversial, and, in this debate, the merit criterion of political representatives gained unprecedented prominence. This discussion brought a kind of genderization of merit. We also know that successive legislative proposals to introduce *pink quotas* in the political system were rejected.

However, something has changed in the sensitivity of public opinion to the underrepresentation of women as a democratic problem and in the behavior of political parties, which have begun to include many women on their lists. Indeed, a greater presence of women in political bodies has begun to be noted.

There was also late feminization in journalism in the 1990s; today, there is practically parity in the profession. Nevertheless, this parity has not yet been achieved in editorial and management positions and the administration of media companies. The approval of the Parity Law in 2006 had a decisive impact on the process of feminization of political bodies, whose measures have been applied since 2009.

² To illustrate, see the Council of Europe's Strategy for Gender Equality 2014–2017, and the Committee of Ministers' Recommendation to member states on gender equality and media (2013).

Ever since this law has been practiced, the rise in the number of female representatives in political bodies has been evident, especially in the Assembly of the Republic, with the unprecedented election of 39% of female seats in the 2019 legislative elections (37% in the elections of 2022). The reinforcement of the upward trend in the number of female MEPs can also be observed (currently they correspond to 47.6% of those elected to the European Parliament).

Nonetheless, in political bodies and positions without the direct application of the Parity Law, the greatest imbalances continue to exist in executive positions and at the top of the power hierarchy: in the most prominent positions in Parliament (the Presidential office, the leadership of parliamentary benches and committees); Government (Prime Ministers and Ministers); the Presidency of the Republic; and the presidency of local authorities, especially city councils. Female participation at the government level has historically been low, and only the V Government (1979) was led by a woman, Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo. The female representation in the XXIII Government, led by António Costa, considering all government positions, is approximately 36%. In June 2020, there were 9 female ministers out of 18 ministers.

The evolution of female political participation has been slower in the context of the elections for Local Government bodies, especially in executive bodies. The number of female mayors remains residual. In the last local elections of 2021, only 31 women mayors were elected in 308 city councils (10.1%).

In the last presidential elections of 2016 and 2021, two women ran as candidates, which had not happened for 30 years, following Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo's candidacy in the 1986 presidential election. Until recently, two women led parties with parliamentary seats: Mariana Mortágua (BE) and Inês de Sousa Real (PAN).

The greater presence of women in politics also challenges the values and norms underlying the functioning of the field as being neutral from a gender perspective.

3. Invisibility and Stereotypes

For women politicians, it will be a challenge to define their identity as agents in a field shaped by those values and norms sedimented by male action. The question is whether women feel conditioned to adapt to a political ethos, which may be described as more aggressive and may result in their de-characterization or even de-feminization. Further, whether they feel belittled when they seek to assert an alternative style of exercising power, seek to promote an equal rights agenda, or consider it important to claim a pace and schedule of politics that is more favorable to reconciling private and family life is worth considering.

In an interview with *Sol* newspaper in 2017, former Minister of Health and presidential candidate, Maria de Belém Roseira, said: "I have only felt male chauvinism in politics; I have never felt it in my family or professional life." She declared on the same occasion:

"And I really think, like Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo, that men and women are not equal. And it is because they are different that they are both necessary. They are different, but the difference cannot be seen as something to be trampled on. Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo often said that if women go into politics to do the same as men do, it is not worth it. Women are different and they must assert their difference. I learned that from her. And I consider that I have never been a woman equal to men in politics,

although I have been criticized a lot for that. But it doesn't bother me (...) People think you have to be very violent. And I hate violence for violence's sake (...) I respect the opinions of others, and even when I disagree with them, I am not violent in my disagreements, and I never go beyond certain levels. People think that this is a sign of weakness, but I think it is a sign of a difference in attitude."

Women are seen through more filters than men; they are more scrutinized and evaluated, as reflected in the way they are represented in the media and are perceived by citizens. Research on the nexus between politics and media from a gender perspective shares anxiety about the quantity and quality of representation. The analyses have as their normative axis the inclusive conception of the public sphere. According to Ross and Sreberny (2000, p. 80), "if the media articulate the political and public spheres, then representation is relevant. Unfair media representation can be an impeding factor to fair political representation."

The media certainly reflect the contradictions generated by women's access to a traditionally male universe. According to Sreberny and van Zoonen (2000, p. 2), if politics is defined as an alien place to women, and female activities as apolitical, the media, as the main stages of contemporary politics, "are deeply involved in this process of definition and framing, insofar as they represent and renew the contrast between femininity and politics." Gallagher (2006, p. 21) warns that "the emerging picture is extremely complex. Women's entry into the political arena poses a problem for news. As women, they embody a challenge to male authority. As active and powerful women, they challenge simple categorization."

Women can be penalized for behaving less assertively, just as they can be penalized for taking a firm stand. A good example is the former minister of Finance and Planning and former president of the PSD, Manuela Ferreira Leite, who conformed to an archetype of male leadership (i.e., a Thatcher model) and was qualified as an "iron woman," often being compared to a "Cavaco in skirts" (Martins 2015a, 2015b). Many women in politics break this correspondence to an ideal of "feminine behavior" when they reveal more angular, aggressive, harsh aspects of personality, which tends to be negatively appreciated.

These reflections circle back to the patterns of news coverage of women in politics and how, in reporting on these protagonists, journalists' discourse can easily fall into stereotypes. The contrast between this argument and how journalists perceive their work as gender-neutral is clear.

However, it seems the culture of newsrooms conforms to this neutrality only in appearance, even given the increased presence of women journalists.

According to research conducted in national newsrooms, based on interviews with journalists of both sexes, gender issues in professional media cultures and content proved to be challenging to address. When asked about gender asymmetries, respondents would reject the idea, appearing surprised or uncomfortable. During the interviews, gender was rarely considered a criterion for the selection of sources, protagonists, commentators, or stories, as opposed to other criteria of representation, such as geographical, cultural, or racial diversity, which were considered important by most respondents (Lobo et al. 2017).

While they are privileged narrators of the present, most journalists construct this narrative in an impressionistic and routine way (given the speed with which

they work) and in a standardized way (despite their creativity, journalism can also be a very formatted activity in the news selection and treatment of information).

Therefore, the journalists' discourse is far from being natural and evident and is, instead, a kind of "mirror of reality." As much as journalists may contest this idea, the gender of the protagonists is one of the attributes that influence the news, leading to distortions, biases, or stereotypes.

First, if women remain shunned from the most prominent positions and those with greater responsibility, they also have less notoriety in the coverage of the political field. They are more invisible. The media focus on the dominant elites, the top leaders, giving priority to the people they consider important and powerful.

In 2020, per the Global Media Monitoring Project (a study conducted internationally every five years in more than 100 countries), women made up 25% of people mentioned in the news. In news about politics and government, they comprised only 20%.

These data correspond generically to the results of the monitoring of the evening television newspapers of RTP1, RTP2, SIC, and TVI, carried out by the Regulatory Entity for the Media. In 2021, approximately 70% of the protagonists of the news pieces analyzed corresponded to the male gender (this indicator rises to 73% regarding *Jornal da Noite*, of SIC), continuing the trend of previous years. Women starred in between 18% and 22% of the pieces (ERC—Entidade Reguladora para a Comunicação Social 2022, p. 600).

When they are visible in politics, the news media tend to represent them following some patterns systematized below.

It remains common for women politicians to be presented first and foremost as such. They are also often framed as pioneers in the performance of certain positions (e.g., it is "the first time" a woman reaches a certain position). That is, their presence in the public-political sphere in various leadership positions is not yet normalized. It has already been years since the nomination of Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo as Prime Minister, in 1979, when the *Diário de Notícias*, celebrating the fact that the leader of the government was a woman, wrote: "She will be the third woman with responsibilities in power in 800 years of Portuguese history, succeeding the two Queens Marias" (Martins 2015a, 2015b).

When they are highlighted in the news, female politicians appear more associated with image attributes (beauty, what they wear, hairstyles, and accessories), their relationship with their family (their husbands or partners, whether they have children), and their age (youth is very much emphasized, but also old age).

The greater media attention paid to women's age and physical appearance is very evident. In 2008, when Manuela Ferreira Leite ran for the presidency of the PSD, the newspaper *Público* (29 May 2008) identified the "taboo that everyone talks about in the PSD"; that is, Ferreira Leite being "too old for the presidency," which raises the question: "Is age a problem in politics?" During the 2015 general election campaign, a profile on Catarina Martins in *Público* (30 August 2015) states: "Broad smile, girlish air on a body which turns 42 in a week's time. With bright green eyes that are not highlighted by the little make-up she wears every day; it is only when she goes on television that Catarina Martins has been changing her style. Sometimes, her hair is slicked back to give her a more conservative look, sometimes she has a slicked back hairdo to give her a modern edge." Newspapers report that, on the second day of the centrist congress at which she was elected president in 2016, Assunção Cristas chose to wear a long blazer in shades of baby blue over a dark ensemble.

In general, the media exploit the female image more, for reasons of audience appeal, but these symbolic schemes draw on older models of representing women as subjects of contemplation rather than action.

These attributes genderize the media representation of politics and may have various readings (i.e., more positive or more negative, more inclusive or less). Arguably, highlighting style is not synonymous with trivialization; it may, however, be a way of distinguishing personality (breaking the monotony of dark suit and tie politics) and reinforcing leadership.

However, from empowerment by contemporary attributes, per the greater personalization of politics, it is easy to slip into the “symbolic annihilation” of women (to use an expression of the North American sociologist Gaye Tuchman (2004)) and into their trivialization, which contributes to pushing them away from power.

Aspects such as novelty, age, or appearance, to which more attention is added to family life or the reconciliation of spheres, are more present in news coverage of women in politics. It will be problematic if the emphasis attributed to such attributes is exhausted and constitutes an obstacle to a more substantive apprehension of the political proposals and messages of these protagonists, especially if it is an obstacle to women’s political empowerment and the public affirmation of their empowerment.

Nonetheless, the journalistic discourse may also contribute to deconstructing certain categories, moving them from their natural habitat into the public space. The category of mother (a function previously relegated to the private and family sphere) emerges in certain contexts with extraordinary political and public force (Cabrera et al. 2016). However, the absence of children may constitute a political issue that eventually contributes to discussing the scope of stereotypes rooted in society.

4. Concluding Remarks

More women in politics embody a greater representation of society in formal political bodies. What they bring as new and distinctive features is reflected in greater diversity in the exercise of politics. With more women in politics, new images or metaphors of political power emerge in a dialectic with the transformation of the political field resulting from the presence of women. From the media representation perspective, the journalistic discourse on politics is partly based on stereotyping by reproducing stereotypes associated with women. However, it can also be an important vehicle to discuss them. It is also up to us, as citizens, to enter this discussion and demand fairer and more balanced representations.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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