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# Who takes care of the children? The presentation of female top politicians in the media

*[ORIGINAL ENGLISH VERSION]*

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# *Who takes care of the children? The presentation of female top politicians in the media*

**HOLTZ-BACHA**, Christina

Angela Merkel, Dilma Rousseff, Michelle Bachelet, Tarja Halonen, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Josefina Vázquez Mota, Pratibha Patil, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, Luísa Diogo, Ségolène Royal, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Sarah Palin – it appears as if women are gaining ground in politics worldwide and are knocking at the doors of the highest political offices. Nevertheless, politics is still regarded as a male business: "Manly men, doing manly things, in manly ways" (Duerst-Lahti, 2008, p. 87). The fact that the political arena is still dominated by men is supported by looking at pictures in the political pages of the newspapers or in TV news. The "family photo" shot at G8-meetings shows the German chancellor Angela Merkel sole in the midst of men. It doesn't look much different when the Heads of States and Governments of the EU countries get together for European Council meetings. Men still seem to be in charge in politics even though women in all parts of the world have made it to the top. That does not really come as a surprise. Men simply have been around in the political field much longer than women. Men have done politics since ages. They had plenty of time to determine the rules of the game. Therefore, it is difficult for women to enter the political arena and it is still true to say: the higher the office, the thinner the air.



When women are starting a political career, they not only have to prevail in competition with men, but they also have to deal with social stereotypes. Voters have a specific image of politicians, which attributes and traits they should possess and what is adequate behavior. These images feature many of the traits that are usually

ascribed to men rather than to women and they do not fit very well in the characteristics that are typically ascribed to women. Instead, the images of politicians follow the "great-man model of leadership" (Duerst-Lahti, 2008, p. 98) that makes women appear in the role of "the other". Men are usually considered to be strong, aggressive, rational, active, self-confident and assertive whereas women are expected to be emotional, warm, compassionate, gentle and cautious. These images go along with the ascription of different competencies to women and men, which also seem to recommend them for different political fields: for men, it is foreign politics, security, the military and the economy, for women, it is social welfare, health, education, the environment. Against this background it is no surprise that the specific political situation before an election has proved to be influential for voters to be inclined to cast their vote for a female candidate or rather prefer a man. A bad economy, international conflicts, military or terrorist threats rather play into the hands of male candidates than their female competitors.



So, if women want to climb up the ladder in the political hierarchy, they have to keep in mind the social expectations that are also common among their male colleagues. Women are thus brought into a difficult situation which is characterized by the psychological term *double bind*. Double bind situation are situations that cannot be won. Whatever a person decides to master the situation will be wrong. If a woman presents herself as being cool, calculating and aggressive as it is expected in the political business she risks to be rejected as a virago. If she recommends herself with allegedly female traits, she will be regarded as not being viable for the serious challenges of the political business.

The interrelation of social gender stereotypes and the images of how politics is done and which traits and characteristics are needed to hold one's own in political life is also present in the media and

among those who work for the media. However, who wants to make a career in politics is dependent on the media: Most people do not have the opportunity to experience politics directly and are therefore influenced by the political images that they get delivered by the media. Political actors are also affected by what the media say about politics and politicians. For women who go into politics and want to make it to the higher levels it is therefore crucial what the media say about women politicians in general and specifically about individual women.

Women politicians know that the media act as a significant hurdle for their career. The media report differently on women and men. Since decades we have been hearing from women all over the world complaining that the media only seem to be interested in their looks and in their private life but not so much in their political aims and concerns: How she dresses, how is her hairdo, does her husband have to prepare his own meals and who takes care of the children while she is doing politics? Her male colleagues are rarely confronted with these sorts of questions. That means female politicians are confronted with evaluation criteria that do not come from the political field and that do not play a role for the evaluation of male politicians. These differences particularly play against women who start climbing up the ladder. Once they have made it to the higher ranks differences do not necessarily disappear but dealing with the media becomes easier. That is probably what Han means when she writes: "[...] getting elected, as opposed to governing, may be the biggest hurdle that a potential woman president will face" (2008, p. 8).



In Germany, women have been represented in highest governmental positions since 1961 when the first woman became minister in the Federal Government. However, only in 2005, when the first woman ran as chancellor candidate interest grew in the interdependences among the political career of women, the role of the media and the

attitudes of the electorate. At about the same time elections in other countries provided for the opportunity to pursue the topic and make comparisons of different candidates and across countries. In early 2006, Michelle Bachelet was the first woman to take office as president of Chile. Although Cristina Fernández de Kirchner was not the first female president of Argentina when she took over in 2007 she was the first woman to win the presidency in a general election. Also in 2007 Ségolène Royal was the first presidential candidate to reach the second ballot in France. In the U.S., Hillary Clinton came as far in the presidential primaries of 2008 as no woman before. These examples have demonstrated that there are similarities across borders in the way the media treat woman politicians, independent of different political, electoral and media systems. They have also shown that the complaints of women about the media reporting are still justified. At the same time, it became evident that there are differences among candidates which can be explained by their personality and their individual strategies of presenting themselves in the public and of dealing with the media.



**From Angie to Hillary**

There are only few countries in the world where a woman gained the highest governmental office more than once or ran with good prospects for that position. In Germany, Angela Merkel also was “the first” when she was nominated as the chancellor candidate of the Christian Democrats in Mai 2005. Everything she did during the campaign or when she finally took office happened “for the first time”. The fact that a woman achieves the highest level of the political hierarchy “for the first time” evokes the first woman label. Objectively, that is of course correct but makes women the subject of special attention. For the media, an event that happens for the first time or comes as a surprise is always a good reason for reporting.

They watch closely what "the first woman" is doing, how she behaves, whether she does everything right or, even more, whether she does anything wrong. However, at the same time, the novelty that comes along with the first woman phenomenon also demonstrates the extraordinary of a woman making it to the top in politics: Women are the newcomers in a male business whose nuts and bolts they have to become acquainted with. This message seemed to be overemphasized in the pictures of the heavily pregnant Spanish minister of defense Carme Chacón when she visited the troops in Afghanistan shortly after her appointment. The first woman label thus proves to be a double edged matter. Political actors need the attention of the media for their publicity. Being present in the media demonstrates relevance. On the other hand, attention of the media also means close observation and the excited expectation of a blunder confirming that women are outsiders in the political sphere.



Whereas men seem to be naturally prepared for the political business, women have to grapple with questions concerning their competency on their way into a top position in politics. Studies from the U.S. have shown that female candidates are frequently confronted with doubts as to their *viability* that is the question whether they are up to the power struggle and the office they are running for. This question is either asked directly – by the media but also by their male competitors – or indirectly by emphasizing a candidate (female) traits that make her appear unqualified for the job. That happened to Ségolène Royal during the French presidential election campaign in 2007 when she was frequently portrayed as being inexperienced and incompetent and in addition was associated with "soft" issues and made to look like a fool dealing with hard issues like foreign affairs or economic policy (Murray e Perry, 2008). Reporting about Michelle Bachelet was similar to Royal's when she was a presidential candidate in 2005. Newspaper coverage associated Bachelet with female stereotypes of welfare and compassion

whereas to her male competitors were attributed leadership qualities and competence in a typically male manner (Valenzuela e Correa, 2009). In contrast to Royal, however, Bachelet was treated as the favorite at an early stage because she was leading the polls. In the 2005 German electoral campaign, Merkel's competence was the object of public debate in a way that a book about her ironically took the question up in its title: "Is she capable?" (Scholz, 2007). This debate was also the consequence of a deliberate strategy by the Social Democratic Party (SPD) casting doubts on her competence. Franz Müntefering, at that time leader of the SPD, was repeatedly quoted with his verdict on Merkel: "This woman will not make it". An Internet spot launched by the SPD in reaction to an attack by Merkel's party also accused her of fickleness and dubious expertise.



Challenging a woman's competence is often associated with doubts as to whether she has made her way to the top in politics on her own and on the basis of her own achievements. In fact, there are several examples of female politicians worldwide who have been the daughters or wives of successful men as for instance Indira Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi (India), Corazón Aquino (Philippines), Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (Philippines), Isabel Perón (Argentina), Megawati Sukarnoputri (Indonesia) or Benazir Bhutto (Pakistan). Without question, famous names and family ties can help with a political career. However, even if women have already made their own career in politics, their success will often be explained by family connections. Therefore and to prevent only to be regarded as "the wife of Bill Clinton", Hillary Clinton started out early to prepare her candidacy for the presidency and first became a senator in the U.S. Congress. Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's political career before she was elected as president of Argentina disappeared behind her role as wife of her predecessor Néstor Kirchner.

The tendency to attribute a woman's career to her name and her family underlines the doubts about her political competence and also insinuates that women make their way into politics without adequate expertise. When Angela Merkel ran for the first time as chancellor candidate in 2005 many pictures were retrieved from the archives that showed her together with Helmut Kohl during the first years of her political career. The photos sometimes gave the impression that a father had to be found even for "Kohl's girl", as she was called when he brought her into politics, and to attribute her success to him. The same pattern was applied twice for Martine Aubry, a former minister of the French government, mayor of the city of Lille and finally leader of the French socialist party. She was portrayed as the "daughter of" and also as an "adopted daughter". The daughter of the French politician Jacques Delors who held several high offices in French and European politics was also regarded as a protégé of former president François Mitterrand and at the same time a darling of influential French entrepreneurs (Ramsey, s.d., p. 240-242).



All over the world, women politicians complain about the media making their private life and their appearance (physique, dress, hair) an issue in their reporting. Women have to put up with questions that men do not have to deal with[1]. That does not only apply to media reporting but is also a strategy used by male colleagues in the competitive struggle. "Who takes care of the children?" is a question that only women have to answer. It was exactly this question that Laurent Fabius asked his competitor Ségolène Royal who therefore accused him of sexism (Clift, 2007, p. 285).

The media's occupation – and that of the male colleagues – with private aspects of women politicians, in particular their appearance, and the application of off-topic criteria for their evaluation revives

[1] See for instance the quote by Michelle Bachelet (Valenzuela and Correa, 2009, p. 203).

gender stereotypes and social expectations of women and has the same effects as the association of candidates with soft issues: It emphasizes that the competence of women is not seen in politics.

**Playing the gender card?**

Social gender stereotypes are connected with specific images and expectations about appropriate behavior, competences and appearance. These expectations are dependent on culture. Women who want to enter the field and make a career in politics have to deal with these images. It is, however, quite a challenge to find adequate strategies because the political field is still very much dominated by men and women on top positions in politics are still rather the exception than the rule. As a consequence, women hardly have established strategies available when they start campaigning. Therefore they embark on an uncertain tightrope walk between diverging expectations that follow from the *double bind*. As social expectations vary according to culture, it is only conditionally feasible for women to follow role models from other countries. Finally, because it is not a particular type of woman who prevails in political life, career strategies for women politicians will vary and turn out more or less individually.



That is why the media deliver different images of those women who have made it to the top in politics in recent years. Across the world, reporting about women politicians has shown certain similarities which are mostly due to the usual selection and production criteria of the media. However, what and how the media report about women in politics is also dependent on the politicians' public self-representation which is more or less strategically oriented towards the expectations of the environment and dependent on the specific circumstances.

When all of a sudden an early election was called in Germany in 2005 and Angela Merkel became the chancellor candidate for the Christian Democratic Party, media, electorate, parties and campaign strategists were confronted with a new and so far unknown situation. There was soon consensus among campaign observers that Merkel would not run as "a woman" and also would not use her private life for campaigning. Thus, the chancellor candidate did not meet the expectations of the media who might have hoped for specific female strategies – whatever that might have been. Since there had never been a woman in the position of a chancellor candidate in Germany before, the fact of a woman running for chancellor alone had news value. Several studies (Boomgarden and Semetko, 2007; Koch and Holtz-Bacha, 2008; Westle and Bieber, 2009) analyzed the campaign reporting of the media but yielded somewhat heterogeneous findings due to differences in the period of study, media samples and methodological designs. However, most studies showed that the media did not report more about the incumbent chancellor Gerhard Schröder than about Angela Merkel. For once, the traditional chancellor bonus that gives preference to the incumbent because of this status almost disappeared. At the same time, findings did not show a more negative reporting about the female contender in general. Nevertheless, some findings indicated that gender did play a role. There were somewhat more references to Merkel in a private context than for Schröder, her appearance was made an issue more frequently than Schröder's, and she was more frequently mentioned in connection with gender stereotypes. In addition, the reporting features *gender frames* which specifically addressed the candidates' gender. Analyses of the visual reporting (Kinnebrock and Knieper, 2008; Holtz-Bacha and Koch, 2008) about Angela Merkel confirmed the validity of gender stereotypes. In comparison of Merkel and Schröder, however, the visuals also showed *cross-sex-typing* with Merkel rather being presented as "male" and Schröder rather as "female".

Other than Merkel, Ségolène Royal emphasized her femininity and the duel between a woman and a man in the French presidential election campaign in 2007. A study that analyzed the campaign referred to Royal as the "incarnation of femininity" (Gully, 2009) which was even more prominent in contrast to her main opponent Nicolas Sarkozy who stressed his masculinity. Royal was not evaluated positively in the French media but it is difficult to determine whether that had to do with gender or was due to Sarkozy's superior campaign (Leidenberger and Koch, 2008; Murray and Perry, 2008). The French newspaper reported more frequently about Sarkozy than about Royal which also was a consequence of him being an incumbent minister whereas Royal only appeared as a candidate. Evaluations were negative for both of them but worse for Royal than for her opponent. The media frequently portrayed her as inexperienced and incompetent and cast doubts on her leadership skills. Her appearance also was an issue. In addition, the media frequently used her first name which was hardly the case for Sarkozy and they used other forms of addressing Royal which stressed her gender. In some countries or languages, addressing female candidates with their first name counts as a form of belittlement demonstrating that women rather belong to another sphere than politics and are not taken seriously in the male political business. In her campaign, Royal repeatedly referred to her role as a mother which was taken up by the media, even though in a derogatory way.



The candidacy of Cristina Kirchner for the 2007 Argentine presidential election and the way the media treated her is a special case (Rodríguez, 2008). The strategic agreement with her husband Néstor Kirchner, whom she succeeded in the presidency, his continuous presence and her role as the former first lady not only brought her increased attention but also seemed to suggest to present her with reference to her husband and as a piece in a prearranged affair. Cristina Kirchner went into the campaign with

her first name. Together with the comments on her appearance, the specific features of the campaign lent themselves to gender stereotyped reporting which did not allow for distinguishing whether she was treated in this way because of her gender or whether the candidate and the specific situation provoked how she was treated in the media. Nevertheless, because the reporting was similar for another female candidate who was in the race, it seems safe to say that gender – also – played a role.

As a former first lady, Hillary Clinton had a similar problem when she went into the U.S. presidential campaign in 2008. She had to prove herself as a politician in her own right and independent of her husband. In an exemplary way, she had to deal with the double bind. Even within her own campaign organization, consultants disagreed whether and how far Hillary Clinton should play the gender card (Lawrence and Rose, 2009). She decided in favor of a tough strategy in order to demonstrate leadership skills and thus her qualification for the presidency. Independent of the fact that the candidacy of an African American provided for a complex situation of race and gender, Barack Obama still had an advantage as a man. Even though Clinton received a lot of attention, reporting about her was considerably more negative than about her competitor. She escaped the discussion of her viability that has usually been brought up when female candidates were entering an electoral race. In Clinton's case, the viability discussion was replaced by a continuous speculation about when she would drop out of the race. Although she escaped some other stereotypes, the reporting about Clinton was "deeply gendered" (Lawrence and Rose, 2009, p. 203), in the so-called new media even more than in the traditional media. Therefore, the media were accused of contributing to her failure to shatter the glass ceiling even though it got 18 million cracks, as she said after pulling out.

**Conclusion**

Across the world, women face a double bind dilemma when they enter the political business: Femininity and striving for power do not seem to be compatible. There is no easy formula for how much women need to show of one or the other. As the few examples here have demonstrated, each candidate is a singular case that results from her personality and the specific political context. Nevertheless, it is still one thing how a politician presents herself and another, what the media make of it. It is up to them to emphasize certain aspects of events and traits. Therefore, a politician's well-balanced behavior does not necessarily appear as such in the media. What counts, however, is the image that is delivered by the media because there are only very few opportunities for direct contact between politicians and the electorate during election campaigns and even more so during day-to-day political business.

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