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"A Fly in the Ointment": The Barriers to Portuguese Female Political Participation

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Abstract: The latest data from the Gender Equality Index ranks Portugal 10th in female political power. Despite a larger female resident population, parity in access to power and decision-making remains limited. Research on local political power reveals low female representation within parties and a lack of motivation to recruit or affiliate women. This study utilizes thematic analysis eight interviews with women in political leadership positions to identify barriers to female political participation in the Portuguese context. Key questions addressed include the following: How do media representation, role models, stereotypes, and cultural norms impact the political arena? Is it the lack of representation that deters women, or does the political environment alienate them? The analysis explores how media portrayal, stereotypes, double standards, scrutiny, and cultural norms interconnect, perpetuating the political arena as a male-dominated space, thereby marginalizing women politicians.

Keywords: female political participation; systemic barriers; gender imbalance; Portugal

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1. Introduction

2024 marks the year of national elections worldwide, as many media outlets, organizations, and institutions are dubbing the year 2024 as 'The Ultimate Election Year' (Time Magazine 2023), 'The Super Election Year' (Statista 2024) or 'Mega Election 2024' (UN News 2024). At least 64 countries, plus the European Union, are meant to hold national elections, making 2024 the biggest election year in history (Time Magazine 2023). According to Reuters (2024), the trend in European countries is the rise of nationalist, populist, and Eurosceptic parties, which includes the legislative elections that took place in Portugal on March 10 of this year.

In terms of female political power, the Gender Equality Index by the European Institute for Gender Equality puts Portugal in 13th place in 2023, having moved down three places when compared to the previous year. Women held a 34% share of ministers, a 37% share of members of Parliament, and a 32% share of members of regional assemblies and local municipalities.

Considering the results of the 2024 legislative elections, among the nine parties represented in Parliament, only 76 women were elected, representing a 33.6% share (SIC Notícias 2024). On the other hand, the ministers of the current Government are the oldest in the last 25 years, with an average age of almost 55 years, and among the 17 ministers, only seven women are included (Renascença 2024).

If the UN considered that 2024 could be a landmark for democracy (UN News 2024), this may not apply to the concerns of the Portuguese political context and its respective female participation since the Portuguese elections also resulted in the entry of 50 members of the nationalist and populist party CHEGA into Parliament. A conservative storm hovers over Portugal, and although it has not yet broken, the setback in terms of gender equality in relation to the last three legislatures is already being felt (RTP 2024). Assuming politics

are not just based on votes and parties, new anti-feminist strategies also come into play, such as a former prime minister launching a book that rails against homosexual marriage or legislation that facilitates divorce while referring to the role of women in the domestic sphere (Observador 2024); or the Vice-president of the Popular Center Party—CDS-PP—wanting a new referendum to reverse the right to abortion (RTP 2024).

While the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women—CSW65—reported in 2021 that it would take 130 years to reach gender equality at the highest positions of power (UN Women 2021), three years later, the problem may have been aggravated. Having painted the Portuguese context, it is necessary to understand what barriers and obstacles women experience in their political participation. Through a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) of eight individual interviews with women in leadership roles in various areas of the political sphere, in this article, we aim to outline these obstacles and reflect on how they interconnect and subtly contribute to keeping the political arena as a men's club (Jordão 2000).

2. Female Underrepresentation in the Portuguese Political Arena

Among the constituent elements of the political habitus (Bordieu 1980)—the set of internalized dispositions and values shaping an individual's political actions, derived from Bourdieu's concept of habitus, adapted to the political context—it is in participation in political parties or political organizations that the presence of women is much smaller. This happens, at first glance, for two main reasons that, according to Viegas and Faria (1999), substantiate masculine domination in the social and symbolic order. The first reason is the lack of time that women must invest due to the family responsibilities that fall upon them (Amâncio 2004; Amâncio and Santos 2021), while the second reason goes through the dominance of social representations about the feminine and masculine world, inscribed in the consciousness and dispositions of both genders,[1] which include social representations about the struggle, aggressiveness, authority and protagonism associated with the masculine gender and politics (Butler 1990; Walby 1990). Nevertheless, with the evolution of gender studies, a second, closer look allows us to see that the reasons for the political female under-representation in Portugal could also be from a different nature, whilst there seem to be several systemic barriers at play. In this study, we focus on political participation, referring to the active involvement of individuals in decision-making processes and other activities that influence governance, such as voting, activism, and holding public office, while also concentrating on descriptive representation (Pitkin 1967), referring to the extent to which social groups, particularly women, are proportionally represented in public office relative to their presence in the population.

Amâncio and Santos (2021) noted that, due to academic progression and access to higher education, women, predominantly since the late 1990s, have entered fields historically dominated by men, encountering instances of gender discrimination. Despite their academic achievements, the traditional familial roles persistently influence their professional lives. Initially, during recruitment, this dynamic presents a barrier to their competitiveness vis-à-vis their male counterparts. Subsequently, as professionals advancing in their careers, the responsibilities of motherhood diminish their prospects for advancement. This phenomenon may be surprising given the recognition of their merit and intellectual capabilities in educational institutions, particularly within a legal framework that has made significant strides in gender equality (Amâncio and Santos 2021). Women have advanced across various academic and professional fields, but these achievements have yet to translate directly into increased political representation.

Although there is no formal discrimination between women and men in the political sphere, there is still in Portugal, as in most countries, a female underrepresentation in bodies of political power (Almeida 2019; Viegas and Faria 1999), which is explained, according to Almeida (2019) by the existence of covert discrimination against candidates within their own parties and the lack of time, energy and political socialization networks available to women. In Portugal, Espírito-Santo et al. (2020) observe that female parliamentary

representation influences policy, especially concerning gender equality and social rights. Compared to other European countries, Portugal shows progress in female representation; however, party discipline somewhat limits the independent impact of female legislators. On topics such as women's rights and family policies, Portuguese female representatives contribute significantly, though their influence is more party-bound compared to countries with more flexible systems, such as Norway and Sweden (Espírito-Santo et al. 2020).

In her analysis regarding Portuguese female mayors by district and political party between 1975 and 2005, as well as Portuguese female European deputies between 1987 and 2004, Almeida (2015) concluded that women have higher levels of education and professions with a higher level of specialization, notably in the areas of teaching and management. There seemed to be a tendency to choose women with doctorates and specializations in the areas for which they are appointed, meaning their recruitment focuses on their technical qualities more often than their previous political careers (Almeida 2015). Furthermore, according to her analysis, left-leaning parties have greater gender equity, corroborating the tradition of the international panorama (Davis 1997). On the other hand, when interviewing 20 deputies from different parties, Santos (2008) did not find any major differences in terms of educational qualifications between male and female politicians, contrary to international findings (Baltrunaite et al. 2014; Bauer 2020; Profeta and Woodhouse 2022)

Research indicates a disparity between women's qualifications and their occupational positions (Archer and Lloyd 2002; Jacobsen 1998; Lipovetsky 2000). Despite holding higher qualifications, women often occupy lower positions compared to men. Lisboa et al. (2006) found that from 1974 to 2005, women represented 27% of office holders in Portuguese political elites, yet their presence in top positions such as Prime Minister, Minister, and Secretary of State remained limited. Conversely, women were more prevalent in intermediate roles, sometimes even exceeding male representation in positions like Deputies and Advisors.

Lisboa et al. (2006) assert that multiple authors also point to a strong concentration of female participation in governments in areas such as Health, Social Affairs, Education, or Family to the detriment of others, such as Defense, Economy, or Internal Administration, which are more dominated by men (Davis 1997; Vianello and Moore 2000). Lisboa et al. (2006) also identify another trend: women appear more frequently among politicians who hold just one position and men among those who hold three or more positions.

At the local level, politics often involves direct governance of immediate issues, while at regional and national levels, challenges encompass broad decisions and long-term policies affecting representativeness. According to Ribeiro (2021), what emerges from investigations that have local power as a subject is that the parties have few women (E. S. Costa 2010), and there seems to be no interest in motivating them to join or become affiliated (Jordão 2000). In this context, Ribeiro (2021) argues that when there is a female presence within these lists, women seldom have access to power, as it is gatekept from them, although not officially (Mendes 1993). The political parties, therefore, persist in configuring themselves as "men's clubs" (Jordão 2000, p. 120). Even though there are female sections within the majority of parties (Almeida 2018; E. S. Costa 2010) and rules in party statutes regarding the selection of candidates (E. S. Costa 2010; Viegas 2016), it is men who benefit from recruitment processes guided by criteria that are not very transparent (Lopes 2009) because the prevailing rule is to privilege those who meet the characteristics of the three Ms: "Male, Middle Aged and Middle Class" (Almeida 2019, p. 218; Ribeiro 2021, pp. 30–31).

In the political domain, media access is crucial for political actors as it offers them the opportunity to gain visibility on significant policy issues. This results in the under-representation of women in the news, thereby leading to their underrepresentation in the political arena itself (Baitinger 2015). Research indicates that "news content does not accurately reflect politics and its (female) actors" (Vos 2013, p. 390; Simões and Amaral 2020). According to Simões and Amaral (2020), women in politics are frequently evaluated

against a male normative standard, often being marginalized as outsiders in a predominantly male field and stereotyped as mothers and caregivers who are out of place (Campus 2013). Furthermore, they state that this bias is reinforced by media practices that consistently underestimate and belittle female political candidates and parliamentarians. This includes underrepresentation compared to their male counterparts, omitting their honorific titles, referring to them by their first names or familial relations with men, or employing unflattering gender descriptions (Ross 2009; Simões and Amaral 2020).

Araújo et al. (2022) called the news arena a "no women's land", in which the way in is highly selective. Upon researching the under-representation of women in COVID-19 News in Portugal, they concluded that the Portuguese news media persisted in exhibiting gender bias, wherein male sources were prioritized over female sources. This bias persisted even though two key decision-makers were female—specifically in the Ministry of Health and the National Public Health Authority—and the most frequently quoted groups of sources, namely doctors and researchers, predominantly consisted of women.

The relevance of increased female representation in political organizations, especially in Portugal, is underscored by both symbolic and substantive benefits for democracy. Research indicates that women in power often prioritize policies on social equity, gender equality, and family rights, which are crucial in diversifying policy perspectives and aligning government actions with the needs of broader societal groups. This inclusion challenges longstanding male-dominated viewpoints and contributes to a more nuanced and inclusive policy-making process. In Portugal, the introduction of the Parity Law (dated 2006), mandating a minimum of 33% female candidates on party lists, exemplifies efforts to close the gender gap in political participation. However, structural limitations within party dynamics, such as the placement of women in non-electable positions, have historically diluted these gains. Comparative studies highlight that nations with more gender-balanced representation often demonstrate enhanced democratic quality through more representative policy outcomes, addressing broader societal interests and thus elevating the democratic responsiveness and accountability of elected bodies (Alexander 2012; Childs and Krook 2009; Espírito-Santo and Weeks 2022; Monteiro 2012). Ultimately, promoting women in Portuguese politics aligns with a global movement toward greater equality and enriches the democratic process by ensuring that diverse voices and experiences shape policy at all levels.

Since agents who speak for women and gender equality continue to enter the political arena, Portugal has, when it comes to state feminism, a descriptive representation—even though female party politicians are much smaller in number than their male counterparts—which should evolve towards substantive representation, involving the integration of women's issues and equality in the discussion, formulation, and implementation of policies (McBride and Mazur 1995, 2008), but this last part proves difficult.

3. The Role of Nonpartisan Politics

It is important to highlight that we understand that both partisan and nonpartisan politics have fundamental roles in the systemic sphere of society. As Pinto (2020, p. 16) states, "Nonpartisan groups can help to keep democracy alive and healthy, and they already play an important role in Portuguese political life." Also, as Dalton (2017, p. 7) refers, "the number and variety of ways that citizens can use to influence government beyond elections have dramatically increased." And it is also possible to identify new ways of action "that greatly expand the potential for citizens to influence public policy and further democratic progress" (Dalton 2017, p. 7).

According to Monteiro and Ferreira (2012), the tenet of State reformism (Ferreira 2000) implies new conceptions of democracy and governance, with the adoption of bottom-up logics, monitoring and evaluation practices, accountability, and transparency, which require strong women's movements, capable of demanding accountability for the lack of integration of the principle of equality in public policies (Outshoorn and Kantola 2007). With the accentuation of neoliberal trends marking the dynamics of governance and public management from 2002 onwards, the gradual separation between women's movements,

the State and its Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality is accentuated—a new relationship of induced autonomy and partnership (Monteiro 2010).

Fertuzinhos (2016) refers to nonpartisan individuals and collectives as actors who, in addition to constitutional legislators, influenced at every moment, over the then 40 years, the text of the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic regarding equality between women and men. It is from parliamentary debates that it is possible to highlight the role of women's organizations. The proposals of these associations are constant and are based on the persistence of inequalities between women and men as a basis for specifying the promotion of gender equality in several standards, in addition to the prohibition of discrimination based on gender, for the enshrinement of positive measures in various areas and to update the promotion of equality through the introduction, for instance, of the principle of reconciling professional and family life (Fertuzinhos 2016).

Nevertheless, Monteiro and Ferreira (2012) assert that the articulation of women's movements with the Commission has not been very effective in achieving significant political results in Portugal, concluding that its biggest contribution was the creation of a network around it. Since the emergence of the phenomenon of State feminism (McBride and Mazur 1995)—the idea that at a certain point, the State, previously seen by most feminist movements as a patriarchal opponent and rival, has become an ally of women's causes, including them in their political agendas (Monteiro 2010)—a relationship matrix was created between the State, political parties, women's associations, and the Commission, to promote gender equality policies in Portugal. A relationship in which, according to Monteiro and Ferreira (2012), the Commission is a fragile and marginalized, although persistent and militant, intermediary between weak and dependent women's movements, which it supports with faint reinforcement, and a "centralist, juridical, clientelistic and conservative State that gives it little space, resources and political relevance, while it maintains it in response to the pressures of transnational feminism" (Monteiro and Ferreira 2012, p. 25).

4. Affirmative Action Measures and the Parity Law

The creation of gender quotas, although not consensual (Freidenvall and Dahlerup 2013), has been identified by some as a direct and effective way of ensuring greater parity in parliamentary representation, which can be a temporary or definitive mechanism. In Portugal, the so-called Parity Law—Organic Law No. 3/2006, of August 21—established that the lists for the National Assembly, the European Parliament, and local parishes should be composed in such a way as to ensure the minimum representation of 33% of each gender. Later, the Organic Law No. 1/2019 of March 29 raised the minimum representation threshold for each gender to 40%, determining that for this purpose, no more than two candidates of the same gender can be placed consecutively in the ranking of the list. In other words, there is the adoption of a double quota that corresponds to the establishment of a minimum threshold for the composition of lists to be presented for legislative, local elections and for the European Parliament, but which adds the need for this composition to be divided between genders, to avoid placing men and/or women in ineligible final positions. With the establishment of the parity Law, some changes appeared. Between 1982 and 2017 (a period for which complete and systematic data are available), the presence of women in local consistently increased from 5.1 percent in 1982 to 19.3 percent in 2005 and, following the entry into force of the Parity Law, to 27.7 percent in 2009, 31.1 percent in 2013 and 33.2 percent in 2017 (Teixeira et al. 2023, p. 346).

This ultimately proves Krook's (2010) exploration of how quotas can counteract informal networks and discriminatory practices by mandating a minimum level of female representation on candidate lists, thus creating more equitable opportunities for women to be selected and elected. However, the effectiveness of quotas depends on how they are implemented, while enforcement mechanisms and the specific design of quotas play a critical role in determining their success (Krook 2010).

According to B. F. Costa (2022), this path is the most effective, although the specificity of Portugal's electoral system may prevent immediate modeling in terms of converting votes into mandates due to the size of the electoral districts and the vote for each party.

However, it is now consensual that the asymmetric reality that exists between women and men in politics results from very complex processes and the interaction of various cultural, situational, institutional, structural, and ideological factors that, as they are deeply rooted in social structures, make it more difficult to change towards equality (Santos 2017). The traditional association of the male stereotype with the world of politics constituted a real barrier to women's affirmation at this stage. Even in cases where there is a greater proportionality of women in government, there is a reduced political weight of these rulers with the portfolios they oversee. According to an analysis that B. F. Costa (2022) made regarding constitutional governments, parity is only noticeable or clear in the constitutions of the last two governments. However, this analysis can only be considered complete with an approach to the ministries overseen by women, with the promotion of stereotypes due to the allocation of soft ministries, traditionally health, education, and culture (B. F. Costa 2022).

This stereotype is particularly evident in the distribution of ministerial portfolios. Men continue to dominate the so-called hard ministries relating to defense, justice, and foreign policy, and women tend to occupy softer ministries relating to education, health, and culture (Santos 2017; B. F. Costa 2022). In Portugal, only one woman held the position of Prime Minister and only for six months—Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo—who was appointed Prime Minister in 1979 to head a government of presidential initiative. It also becomes evident through an analysis of presidential positions at a national level, as no woman has held the position of President of the Republic, but also at a local level—the number of Mayor positions held by women is a good example of this, having reached its maximum in the 2009 local elections, with 23 women occupying the position, in 308 existing chambers, that is, the truly derisory percentage of 7.5%, where it stagnated until today (Santos 2017).

Several authors point out that the positive influence of gender quotas has not been equal across the three political levels covered by the Parity Law (Ribeiro 2021; Santos et al. 2018), and, unlike the Assembly of the Republic and the European Parliament, in local government, impairment persists significantly in some bodies. According to Ribeiro (2021), studies highlight that the internalization of the principles that guide parity democracy was not carried out by a large majority of local politicians (Almeida 2014; Jordão 2019), which helps to explain the ineffectiveness of the Parity Law, but it is also highlighted that the design of the Law means that, even if fully complied with, the proportion of women is reduced (Santos et al. 2018), mainly in the presidency of bodies. This aspect, absent in law, as it is restricted to increasing their numerical presence, reveals, as maintained by Ribeiro (2021), little ambition regarding the objective of women's leadership (Viegas 2016). As Teixeira et al. (2023, p. 353) concluded, the entry of more women into parliament, has led to a more balanced sharing of space, work, and even their visibility, although the most important positions and areas are still reserved for men. Additionally, Almeida (2020) also suggests measures and describes good practices that show that the logic of political parity is not reduced to the implementation of quotas or other special measures established only temporarily to compensate for a situation of imbalance.

In short, almost 20 years after the implementation of the Parity Law, as Santos (2017) puts it, there are still no clear changes in the way of doing politics, nor in power games and strategies (Teixeira et al. 2021). It is clear that men continue to have more informal networks and lobbies, the so-called "men's clubs" (Jordão 2000, p. 120), cooperating much more among themselves than women do. This puts women politicians at a disadvantage because, as they have not yet been able to build and strengthen networks, they are also unable to build relationships of power or influence as easily as their male counterparts can (Santos 2017).

5. Portuguese Female Political Participation: Barriers and Obstacles

5.1. Methodology

Between 21 July 2023 and 26 August 2023, eight individual semistructured interviews were carried out during the preparation of the National Report on Female Political Participation under the European Project FEM-ABLE—Promoting women's participation in the political domain (101088295—FEM-ABLE). The interview script was created by the team responsible for the Work Package in question, with 17 questions regarding female political participation. The interviews were held via Microsoft Teams, with an average duration of approximately one hour each, and had the participation of the following interviewees, all of them women in leadership positions, the identity of which will remain anonymous for ethical reasons:[2]

- A National Assembly Politician;
- A City Hall Councilwoman from a northern city, elected by a left-wing political party;
- A City Hall Councilwoman from a southern city, elected by a right-wing political party;
- A Chairwoman of a Parish Council;
- A City Coordinator for a political party;
- A Leader of a feminist collective;
- A Leader of a black queer collective;
- A Leader of an antifascist collective.

This study focuses on organizations such as the National Parliament, City Halls, Parish Councils, internal party life, and independent collectives due to their central role in policy implementation and potential influence on political decisions impacting female representation.

Verbatim transcriptions of the interviews were meticulously reviewed, and the collected data underwent thematic analysis, as delineated by Braun and Clarke (2006). This methodology was chosen for its efficacy in "identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 79). Adhering to Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, the analytical process was systematically structured as follows:

1. Familiarization with the Data: Involved thorough and repeated readings of the material to gain an in-depth understanding and to draw initial insights;
2. Generation of Initial Codes: Organized the data in a meaningful and systematic manner;
3. Theme Search: Identified patterns within the data that corresponded to the research questions and study objectives;
4. Review of Themes: Modified, developed, subdivided, or discarded themes based on their centrality to the study;
5. Definition and Naming of Themes: Finalized the themes, clearly defining and naming them;
6. Report Production: Integrated the themes into a comprehensive report, which included a literature review, discussion, and other relevant sections. This phase involved crafting an analytic narrative that incorporated vivid data extracts as evidence.

The thematic analyses were conducted from a constructionist perspective, diverging from essentialist approaches that merely document life experiences. Instead, this viewpoint focuses on understanding events, realities, meanings, and experiences as products of prevailing social discourses. Braun and Clarke (2006) assert that this perspective transcends simple reporting, examining the interplay between existing discourses and the shaping of these phenomena.

Applying this technique, the five themes/barriers referenced below (Figure 1) were identified; however, it is important to note that, despite being divided in this article, the themes are not impervious, as they directly correlate with each other.

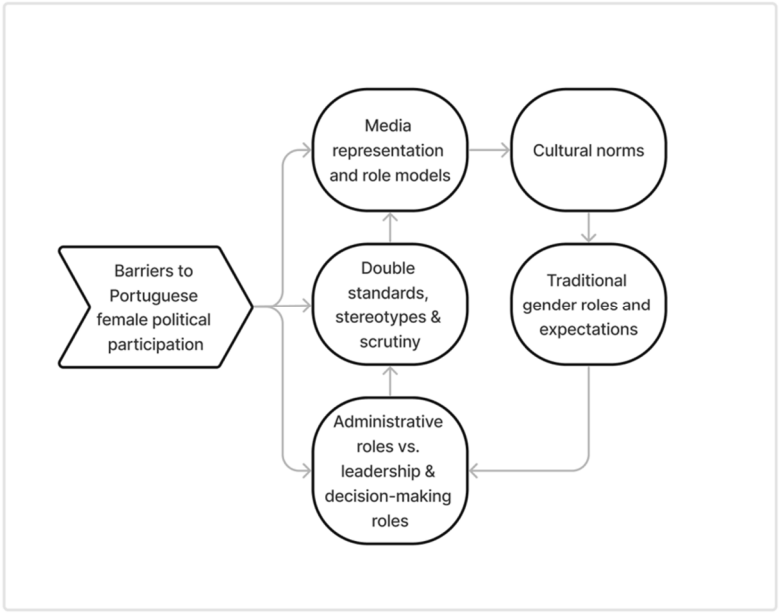


Figure 1. Themes/barriers highlighted in the thematic analysis.

5.2. Results and Discussion

In Portugal, several barriers to female political participation hinder their ability to fully engage and contribute to politics (Monteiro and Ferreira 2012). Inadequate political participation and challenges in attaining positions of power and influence within political parties and institutions lead to a lack of representation and influence in decision-making processes. Role models mediatization, stereotypes, and administrative role perception are some of the barriers already related by previous studies and authors.

In this article, and through a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) of the eight interviews, it became evident that these barriers—media representation and role models; cultural norms; traditional gender roles and expectations; administrative roles vs. leadership and decision-making roles; double standards, stereotypes, and scrutiny—intersect and reinforce each other, creating a complex web of challenges in Portugal. The narratives shared by the interviewees shed light on the multifaceted nature of these obstacles and emphasize the need for comprehensive strategies to address them.

5.2.1. Media Representation and Role Models

To be perceived favorably by the public, media, and peers, a woman often must suppress certain traditionally feminine traits. According to Interviewee 7, this encompasses modifications in attire, hairstyle, make-up usage, behavior, and overall demeanor. Consequently, this perpetuates the notion that for a woman to achieve success, she must emulate masculine characteristics or embody traits conventionally associated with men. This then resonates and implies something to women who are watching TV news every day:

> *"Women are asked questions about their personal and family lives that are not asked to men. There is no great explanation other than precisely these prejudices which are already so unconscious that many people do them without even realizing they are doing them."* (Interviewee 7)

Several authors point to the fact that the media have not been allies of women and their representatives (e.g., Peça 2010; Santos et al. 2015; Silveirinha 2004; Araújo et al. 2022), according to Simões and Amaral (2020), since women in the political sphere are permanently judged, taking into account the male normative standard, being often reduced to outsiders in a globally male-dominated field, and to mothers and caregivers who are out of place (Campus 2013). This is propagated by the fact that the media continually underestimate and belittle female political candidates and parliamentarians, underrepresenting them compared

to their male counterparts by forgetting their honorific titles, identifying them by their first name or by familiar relationships with male subjects, or using unflattering gender descriptions (Ross 2009; Simões and Amaral 2020). Additionally, in the focus groups conducted in their research, Santos et al. (2015) assert that the participants were able to identify, concerning representational paradigms, three main thematic narratives in Portuguese newsmagazines: women's participation in politics, private life and domesticity, and physicality, body, and physical appearance.

Simões and Amaral (2020) identify five trends, highlighted by feminist research, in media representations of women political candidates in the West: that of underrepresentation (Carlin and Winfrey 2009; Martins 2015; Ross 2009); that of problematic visibility, associated with the intense scrutiny on the personal characteristics of women candidates and their ensuing objectification (Braden 1996; Carlin and Winfrey 2009; Haraldsson and Wängnerud 2018; Heflick and Goldenberg 2009; Ritchie 2013; Wasburn and Wasburn 2011); that of the coverage being more negative towards women when compared to men (Carlin and Winfrey 2009; Devitt 1999); that of the association of the female political profile with issues considered to be feminine (Caroll and Fox 2006; Devitt 1999); and finally, that of normalization, a trend that maintains that the political scenario has changed, with women no longer being electoral novelties, which has had repercussions on the emergence of a more diverse range of media representations (Hayes and Lawless 2016).

In any event, it does not mean that this normalization is already present in most scenarios since another transversal phenomenon occurs, that of hypervisibility (Ward 2017), also combined with a new media trend towards the identification of intersectional identities (Cho et al. 2013). Taking into account the perspective of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991), Simões and Amaral (2020) maintain that feminist studies emphasize how the distinctive particularities of political subjects are illuminated or obscured by the media, with significant effects on the public representation of these subjects (Joshi et al. 2019; Ward 2017). Such is the Portuguese case of Joacine Katar Moreira, who "contradicts the invisibility of female politicians in the media, positioning her in a place of challenge and resistance to the normative standards of the political space, which are traditionally male and white." (Simões and Amaral 2020, p. 147). The politician is mentioned by four of the interviewees as a former member of the National Assembly who was scrutinized by the media mainly because she was an afro-descendant woman and suffered from stuttering:

> *"So I think there are very painful processes that then end up becoming barriers, because then there is a very specific anxiety related to these processes, which has to do with who you are. Oh, I can't imagine how Joacine Katar Moreira ended her term, but it certainly didn't go well."* (Interviewee 3)

> *"But in terms of representation it was very important. Not only because she was a black woman, but also because she was a black woman and said a lot. At the time, she was seen as just another woman, another hysteric. And nowadays, she is no longer there, they focus on things she said and paths she took. The truth is that that woman made a change".* (Interviewee 8)

All interviewees agreed that representation is key for any woman to believe that she can do it.

> *"When we see women, I think people also feel a different spirit and see a kind of hope there, of achieving something more than what until recently was reserved exclusively for men. "Therefore, if it is possible for those women, for those people, it is also possible for me and if we see, for example, in some cases where women are in politics, they take their children, they are in meetings, they are in assemblies and they are breastfeeding their children. . . I think that this, for those who see it, is a possibility of 'I am capable too'."* (Interviewee 1)

While it is very important, it should not be treated as a token but as a way of deconstructing roles.

> *"I think that the more we deconstruct gender roles, the more we also deconstruct the place where we, regardless of our gender, can be. So I think so. I think representation has everything to do with this, it has everything to do with effectively being an alternative to established power."* (Interviewee 3)

Interviewee 3 also highlighted that the fact that Portugal has never known a woman as president means that one does not think that there is such a possibility. And even though a woman may want to be president, it is almost always a form of counter-speech and not an effective alternative that may win.

5.2.2. Cultural Norms

Established ideas about the role and position of women in society tend to form cultural barriers (Henderson and Jeydel 2010), a classic obstacle to female intervention in institutional politics. Different socializations of men's and women's citizenship provide different political experiences, and women, as a result of a socialization and acculturation complex, tend to somehow remain away from power (Viegas and Faria 1999).

According to Interviewee 6, the male gender is still understood over the years as being the most qualified to be in politics, and this also comes as a result of the dictatorship experienced in Portugal. Women's political participation before the 25th of April was practically zero precisely because the head of the family was the one who could vote. Although there was soon an attempt to democratize women in politics, the man was always seen as the leader, and perhaps due to this history, which apparently is still very recent in Portuguese society, women's political participation is often not encouraged.

> *"Perhaps due to this history, it may seem that it isn't, but it is still very recent in Portuguese society, there ends up being this scrutiny, and often the lack of encouragement of women in politics, for example: when he [a PSD former party leader] was called to attention in the last legislative elections, where there were few women on the lists, he himself said that women were not interested in politics, or something similar. What is certain is that I also know the PSD well, and the PSD has a series of women and people who are in this role, and who are motivated to secure and run for these positions. But we know how the district offices work, and due to pressure from the national team, many of the top candidates are chosen by the national team itself. So here it wasn't about the women not being available, but rather an excuse. Purely and simply an excuse not to feature women."* (Interviewee 6)

In Portugal, the weight of social normativity, which was far from the egalitarian spirit of the law, could have been less aggravated if the Constitution resulting from the April Revolution had attended to some details. According to Fertuzinhos (2016), several authors (Beleza 1977; Viegas 1977) and draw attention to what this Constitution should have avoided and what it could have done better. Fertuzinhos (2016) argues that, for it should have avoided qualifying the irreplaceable role of mothers in the education of their children, either because of the controversy it suggested, which it still suggests today, or because it reinforced the weight of traditional stereotypes fueled by spillover effect, as a significant part of it still does today, other types of discrimination. It could also have approved a general provision on women's rights, which would have pedagogical utility and would have legitimized, already at that time, the positive measures that were considered necessary in promoting equality between women and men (Beleza 1977). It should also have approved specifications prohibiting discrimination based on gender, specifically referring to the prohibition of discrimination between women and men, for example, in the enshrinement of the principle of equal pay for equal work or even in the principle of equality itself (Beleza 1977; Viegas 1977), which was only approved as a State responsibility in 1997 (Fertuzinhos 2016).

Regarding social expectations, according to those interviewed, Portugal still has a society that expects women to want to do things like getting married, having children, taking care of others, and not aspiring to a career outside their home. Even if and when

a woman wants a career outside her home, she should prioritize her family life. If it is a woman who chooses a political career, she will normally not have that family, and she will not have that 'prestige' image that is valued in this context. So, from the outset, she is already at a disadvantage to other male counterparts:

> *"If we think about what is valued within politics, if we think about who reaches political positions of power, we see that immaculate family, which is a straight couple, with three children, a dog, a house, employees and nice cars."* (Interviewee 3)

On the other hand, one interviewee, who is the President of a Parish Council, having previously worked as a secretary to many presidents and always in offices with men, said that she has never felt any discrimination for being a woman and that this probably comes from the social culture in which she lives.

> *"I'm not the ideal person for these answers. I've never felt anything like that, you know? Never. I have always worked with men. I was a secretary to presidents, I was... Then I worked in an office with only boys, and now I have men. Of course, you always have to do a little forcing there, but sometimes I even have another type of respect when they are men."* (Interviewee 5)

Her explanation is that since she lives in a fishing area, extremely matriarchal, with the tradition of men working and women being in charge of managing money, the house, and the company, this culture of women in charge of organizations has been transferred to the corporate, associative and political circles. On the other hand, although she denies ever having felt any gender discrimination, she contradicts herself in her speech:

> *"I don't notice, I've never noticed that. I don't know if it's my way of being. I also don't care and take things in a more streamlined way, as a joke, I pretend that I don't notice when this type of situation occurs, so I never noticed it."* (Interviewee 5)

This is in line with what Amâncio and Santos (2021) noted in their Analysis of the Obstacles to Gender Equality in Highly Qualified Professions in Portugal. Many women adopt a strategy of denying such discrimination, while a prevailing ideology that assigns distinct characteristics, competencies, and roles to women and men exacerbates their struggle with femininity within contexts dominated by hegemonic masculinity (Amâncio and Santos 2021).

5.2.3. Traditional Gender Roles and Expectations

While analyzing the constraints on female political participation, Viegas and Faria (1999) pointed to the unavailability of time, resulting from the accumulation of professional work with domestic tasks, as an unfavorable factor. Politics remains a genderized world, and the Parity Law has not yet succeeded in eliminating gender hierarchies or creating a gender-just world (Teixeira et al. 2023, p. 354). And 25 years later, these traditional roles remain intrinsically embedded in Portuguese society. Although the legal framework currently defines equal responsibilities of spouses, and institutions such as courts tend to implement these provisions, current practice in families, in most social strata, as well as in most business companies, still have the traditional division of gender roles shrouded in their foundation (Viegas and Faria 1999).

In Portuguese, due to cultural norms and the Portuguese language, work-life balance is defined in terms of work vs. familiar life. Therefore, two questions arise when deconstructing this topic. The first is to stop assuming that all women are expected to have children and to manage that balance, so if we are talking about a couple in which there are two women, perhaps the questions do not arise in the same manner. The second is the need to assume that family life may involve more than a nuclear family, for example, a family of choice and romantic commitments. On the other hand, some women do not have to make this choice, for example, more privileged women, with employees whose sole purpose is to attend to their children, or even women from somewhat favorable socioeconomic positions who will have another family network.

Interviewee 4 states that women who do not have this family network do not even dare to be in a leadership position, giving the example of a colleague from the same party who was elected to the National Assembly, but as she became a mother and lived in another city, she had to resign the position. While this has happened many times, elected men becoming parents and having a separate life only to go home at the weekends, for a mother, this would imply many other changes:

> *"So, this is a good example of how a woman, even being involved, even being in places, decides, for instance, to become a mother, and that changes everything."* (Interviewee 4)

In the family environment, men's participation has not grown in the same way as women's involvement in work and professional activity, nor has the career, in the case of women, gained the same social importance that is attributed to men's careers (Amâncio 2004). In Portugal, in resemblance to what happens internationally, newsmagazines tend to frequently explore aspects related to the family relationships of female politicians, referring them to the domestic space by mentioning them as mothers and family caregivers—a phenomenon that, by rule, does not happen with their male peers (Ross 2009; Santos et al. 2015).

The majority of women, said Interviewee 1, do not have the time available that men have to dedicate themselves to what is a career, in this case, a political career that can have a duration of time, sustainability, and dedication, like her male counterparts can do it.

> *"Firstly, because some women get pregnant, have children, and must pick them up from school at once. When children are sick, their mothers are usually the ones who go with them to the doctor. When they can't go to school, it's their mother who stays with them. Thus, all of this makes, firstly, whoever has the decision-making role turn to discrimination, because they want a person who is always available; on the other hand, some women may also feel fear of making decisions that last longer in their lives, because at any moment they have to make changes. And therefore, sometimes, for women, there are no high expectations, because they are always afraid of not living up to a series of things that are imposed on them."* (Interviewee 1)

Interviewee 7 also explained that while there is a daycare service at the National Assembly building, it does not work during the times that the Assembly operates.

> *"So, for example, when it is time for the State Budget, in which politicians sometimes stay until 2 am in committee and in votes, it can be very problematic for women. On common days, because the daycare service operates with the same schedule as any other daycare center, it is very normal to see women in committees at the National Assembly leaving early because they must pick up their children."* (Interviewee 7)

This demonstrates that there are not enough mechanisms for the balance between family life and professional life to happen fully because, in her opinion, when these cases still happen in the National Assembly, they are transferable to the rest of society. The means to overcome this would be to have more people with more flexible schedules to have an effective equal division of the various tasks at home, which the interviewee considers to be good speech, but the practice always depends on each person and each couple, and therefore, putting this into practice is always very difficult and is increasingly difficult if there are no public services that can possibly respond, particularly in the area of care, to these needs.

5.2.4. Administrative Roles vs. Leadership and Decision-Making Roles

Whether in political collectives or political parties, the tendency in meetings is almost always the same: the presentation of more complex topics is directed, unless they are feminist issues, the suggestion is almost always that they be presented by a man, while the administrative issues of table setting, that is, controlling times and keeping minutes, are carried out by women.

> *"I have this discussion all the time. Why are they asking us, women, to take these roles when there are 10 men here? We are not secretaries."* (Interviewee 1)

According to Interviewee 1, this particular problematic makes women feel bad, diminished, not welcomed, and not comfortable, especially when women are very young, and has two possible outcomes: either women do what is asked and then become gradually demotivated, or they become demotivated immediately as they construct the idea that the political career for women is similar to a secretary one. The same interviewee was a member of a left-wing party for many years and left the party precisely because this secretariat role was always imposed on her, and she felt that she had no place there other than this minor role. She is currently the local coordinator of another party, but even so, she admits that in this party, when important decisions are to be made, there is a group of five men who make them, with only one woman included in this group.

This aligns with the findings of Lisboa et al. (2006) in their study on women's participation in political and economic elites. They maintain that the scarce presence of women at the top of the pyramid is presented by Lipovetsky (2000) as being universal and affecting all sectors. When analyzing a hierarchical scale, the higher one goes, the less likely it is to find women. This phenomenon is known as the glass ceiling, a type of invisible barrier that blocks the progression of women above a certain level. Several studies suggest that our current situation is marked by a gap between women's qualifications and the positions they occupy (Archer and Lloyd 2002; Jacobsen 1998; Lipovetsky 2000); that is, although women hold higher qualifications, they tend to occupy lower positions than their male (Lisboa et al. 2006).

An interviewee from a left-wing party noted that, in fact, all, or almost all, of her party's administrative roles are held by women. Although her party is careful to balance leadership positions in terms of gender, in her opinion, administrative positions are still closely linked to the stereotype of women being associated with care and management. In their investigation into female participation in Portuguese political elites from 1974 to 2005, Lisboa et al. (2006) ascertain that, despite women representing 27% of office holders, their participation is scarce at the level of top positions—Prime Minister, Minister, Secretary of State. On the other hand, the female presence is much more significant in intermediate positions, supporting decision-making, and there are even situations, such as in the case of Deputies and Advisors, in which the percentage of women exceeds that of men (Lisboa et al. 2006).

Furthermore, Interviewee 6 recalls that in the last legislative elections, the President of a right-wing party to which she belongs was called out because there were few women on the election lists, to which he responded that women were not interested in politics. She states that this party has several women prepared for this role who are motivated to secure and run for these positions. However, as district elections come under pressure from the national elections and many of the list leaders are chosen by the national committee, here it was not a question of women not being available, but rather an excuse for not placing women in these roles, in her opinion.

Although no political force with a parliamentary seat in Portugal has established any formal obstacle to female participation (Martins and Teixeira 2005; Viegas and Faria 1999), women identify the existence of intra-party discriminatory mechanisms and practices, as well as prejudiced attitudes and exclusionary behaviors by men (Martins and Teixeira 2005). The scarce female presence in top positions within party organizations is reflected in the composition of the main bodies of political power (Martins and Teixeira 2005), even though recruitment processes, central moments of intra-party life, remain a somewhat unexplored area of research, which is essentially linked to difficulties in accessing the inside of the parties and the actual candidate selection practices (Martins 2015). Looking at the reality of the various parties, the fact that women are more likely to take on administrative roles rather than leadership positions seems evident to all those interviewed.

> *"Our bodies are not welcomed in these places, because they are expected in other places, in other roles."* (Interviewee 3)

This happens, whether in politics, or in other places and in other forms of activity, and it is a way of looking at the roles of women and men, even though they may sometimes be

unconscious and that it was so because that person already worked in that area, the truth is that the parties also have to consciously realize that they may have to make different options to completely change their outlook, and to say consciously they will not make the usual choices, but instead put women in more relevant roles. According to the interviewees, these choices must be made consciously, and when it comes to political parties, it has to be an assumed decision made by the parties.

5.2.5. Double Standards, Stereotypes and Scrutiny

All interviewees, except one, state that gender stereotypes have implications for all types of careers, especially those that have more visibility, more impact, and more decision-making power, particularly political ones. Firstly, this is because, according to the interviewees, Portuguese society continues to fall into the stereotypes of considering women as more fragile, more vulnerable, more incapable of making decisions, easier to be led by emotion and not by other reasons that move them and, therefore, women are always looked at with some pity and, sometimes, hatred when they are read as a threat.

Secondly, there are a number of specific characteristics that are valued in the Portuguese political context that are not said to be feminine characteristics, despite being characteristic of all people, but when a woman, or a person addressed as a woman, is assertive, concrete and has a more confident speech, she is being hysterical.

> *"Therefore, it becomes very difficult to occupy a place when people are constantly saying that women don't belong there."* (Interviewee 4)

Some interviewees also noted that there is a dichotomy in the image of female politicians: women who are in leadership positions in politics tend to have an extremely feminine or an extremely masculine role, with no middle ground.

Interviewee 7 reported that, despite her almost 10 years of experience in the National Assembly, many of her interventions are still responded to with mockery because she is a woman and because she is young. This has been increasing now with the entry of the far-right into parliament, which the interviewee claims to have its advantages and disadvantages. According to her opinion, the downside is that women feel uncomfortable all the time, but the upside is that it is easy to use that as an example to prove that sexism still exists.

According to Santos et al. (2015), feminist studies point to the existence of a double standard when it comes to the assimilation of female figures who intervene in the political sphere since audiences tend to understand these actors as incompetent, without defined interests and without independent political convictions, being represented as individuals whose performance depends on the mentoring of their male counterparts (Gidengil and Everitt 2003; Gill 2007; Ross 2009). As Santos et al. (2015, p. 24) maintain, "the autonomy and (political) suitability of women are queried and called into question, in a legitimization of hierarchical relationships: men as mentors, women as mentees. While the former are (a priori) considered suitable for carrying out political/public functions, women are placed under journalistic scrutiny, having to make redoubled efforts to legitimize their status".

Interviewee 4 mentioned that in City Hall meetings, sometimes, for her opinion to be heard, it is necessary for one man to agree with her for everyone else to agree. If there is disagreement and if the majority of members in a given discussion are male, agreement usually goes to the man who spoke and not to the woman. According to the interviewees, women are not being scrutinized for the political content of what they are saying; instead, they are being scrutinized for their image, their tone of voice, and their attitude:

> *"And that doesn't happen with men at all, so this only happens with women, if she has more make-up or less make-up, if she is in a suit, if she is wearing jeans, and if she starts to speak more irritably or less irritably, something else is already implied."* (Interviewee 4)

When it comes to the City Council, two of the interviewees stated that it is women who are under greater scrutiny and discrimination, especially younger women.

> *"In the City Council, when a man becomes inflamed when speaking, he is seen as assertive, as powerful, he is even admired, like 'oh, he has incredible oratory power'. When a woman becomes inflamed, she is rude, hysterical, emotional, she is not controlling her feelings."* (Interviewee 4)

The interviewees agree that there is a hostile work environment focused on the idea that politics is for men; they are the ones who have to discuss things, and women, perhaps, are good at discussing social issues, but economic issues are reserved for men. Interviewee 4 stated that the fact that women are discussing these themes breaks the prejudice, but on the other hand, women sometimes end up internalizing the idea that men do it better than them, which, she says, is absolutely absurd because this has much more to do with personal taste, with availability and with the experience that is then acquired, regardless of gender. The interviewee confessed that it is uncomfortable, for example, to be talking while her male counterparts interrupt her very easily. In her professional experience as a city councilor, her relationship with the mayor is much more cordial than with some fellow opposition councilors, who constantly interrupt her and feel attacked by what she says, which was not the case with the male councilor who was previously in her position. This can actually be politically difficult to manage, in her opinion, because if a person is not clear about what they are doing, they may feel a little intimidated, stop contradicting the opposition, or even give up on their role.

> *"I have heard some comments about me, they were mockingly saying that they need to be careful with me because sometimes I get upset. Nobody says that about a man."* (Interviewee 4)

Furthermore, Santos et al. (2015) also argue that also experience intense scrutiny of their personal characteristics, which can contribute to their objectification (Ritchie 2013; Wasburn and Wasburn 2011), including as sexual objects (Carlin and Winfrey 2009), and affect their political careers (Haraldsson and Wängnerud 2018; Heflick and Goldenberg 2009):

> *"And so, it is very difficult for us to reach places of power and political decision-making, because there it is, there is a lot that we eventually have to give up to be able to do so. And always with much greater scrutiny. Always as targets of potential harassment, that is, society will constantly try to remind us, society, men, will try to remind us of our place. Even if you get there, it will always be questioned. It's always going to be 'oh you're here, but you don't deserve to be here, because there are other guys out there who would do your job better, and you can't forget that you're a sexual object for men, and we're going to remind you of that'."* (Interviewee 3)

In a hostile work environment, these micro-aggressions can turn to bullying, as one of the interviewed Coucilwomen stated, feeling that she was invited to the City Hall just to fill in the gender quota and is now being pressured to give up on her political role by the other Councilmen she works with.

> *"While the older men are no longer in the running for leadership and, in fact, they look at my CV and see that my CV is good, and that my path is good, the younger men have a political CV like mine and they see me as a target; Therefore, I have suffered from bullying and I have felt that it is because I am a woman."* (Interviewee 6)

The interviewee has seen several comments made by her colleagues on the internet targeting her as a person and her two council areas, as well as her female advisor, while her male counterparts deny her an office at City Hall. So, besides being the only councilor without an office, she stated that, for two years, she has been tending to her job functions in a backpack with no place to work. The only reason why she has not given up yet, the interviewee said, is because she has much support from older and wiser men from her political party. This phenomenon is in accordance with the double standard previously mentioned (Gidengil and Everitt 2003; Gill 2007; Ross 2009; Santos et al. 2015).

6. Conclusions

The examination of female political participation and descriptive representation in Portugal reveals a myriad of barriers that hinder women's full engagement in politics. These barriers intersect and reinforce each other, forming a complex web of challenges. Media representation and role models play a significant role, with women facing scrutiny and judgment based on gender stereotypes perpetuated by the media. Despite some progress, women continue to be under-represented and misrepresented in political spheres, facing negative coverage and associations with traditionally feminine issues. The most pronounced asymmetries remain largely intact, as the persistent gender hierarchies in the political world have not been eliminated. Indeed, the most powerful positions in parliament, local politics, and government continue to be predominantly held by men.

Cultural norms also contribute to the underrepresentation of women in politics, with entrenched ideas about gender roles shaping societal expectations. Women often face pressure to prioritize family over career, reinforcing traditional gender roles and perpetuating inequality. Furthermore, discriminatory practices within political parties limit women's access to leadership positions, relegating them to administrative roles rather than decision-making roles.

Double standards, stereotypes, and scrutiny further compound the challenges faced by women in politics. Female politicians are often subjected to unfair judgment and criticism based on their gender, with their competence and suitability for political roles questioned. These biases create a hostile work environment where women may experience bullying and discrimination, further impeding their political careers.

Barriers to political participation often serve as significant "flies in the ointment" for women in politics by subtly or overtly impeding their progress and limiting their influence. These barriers—ranging from structural issues, like exclusionary networks and limited access to resources, to cultural factors, like gender biases and societal expectations—constantly challenge women trying to engage in the political sphere. Women often face higher scrutiny, are assigned lower-status roles, or are restricted to gendered issue areas, making genuine participation a frustratingly obstructed experience. Conversely, the mere presence of women in politics can be an uncomfortable "fly in the ointment" for male colleagues used to male-dominated spaces. Women's participation brings diverse perspectives that challenge traditional viewpoints, potentially shifting policy priorities and prompting structural changes. For men, this shift may represent a disruption to the established norms, especially in institutions where power structures have been historically male-centric. This change can create friction as women advocate for more inclusive policies and call for transparency in areas like recruitment, leadership, and political agenda-setting.

The legacy of Portugal's dictatorship has contributed to a deeply entrenched patriarchal culture that permeates various social and professional spheres, including politics. During the Estado Novo regime, traditional gender roles were strictly enforced, with women primarily confined to domestic roles and discouraged from participating in public or political life. Although the dictatorship ended in 1974, the cultural remnants of this era have left a lasting impact on gender dynamics, resulting in ongoing discrimination and challenges for women who pursue visible roles in society, such as public office.

For women in politics, this cultural context means they frequently face discrimination that is not only based on their professional responsibilities but also on their gender. Unlike other countries where female representation in politics has been normalized and widely accepted, Portuguese society continues to bear traces of machismo that make it particularly challenging for women in leadership. The lasting influence of patriarchal attitudes, combined with insufficient institutional support, subjects women in political roles to a unique set of obstacles in Portugal. Attacks on these women often include sexist language and personal insults, which go beyond professional critique and focus on their gender.

Research on female journalists (Sampaio-Dias et al. 2024) has identified similar patterns of harassment, where women encounter gendered forms of hostility, but this trend is particularly relevant in Portugal due to the cultural normalization of such behaviors. This

normalization often leads women in politics, as well as other prominent fields, to feel pressured to tolerate or dismiss these attacks as an unavoidable part of their roles, thus imposing an "emotional cost" that is not shared equally by their male counterparts. The lack of comprehensive organizational support and protective measures in Portugal further reinforces a culture where such hostility is allowed to persist, leaving women in politics vulnerable to gendered discrimination that extends beyond their professional performance and into their personal identity.

Overall, addressing these barriers requires comprehensive strategies that challenge societal norms, promote gender equality, and empower women to participate fully in politics. Efforts to diversify media representation, challenge gender stereotypes, and promote inclusive practices within political parties are crucial steps toward achieving gender parity in political leadership.

The study's scope is constrained by the relatively small sample size of interviewees, whose diverse backgrounds across the political spectrum paradoxically yielded remarkably similar responses. Additionally, it is pertinent to acknowledge that these interviews were conducted in 2023, predating the March 2024 elections and the consequent shifts in the Portuguese political landscape. Hence, it becomes imperative to allow for a sufficient temporal window to observe and assess tangible changes within this evolving context. Subsequent interviews involving new stakeholders could provide valuable insights into the transformative dynamics underway within the political sphere.

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Notes

[1] Even though we consider the idea that gender is a spectrum, in this article, we focus on the feminine and masculine genders.

[2] To further facilitate anonymity, whenever quoted, the interviewee number does not correspond to the number on this list.

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