"Are you tough enough?" Performing gender in the UK leadership debates 2015 –

Emily Harmer, University of Liverpool

Heather Savigny, Bournemouth University

Orlanda Ward, University College London

Abstract

Leaders' debates have become a feature of contemporary election campaigning. While they are an historical feature of the US landscape, in the UK they are a more recent phenomenon. The second UK 2015 general election leadership debate comprised seven candidates, of which three were women. While a Times poll reported Nicola Sturgeon as the 'winner', much of the coverage focused on the relative strengths and weaknesses of the candidates. Using qualitative thematic analysis, and adopting the notion that gender is 'performed' (cf. Butler, 1999) we explore three features of coverage of the debate. First, the ways in which the debate itself was constructed as a masculine activity through a series of highly gendered metaphors; second, how newspaper frames reinforced gendered notions of masculinity and femininity in respect of political leadership; and third, how the success of women in the debates was constructed as the emasculation of their male rivals. Crucially, we focus not just on the 'feminisation' of women in the political arena, but also on the ways in which masculinity is posited as a criterion for the evaluation of politicians of all genders.

Main article

There has been much public discussion of politicians' awareness of the media's ability to frame their public perception. Media play an active role in shaping how we perceive the behaviour of politicians (cf. Street, 2001), and a great deal has been written in terms of the techniques and strategies used by

politicians to manipulate media, the media's attempts to resist and manipulate political messages (cf. Wring, 1997; Newman, 2001), and the extent to which media are able to shape voters' behaviour (cf. Newton & Brynin, 2001). However, very little attention has been paid to the gendering of these processes, and how this effects representations of both male and female political actors. Using a case study of the UK leaders' debate in the 2015 election campaign, we analyse the ways in which newspaper coverage frames political leadership in intensely gendered terms, which normalises the notion of the public art of politics as a masculinised activity.

Leaders' debates have become a feature of contemporary election campaigning. While they are an historical feature of the US landscape, in the UK they are a more recent phenomenon. The second UK 2015 general election leadership debate featured seven candidates, of which three were women. While a Times poll reported Nicola Sturgeon as the 'winner', most of the coverage focused on the relative strengths and weaknesses of the candidates. Using qualitative thematic analysis, and adopting the notion that gender is 'performed' (cf. Butler, 1999) we explore three features of coverage of the debate. First, how the debate itself was constructed as a masculine activity through a series of highly gendered metaphors; second, how newspaper frames reinforced gendered notions of political leadership; and third, how the success of women in the debates was constructed as the emasculation of their male rivals. Crucially, we focus not just on the 'feminisation' of women in the political arena, but also on the ways in which masculinity is posited as a criterion for the evaluation of all politicians. Although we take one case from the UK as our subject, the gendering of political performance clearly has implications for the fortunes of politicians across the globe.

We foreground the active role of media in disseminating political beliefs and ideas about what counts as 'political'. Justin Lewis argues that media define the limits of our imagination, and the limits of what we perceive as possible (2013). Our analysis rests on the assumption that media are thus enacting politics by framing political discussion in gendered terms. Our argument here is that media

play an active role in normalising the perception of gendered roles, which translates to normalising what politics is and what it is to be a politician.

The article offers some background to these public and academic debates, and establishes the ways that gender scholars remind us that politics is not only about politicians' behaviour, but about a series of power relationships which underpin, and can be exposed in an analysis of, media coverage of politicians' behaviour. Drawing on the work of Judith Butler, we argue that media play a crucial role in the performativity of gender, and the ways in which we publicly discuss the actions and behaviours of politicians is intensely gendered and therefore also intensely political.

Female politicians and the media

Academic debate about the role of women in Parliament has a variety of foci from discussion about, for example, the need for change to come as a result of a 'critical mass' and 'critical actors', female MPs' experiences as mothers, and the competing expectations and demands of the overlap between public and private life. Thought provoking intervention in these debates has also come from scholars who unpack the difference between descriptive representation (where numbers matter) and substantive representation (where the capacity to advocate gender equality is decoupled from biological sex). What we seek to add to these debates is the ways in which men are normalised as politicians, and women are treated as 'other' reinforcing binary gendered positions. We are concerned here with the differential representations to which female and male politicians are subject; not their descriptive 'over representation' in Parliament (Murray, 2014), but in the how public discourses mediate and construct gendered representations of our politicians.

Female MPs have long expressed concern at bias against women in news coverage of politics (Childs 2004; Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross 1996). Several studies have noted the disproportionately negative tone of media representations of the 1997 intake of Labour women MPs (Childs 2004; Ward

3

2000). Yet it seems the upward trend in women's descriptive representation at each subsequent election has done little to normalise women's presence within elite politics or alleviate these gendered coverage patterns. O'Neill et al. (2016) suggest that in recent decades, not only have female MPs received more negative coverage than men, but that this trend appears to be worsening. For example, Ross et al. (2013:15) note examples of coverage in the run up to the 2010 UK general election, where female candidates were praised for their political aptitude, they were simultaneously undermined by commentary on their appearance.

News coverage which heightens the salience of female politicians' gender have been well documented both in Britain and internationally (inter alia, Campbell and Childs 2010; Campus 2013; Falk 2012; Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen 2012; Heldman et al. 2005; Ross et al. 2013; Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross 1996). Although the frame can be associated with greater visibility, (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross 1996) it can also emphasise the "notion of women as out of place and unnatural in the political sphere", (Falk 2008:37) and ensure "that the role of politician continues to be codified as male, with women politicians as 'other'" (Ross et al. 2013:7). However, less attention is paid to the gendered nature of coverage of male politicians. We argue that in addition to feminising female leaders, news framing of the leaders' debate both posited the display of masculine traits as crucial to success while characterising women's strength as emasculating to male participants, Ed Miliband in particular. Furthermore, the event itself was represented via a series of implicitly gendered metaphors which set the terms for these evaluations of debate performance premised on stereotypically masculine attributes.

There has been widespread critical discussion within media studies as to the ways in which women are represented in news, (Carter et al, 1998) popular culture, (McRobbie; 2007) and in media more broadly, (Van Zoonen, 1994). In this context, women politicians are represented as glamorous, (cf. Van Zoonen & Harmer, 2011) as adjuncts of men, and as mothers and wives rather than politicians in their own right (Garcia & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011). The focus on women's personal lives, rather than their

public contribution is a regular cause of complaint by women politicians (Ross, 2002; Ross and Comrie, 2011; O'Neill and Savigny, 2014; O'Neill et al, 2016); yet little attention has been paid to how this may be exacerbated through the representation of masculinity. In our particular case study we explore how representations of both male and female politicians serve to reinforce rather than challenge existing gendered constructions of the politician. The widely publicised image of Nicola Sturgeon, Natalie Bennett and hugging following the pre-election leaders debate garnered public attention, and perhaps highlighted that men and women may 'do' formal politics differently. Its unusualness was precisely because we are not used to seeing *male* politicians behave in this way. This perhaps reminds us that gender is something that is unconsciously foregrounded when we think of what it means to be a 'politician', and what has been noticeably absent in academic debates to date is a questioning of the ways in which masculinity is constructed as the 'norm' and the standard upon which the activity of politics is judged.

Performing gender

To reflect on the underlying trends that may continue to produce male dominated politics and reinforce 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell, 1992) it may be useful to consider the ways in which underlying power relations operate. Judith Butler (1999) argues that power is reconstituted through artificial binary divisions that arise in gender construction as categories through which social and political relations are ordered. We learn our gendered identities through their performance; there is nothing innate about gender. Through our performance we create, affirm and learn what it is to be masculine or feminine, a 'man' or a 'woman'. Exposing these constructions enables us to reflect in the noting that gender is not fixed rather it is fluid. There is nothing inherently natural about masculinity or femininity, and to extend this to our paper, thus there is nothing inherently natural about men being politicians. Rather, it is through the performance of masculinity that we learn that politics is a masculine activity. Moreover, our argument rests on the notion that this performance is one that takes place in a mediated context, where we 'learn' through a variety of mediated

representations what masculinity and femininity 'look like'. Making sense of the role of the media here, we argue is therefore vital in understanding how gender is performed, and in the case we choose, that is in norms around political leadership[1].

Reviewing the extensive literature on gender and trait attribution in US context, Dolan and Lynch (2013) summarise that female politicians are generally viewed as more compassionate, honest and warmer than men, whilst men are viewed as more competent, decisive and stronger leaders. (Alexander and Andersen 1993; Burrell 2008; Huddy and Terkildsen 1993b; Kahn 1996; King and Matland 2003; Lawless 2004; Leeper 1991; Paul and Smith 2008; Sapiro 1981). These differences are cause for concern because stereotypically masculine are more highly valued by the electorate (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993a; Lawless 2004; Rosenwasser and Dean 1989). In addition, considering international findings regarding news coverage of women's campaigns for executive office, Murray (2010) notes several double binds commonly emerging from gendered trait stereotypes. While women are frequently viewed as 'compassionate' but lacking the necessary 'aggression' expected of leaders, even when they are portrayed as aggressive, this is becomes a problematic transgression of gender norms. Jamieson (1995) describes this as a 'competence/femininity' double bind in which masculinity is associated with leadership, but negative consequences await women who display masculine leadership qualities. For example, Jamieson identifies a "womb/brain" double bind in which women's emotions are deemed to hinder their intellectual, and therefore leadership, abilities. Thus the bind functions along the following logic: to be female is to be emotional, to be emotional is to fail as a leader, to succeed as a leader is to be unemotional, but to be unemotional is to fail as a woman. Additionally, Falk (2008) finds that women are portrayed as experiencing different emotions to men: women are more likely to be described as fearful or sad, while men were more likely to be described

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[1] A caveat here. One of the difficulties of adopting Judith Butler's work to inform our approach is that she argues for the dismantling of gendered categories. And there is a danger that by analysing the ways in which gender is performed we might simply reinforce those gender categories. However, our purpose here is to argue that expose the way in which media encourage us to read performances of gender does enable us to challenge and dismantle those categories

as angry. This is especially troublesome in the context of a debate which is framed in masculine terms through combative military and sporting metaphors (as our findings below illustrate). We encounter gender being 'performed' through mediated constructions of what are considered 'essential' characteristics of men and women. Moreover, following the work of Murray (2010) we argue that not only do we witness the under representation substantively of women MPs in the media (O'Neill et al 2016), but we witness media over representation of masculine performances of gender.

Method

We used Nexis to sample all of the UK national newspapers from the two days following the debate (3rd and 4th April 2015). The search term 'leaders debate' resulted in 183 items. Nexis captures news items from print and online versions of the newspapers so our analysis includes print and online items which reported on the debate. Once all duplicates had been removed, the final sample included 169 separate items. The idiosyncrasies of Nexis are well documented (see Deacon, 2007) so to ensure that we had not missed any relevant items, the print news items were cross-referenced with the print copies of the newspaper which resulted in a further 6 items which were not archived by Nexis. In total 176 items were analysed (a full break down is shown in Table 1). We analysed two days of coverage in order to capture the immediate responses of journalists to the debate and since a Nexis search showed that the debate was most widely discussed on those two days.

A qualitative analysis was conducted on items which were typical examples of electoral coverage for each election. All items were coded by two of the authors. A constant comparison of items allowed us to analyse the dominant gendered themes and vocabularies associated with the party leaders. This led to the emergence of three main themes and in what follows we provide a summary of those themes.

Table 1: Number of Items from each newspaper/website

Source	Number of Items
Daily Express	15
Daily Mail	17
Daily Mirror	34
Daily Star	4
Daily Telegraph	19
The Guardian	24
The I (print only)	6
The Independent	29
The Sun	14
The Times	14
Total	**176**

Findings

The press coverage of the debates reinforced the idea that political debate is a masculinised performance, so that those displaying stereotypically male characteristics are subsequently portrayed as having performed well. The partisan position taken up by the newspapers in question is crucial to this representation, to the extent that positive evaluations of political performance or points of view are accompanied by descriptions that emphasised masculine qualities. Conversely, negative evaluations and disapproval was couched in terms which portrayed the leaders as displaying more feminine qualities and behaviour.

The analysis showed that this was framed in three main ways. Firstly, the coverage frames political debate in terms of stereotypically masculine traits such as strength and decisiveness, thus demonstrating the extent to which feminine traits are perceived as a hindrance in the competitive environment of formal politics. The second, related frame was for newspapers to criticise or denigrate

leaders in ways which explicitly emasculated or feminised them. The third frame showed that not only does the debate format favour masculine behaviour; the debate itself was described as a form of combat. There were frequent allusions to imagery that recalled both military conflict and sporting competitions which emphasised the extent to which politics is associated with masculine behaviour and activities. The final section of the analysis focuses on how masculinised assumptions about the qualities required for success in political debate make it more difficult for the female leaders to be presented as effective political leaders. When they were, they were largely portrayed as excelling in traditionally masculine behaviour.

Strength vs. weakness

Newspaper coverage of the debates made it clear that an effective and competent candidate for Prime Minister needed to demonstrate a strong and forceful personality, and would be willing and able to make robust arguments and decisive judgements. The implication being that by making these interventions in the debate they would be able, by extension, to make them as political leaders. Leaders who were described as displaying such behaviour during the debates were portrayed in positive terms. David Cameron "is perceived as being more decisive and better at handling a crisis than his Labour counterpart" (Nardelli, 2015) inferring that Cameron was seen as more likely to perform well within the parameters of a televised debate.

Due to the strength of press partisanship against Labour leader Ed Miliband (Deacon et al, 2015) much of the coverage sought to portray him as weak and ineffective. The *Daily Mail* criticised his performance by claiming that he "failed to confront Miss Sturgeon" (Chapman, 2015). Criticism of Miliband here not only focuses on his weak leadership, but highlights his inability to challenge the implicitly denigrated female opponent. Such discourses are also evident in the way the politicians describe the terms of political debate. During the debate, Cameron claimed he worried that "Ed

Miliband is not strong enough to stand up to Alec Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon" (Chapman, 2015).

Cameron clearly has a vested interest in maintaining the perception of his own strength and and

effective leadership, and he actively questions Miliband's strength to invoke favourable comparisons

with his opponent. Conservative-supporting newspapers tended to emphasise Cameron's decisive

leadership style whilst Labour supporting (or at least sympathising) newspapers like *The Guardian*

were more likely to defend Miliband by attributing masculine traits to his performance. In one

example, *the Guardian* claimed that he "remains competitive with Cameron" (Nardelli, 2015) as a

result of his debate performance. Similarly, the *Daily Mirror* praised Miliband for pledging that if

elected he would be "cracking down on 'those hedge funds which are engaged in tax avoidance'"

(Beattie and Glaze, 2015). Both examples emphasise masculine strength and decisiveness as attributes

for good leadership. Supportive commentators also attributed masculine credentials to UKIP's Nigel

Farage, who was represented as "a superb natural debater, [who] was his ebullient, eloquent self. He

was the only leader willing to talk in robust language about immigration…while he made powerful

attacks" (McKinstry, 2015).

This particular frame demonstrated the difficulty with which women leaders were incorporated into

this discursive construct. Firstly, Nicola Sturgeon's performance in the debate was generally evaluated

in a positive sense, which saw her associated with a number of masculine characteristics: "her policy

of turning to face Cameron came across well, showing she was not afraid of him." (Coates, 2015). Here

Sturgeon effectively displays the traditionally masculine credential of bravery, but the author's explicit

mention of this possibility implies that as a woman, she is more likely to be threatened by the male

Prime Minister than the reverse. Negative coverage of women leaders - essentially attacks upon their

political platforms - framed them as weak and ineffective. For example, Green Party leader Natalie

Bennett was described as "by far the weakest link… whose vacuous absurdities just reiterated how far

her party is detached from reality" (McKinstry, 2015). Explicitly describing her as 'weak' emphasises her lack of masculine credentials.

Emasculation or feminisation

The second framing strategy identified relates strongly to the first. Newspaper coverage of the debates frequently impugned the masculinity of male leaders, to criticise or downplay their leadership credentials. Furthermore, the partisanship of the newspapers was absolutely crucial in determining their target. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the strength of the negative coverage he received from the Conservative-supporting tabloids, Ed Miliband was the main target for such attacks. *The Sun* declared that "Ed took a kicking from all sides" (Newton Dunn, 2015a), equating his perceived physical weakness with inability to be an effective leader. Moreover, he was subsequently described as "on the backfoot himself as the three female leaders laid into him" (Newton Dunn, 2015a). Positioning women as his aggressors serves to emasculate him by presenting him as lacking sufficient prowess to fend off such an assault. In contrast, the Labour-supporting *Daily Mirror* chose to challenge David Cameron's leadership credentials by implying that he was too frightened to face Ed Miliband in a head-to-head debate, referring to him as: "the yellow Conservative who cowardly chickened out" (*Daily Mirror*, 2015a) and ensured "he could hide in the crowd during a mass scrap" (*Daily Mirror*, 2015a) instead. This perspective highlights the extent to which masculinity is bound up with popular expectations about leadership since both newspapers, regardless of their politics, couch their attacks using the lexis of emasculation.

This also plays out in the opposing ways in which two newspapers (both supporting different parties) relate the same anecdote about Miliband investing in new shoes for the leaders' debate. The *Daily Mirror* suggests that "Miliband was clearly in the mood to give David Cameron a kicking before last night's debate in Salford… the Labour leader dispatched an aide to Clarks to buy him not one but two

11

pairs of sturdy classic black shoes" (Walker, 2015). Here Miliband is portrayed as a tough leader who intends to take the debate to the Prime Minister. In contrast, the *Times* chose to emphasise that buying more than one pair of shoes "did little to dispel his critics' claims of indecisiveness" (Pitel, 2015). This reinforces the idea that strong leaders are decisive, and therefore, Miliband is unsuitable. The fact that discussions of sartorial choices are more frequently associated with mediated representations of women politicians further serves to represent Miliband as insufficiently masculine to lead effectively. Others also experienced an elision between their political prowess and their masculine credentials. Nigel Farage for example was described as "perspiring heavily and [as] the shortest male candidate, he lacked statesmanship" (Coates, 2015). Here the suggestion that he might not be physically fit ("perspiring heavily") is coupled with the emphasis of his lack of physical stature. Such references to his physical inadequacy work to portray him as a less impressive man, and therefore, leader than his opponents.

The emasculation of political rivals also appears to have a sexual dimension. In what might be thought of as one of the least relevant, but most obvious, challenges to a candidate's masculinity *the Sun's* front page on the followingfeatured a picture of Ed Miliband alongside the headline: "oops I just lost my election" (Newton Dunn, 2015b). This crude pun links effective leadership with sexual virility, in the most palpable way of emasculating Miliband that emerged from the coverage.

As well as attacking the masculinity of political opponents, various newspapers sought to play up the leadership abilities of their chosen candidate by emphasising their display of traditionally masculine traits. The *Daily Express* claimed that Cameron "dominated proceedings with the same easy command he brings to his performances in the Commons" (McKinstry, 2015). This further underlines the elision of masculinity and effective leadership in the representation of political affairs.

Debate as combat

The debate coverage was full of language more familiar to a sporting or military arena. The choice of games or sports metaphors and those of violent conflict further demonstrate the association of effective political leadership with traditionally masculine characteristics and behaviours. This is most obvious in the newspapers' presentation of the debates as having been won or lost, rather than as a forum for a nuanced discussion of political issues. The *Daily Mirror*, for example, declared that its preferred candidate, "the Labour leader triumphed in the first of two televised leaders' debates" (*Daily Mirror*, 2015b). The opposite view was favoured by the *Daily Express* who claimed that "the biggest loser was perhaps Ed Miliband" (McKinstry, 2015). This focus on winning and losing framed the debate as a competition in which an appropriately masculine performance was crucial for victory.

Language drawn from military strategy or violent conflict has a long history of being used to describe the conduct of politics. The use of the words 'campaign', 'war room' and 'battlegrounds' to refer to elements of electoral politics emphasise the extent to which politics has traditionally been a masculine sphere, despite such violent imagery being starkly at odds with notions of democracy based on debate and consensus. This language pervaded the discussion of the leaders' debates where various politicians "launched furious broadsides" (Hall et al, 2015) against one another and "came out all guns blazing" (Newton Dunn, 2015a). These vivid descriptions of their debating prowess were largely framed in a positive sense, implying that effective leaders are those who exhibit the most aggressive behaviour. For example, "Mr Miliband drew first blood" (Beattie and Glaze, 2015) when he criticised Cameron's political record. Nick Clegg was similarly portrayed as "gunning for Mr Cameron's economic plans" (Coates, 2015) demonstrating the way that such language has become a routinized way of discussing political debate.

Success in the debates was compared to success in the field of combat. Cameron was portrayed as having "effectively defused the issue of the NHS" (McKinstry, 2015) in the *Daily Express* after Miliband sought to "weaponise the NHS" (Elliot, 2015) in an effort to attack the Conservatives' record on health care. Conversely, negative evaluations of their performance were framed as though they were

struggling to attack. The *Daily Mirror* suggested that "Mr Cameron tried to head off the onslaught" (Beattie and Glaze, 2015) from his political opponent with little effect. Ed Miliband was also portrayed as struggling "when Wood, Sturgeon and Bennett attacked his Left flank" (Maguire, 2015). This final example is indicative of the way that leadership is coded as a masculine enterprise given that even female leaders are portrayed as engaging in politics as a form of combat.

The first leaders' debate was also described as "a mixture of bar fight, bitchfest and Grand National steeplechase" (Letts, 2015) demonstrating that political debate is supposed to be a competitive struggle. The most frequent sporting references were related to boxing. This is largely to be expected since political debate is considered to be a pugilistic contest between two aggressors. Given the fact that there were seven leaders taking part, each defending their own political platform, the boxing metaphor is somewhat laboured; however it did not prevent the newspapers from using boxing terminology throughout their coverage of the debate: "the Labour leader landed more blows on Cameron than Cameron landed on him" (Maguire, 2015). Furthermore, "Nigel Farage comes out fighting to land some telling blows" (Hall et al, 2015). Once again, positive evaluations of their performances were construed in aggressive terms: for example, "Nigel Farage landing some crushing blows" (Hall et al, 2015) or "Mr Clegg drew first blood" (Newton Dunn, 2015a). In contrast, negative portrayals emphasised the extent to which the leader was being metaphorically damaged by their opponents' skills. The *Daily Mirror* sought to represent Cameron as struggling to ward off attacks from all of the leaders: "David Cameron was pummelled last night as the other leaders turned on him" (Beattie and Glaze, 2015).

References to other games or sports were also present in the discussion of the debates, although these were far less common than the boxing metaphors. Cricket was invoked by the *Daily Mirror* to demonstrate its negative perception of Cameron's performance (and his politics when the headline for its main article discussing the debate stated simply: "Cam hit for six" (Beattie and Glaze, 2015). Tennis also featured, the *Daily Express'* assessment of the debate declared that: "it's advantage

Cameron in the big TV battle" (Hall et al, 2015). This example is particularly pertinent due to the mixture of sporting and war references, demonstrating the extent to which politics is still conceived of in highly masculine terms. Despite this reliance on eliding masculinity with competency, Nicola Sturgeon's performance was positively evaluated by a number of commentators. Her competent display in the debate led to the *Daily Mail* using a gaming reference to demonstrate her strong position in the campaign. In a column appraising her leadership credentials and political record she was described as the "woman who holds all the aces" (Deerin, 2015). This reference is somewhat different in that although it calls upon the masculine sphere of game play, there is a difference between the wholesome athlete taking part in sporting competition and the clandestine cunning and guile displayed by successful card players. The prevalence of examples which conflate politics and combat (in sporting or military terms) shows that political debates (and by extension politics more generally) are still considered to be a masculinised sphere. The positive association of Nicola Sturgeon with such language implies that to be taken seriously as competent leaders, women have to be seen to exhibit largely masculine characteristics.

In contrast to the 'debate as combat' frame, the event was additionally likened to a "tacky television game show" (Letter to the Editor, 2015) like the BBC's *The Weakest Link* and ITV's dating show *Take Me Out* (Milanian, 2015). The mixed gender of the participants also led to comparisons with speed-dating: "a series of short conversations with smiling desperadoes who'll say anything to seduce you. And like speed-dating, it was no way to decide what's best for your future" (No byline, 2015). This image inflected interpretations of the dynamics between male and female leaders, for example the characterization of Cameron "gazing" at Sturgeon "with a gallant respect" (Newton Dunn, 2015). By reimagining the context as light entertainment or romantic endeavours, these images rationalised evaluations of leaders' physical attractiveness, making sense of an electorate "repulsed" (Sparrow, 2015) by Ed Miliband.

Evaluating gendered traits and performance

The tendency to associate effective political leadership with masculine characteristics and behaviours, throws into question how the women leaders are supposed to function in such an environment. As the previous discussion sets out, there are instances where biological sex seems to matter less than the leaders' ability to perform masculinity effectively. It is also evident that biological sex matters less than the gendered characteristics or traits that were ascribed to leaders further demonstrating the difficulties women face in this prevailing masculine norm.

This was most explicit in the middle-market and popular tabloids where Natalie Bennett and Leanne Wood struggled to make an impact. Where they did, their performances were not particularly well received. A commentator in the *Daily Mail* asked: "And Who On Earth was that Welsh woman? Had she walked in from a recording of Gavin and Stacey? 'I'm from the Valleys', she announced. Well blow us all down with a kestrel feather, darlin'. There was me thinking you might be from Norway" (Letts, 2015). Letts' emphasises her outsider status by asking who she was and denigrating her decision to focus specifically on Welsh constituents. The same commentator emphasised Bennett's outsider status was linked directly to the fact that she had an Australian accent referring to her variously as the "Sydney Sheila" and "Richie Benaud in drag" (Letts, 2015). Both examples reveal sexism portrayed as satire, however the second example works in two ways to portray Bennett as an outsider not only in terms of her gender, but also by suggesting she is a gender transgressing version of a reasonably well-known cricket commentator. Bennett and Wood were less prominent than Sturgeon in the news coverage of the leaders' debates (and indeed, the campaign in general) and their marginal status was underlined by unflattering references to "Natalie and the Welsh one" (Letts, 2015) whilst the male leaders were mainly referred to by their surnames.

Portrayals of Bennett and Wood were perhaps least surprising given what we know of gendered trait attribution and press coverage of politicians. Those supporting Bennett characterised her as 'reasonable' and 'compassionate', thus embodying typical feminine qualities. Meanwhile her

detractors asserted that she "tried to act ferocious but her breathing and scripted speech suggested high levels of nerves" (Newton Dunn, 2015) therefore failing to display the requisite degree of aggression. This reinforces the difficulties that women leaders have to overcome to appear competent in this masculinised environment.

This is exacerbated by a number of examples which play up the fact that the women leaders are women first and politicians second. This is a common trope in political coverage of women politicians (Garcia & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011; Van Zoonen & Harmer, 2011), for example when newspapers refer to their appearance or personal style over policy issues. Sturgeon is referred to as "self-assured and poised in her stilettoes and new hairstyle" (Deerin, 2015). Such unnecessary detail serves to emphasise that Sturgeon's gender is pertinent to leadership in a way that her male opponents is not, although as this article has demonstrated, this is absolutely not the case. The *Daily Mail* was not alone in mentioning Sturgeon's appearance, *The Guardian* described her as "poised, coiffed and grinning" (Carrell, 2015).

Although Bennett and Wood struggled to be taken seriously, in part due to their status as leaders of smaller political parties, Sturgeon gained much attention due to her role as potential coalition partner for the Labour Party and her status as Scotland's First Minister. Her generally well received performance in the debate led to some positive coverage, much of which is implicitly gendered. Despite being labelled "a very dangerous woman" (Deerin, 2015), this article is largely positive about Sturgeon's competence. The author goes on to describe her as "a very canny operator. Her style on Thursday night was deliberately calm, natural and direct – qualities that are rare in politicians in this age of spin and slipperiness" (Deerin, 2015). Despite this largely complimentary tone, the implicit assumption about gender-appropriate characteristics is never far from the surface. The article claims that "although naturally shy, her two decades in politics has seen her grow into a polished performer" (Deerin, 2015), attributing her with traditionally feminine characteristics which do not fit with the ideal masculine leader. Deerin also implies that Sturgeon's gender is key to her political success by

17

suggesting that "what has lifted her above these male rivals is her emotional intelligence" (Deerin, 2015). Referring to her traditionally feminine traits in a positive sense demonstrates how gender is perceived as central to her political style. The article also states that "the beguiling Sturgeon is a much more conciliatory and less arrogant figure than her predecessor" (Deerin, 2015), once again positively emphasising her femininity in comparison with her male predecessor, Alec Salmond. There are a number of frequent comparisons with Salmond across the newspapers. *The Guardian* claimed that Salmond "enthused that his former protégé was 'wiping the floor with the Westminster old boys' network'" (Carrell, 2015). The gendering works in both directions with this example: firstly Sturgeon is described as Salmond's protégé, suggesting implicitly that she needed male assistance to become the competent politician that she appeared in the debates. The second level of gendered mediation signposts her outsider status in an interesting way. Whilst such representations ordinarily have negative connotations, her challenge to the male dominance of the political sphere, and indeed beating men at their own game, is hailed as a positive intervention.

One possible explanation for this development comes from the fact Britain has already had a powerful female leader. Thatcher is clearly invoked in comparison to Sturgeon: "although polls apart politically… she shares many similarities with Margaret Thatcher. Like Mrs T, the SNP leader transformed her image from that of a dowdy egghead into a glamorous, powerdressing imperatrix – emphasising a mixture of elegant feminine charm and steel" (Deerin, 2015). The example demonstrates perhaps most clearly that the ideal of leadership is heavily gendered. Sturgeon's intellect ('egghead') is portrayed as being less important than her physical appearance ('glamorous powerdressing') but ultimately the suggestion appears to be that in order to be an effective leader, like Thatcher before her, she would have to display both masculine traits ('steel') and maintain some performance of femininity.

The male leaders' were also subjected to coverage which imbued them with gendered traits. The dominant portrayal of Miliband was that he performed poorly. Yet the standards on which he was

judged arguably bore only limited relevance to his debating skills. Critics mocked his failed attempt at "playing tough" (No byline, 2015) and his "puppy-eyed" (Selby, 2015) facial expression. Extraordinary attention was paid to his appearance (far more so than any of the female participants). He was described as being "smartly dressed for a wedding" (White & Collett, 2015) and in his "lucky tie" (Sparrow, 2015). Feminised and hapless, Miliband's "body language showed that he wanted to be taken seriously" (White & Collett, 2015) but instead he was seen as "struggling" (Newton Dunn, 2015) and "stumbling" (McKinstry, 2015). In contrast, positive appraisal of Cameron's performance was consistently premised on the idea that that his "greatest strength is that he *looks* like a prime minister" (insert reference, italics added). He allowed his image to do the talking: "his serious, expression and emphatic gestures made him look the leader that he is" (Newton Dunn, 2015).

Conclusion

Media play a crucial function in framing how we perceive and receive information about politics. The focus on the perception and reception of politics, in the academic literature, is often centred on how politicians seek to manipulate media coverage to reflect themselves favourably, or the tensions between their desires and the demands of media and journalists who may have different agendas.

While media studies literature has extensively explored the ways in which women are represented in media discourses, what we have done here is situate the representation of women within the wider gender discourse, which also relies of a representation of masculinity. Teasing out this theoretical debate allows us to explore how female politicians are 'othered', and in exploring the ways in which male politicians are represented as the 'norm' we are able to understand how women continue to be positioned as outsiders in the political process.

Our empirical data illustrates how the tropes of strength and aggression are associated positively with masculinityt. In this way we have not only explored the ways in which men and women might be

feminised in the representation of political debates, but the ways in which masculinity is reinforced and normalised as the criterion by which audiences are encouraged to evaluate the capacity and ability of politicians. For example, Sturgeon's perceived victory in debate performance seems to have been achieved by successfully walking the tightrope of displaying masculine leadership qualities while avoiding excessive transgression of feminine norms. The vast majority of her appraisal by the press was positive. Her strength and assertiveness were tempered by her more 'feminine' attributes such as compassion, and warmth. Outright criticism of Sturgeon was rare, typically referring to her character rather than her performance. Ed Miliband, on the other hand was largely presented as feminised and awkward, reflecting a dominant narrative of inappropriateness for office. .

In rendering explicit the gender biases evident in the framing of formal politics, we argue that politics is being played out not only at the level of policy debate, but at a more fundamental level: on the gendering of performance of what it is possible for a politician to be. Female success is presented in terms of the capacity to emasculate male rivals; male success is presented as a consequence of displays of strength, aggression and, masculinity. As such, we have drawn out how criteria for success are related and framed to audiences, with masculinity the 'norm' for which audiences are encouraged to view and evaluate politicians of all genders.

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