# The negotiation of meanings in the evening news: towards an understanding of gender disadvantages in the access to the public debate

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**Abstract:**

This article asserts the importance of examining gender barriers in the deliberative processes of the public sphere. The purpose of a participatory democracy is not feasible without the equal inclusion of women's voices under similar conditions to their male peers. In the past, various studies have shown that women in the media are either rendered invisible or described according to stereotyped characteristics, which results in their "symbolic annihilation". Arguing that television remains an important mass medium in the delivery of news to the general public, a qualitative study has been developed aiming to understand how gender meanings in the evening news are negotiated by televiewers. Within this context, a sequence of focus group discussions has been organized in order to examine several gender perceptions of the news that shall contribute to the development of a critical perspective on media structures and contents.

**Keywords:**

Gender, Television, Evening News, Reception, Public Sphere, Participatory Parity, Media Studies

**Introduction**

> *The struggle against sexism is a human rights issue. It is not an issue of morality or censorship.*
>
> *(Media Watch Brochure in Gallagher, 2001: 18)*

Women participation in public life is a key ingredient in the discussion of gender, social justice and human rights. In the past, the theme has been the subject of several academic approaches as the feminist critique raised by the work of Stuart Hall on the public sphere (Benhabib, 1992; Fraser, 1992). The abolition of formal forms of male favoritism in Western societies came as a desired outcome of feminist movements and manifestations. Nevertheless, it is still possible to observe a set of subtle forms of discrimination that count on tacit public permission to exist and which seem to stay unseen to most, including women themselves (Fernandes, 2008). Indeed, feminism has become a non-fashionable word, and gender balance claims appear to be often regarded as radical viewpoints (Nogueira, 2009). Yet, this seems to be the moment when a gender critical perspective of public participation is most required since the social indifference characterized by discrimination consent and the generalized internalization of traditional gender stereotypes constitute an invisible but steady wall against change (Amâncio, 1998; Bonnot and Croizet, 2007; Tuchman, 1978). Thus, the difficulty remains exactly the fact that this is not commonly considered to be a problem whereas, as Fraser stated, 'the lifting of formal restrictions on public-sphere participation does not suffice to ensure inclusion in practice' (1992: 132).

In this context, and adopting the theme of communication and human rights, this paper considers research on gender participation in the media as a significant route to contribute to the gender inclusivity in society and the monitoring of the news media, an important instrument to track down the voices in public speech.

According to Gallagher (1995), the global communication and information system is far from involving the majority of the people in the world – both as consumers and as participants – being, therefore, a system that perpetuates many asymmetries. Subsequently, the author refers to the term 'mentality of resignation' (Hamelink 1994: 132, *in* Gallagher, 1995) as a symptom of the people's lack of power within the mass media. However, Gallagher stresses that if the media can remove power from people, they certainly can be used to give it back to them. Lately, media have proven to be a useful space for social movements and political claims, particularly, for feminist movements. Evidently, the United Nations International Decade for Women (1975-85) was a positive initiative that encouraged activism and research concerning women and the media in two main viewpoints: 'a critique of the ways in which media content projects women as objects rather than as active subjects, and an analysis of the institutional

and social structures of power through which women are systematically marginalized within media organizations' (Gallagher, 2001: 3).

Women's under-representation in media professions has often been viewed as a cause for gender asymmetries in media contents, however, in most countries there has been a considerable increase in numbers of female media professionals and 'it would be unreasonable to imagine that this will result in a radical transformation of media content' (Gallagher, 2001: 4). Further, the underlying causes seem to be entrenched in social structures and in cultural contexts. Within this perspective, the study of gender asymmetries can be a valuable contribution to the revision of media content considering the political and social frame within a public sphere perspective.

### Gender and Media Research

In Silveirinha's opinion (2001), one can consider feminist media research within two major segments: *feminist media studies* and *public sphere research*. Feminist media studies involve, amongst other themes, investigation of feminization of media professions, media practices and narratives, audience studies, property and control, news sociology and media frames – with the purpose of questioning the social structures and the value system underneath them. The designated public sphere research has emphasized Habermas' public sphere critique by stressing the division that it operates between the public and the private spheres, which in turn, enacts a gender division that relegates women to the domestic privacy of homes and men (also empowered in the domestic sphere) to the public economic and political discursive arenas of decision making (McLaughlin, 1999). This division has been structuring gender social relations through time with countless damages to women's lives.

Fraser also criticizes Habermas' conception of a public sphere supposedly accessible to all, where everybody deliberates about the common good as peers, by noticing that it hides a series of exclusions, particularly of gender, since this bourgeois public sphere is 'a masculinist ideological notion that functioned to legitimate an emergent form of class rule' (1992: 116) and that it appears as an 'hegemonic mode of domination' (1992: 117), relegating women to the domestic realm and leaving them outside public discourse. According to Fraser, 'women of all classes and ethnicities were excluded from official political participation on the basis of gender status' (1992: 118). Also, the author claims that Habermas has failed to address other public spheres that have less power to access equal participation and emphasizes the importance of the existence of multiple counter-publics to support participatory parity.

Indeed, several studies have approached gender and media in the past. Reporting to the work of George Gerbner (1972), Tuchman introduced the concept of 'symbolic annihilation' of women in the media (1978: 3). According to Tuchman, women's roles were frequently trivialized by television for being commonly linked to stereotyped characteristics such as passivity, dependence, romanticism, fragility or even for being simply absent from the screen. By doing this, television offers no alternative

role models to women and limits their perspectives of themselves and of their roles. The concept of 'symbolic annihilation' became an important term to describe women's reality in the media until today.

Furthermore, the work of Van Zoonen has focused on the continuous need to contextualize the gender discourse in media production, which 'cannot be seen as a simple black box transmitting the patriarchal, sexist or capitalist values of its producers' (1994: 30) but as something that suffers influences from factors such as tensions and contradictions between competing professional values and personal opinions, or by the necessity to be more popular or commercial among various social groups. Van Zoonen, on the other hand argues that gender must be seen as a discursive construction that 'should thus be conceived, not as a fixed property of individuals, but as part of an ongoing process by which subjects are constituted, often in paradoxical ways' (1994: 33). In this line of thought, she claims that television has the crucial task of rendering the unfamiliar into the common, thus, emphasizing the importance of understanding the negotiation of gender discourse in media meanings. From her perspective, the organizational structure of Stuart's Hall encoding/decoding model (1973) can be used as a good basis for gender diversity:

> *it does provide a useful framework to review and arrange feminist media theory and research,*
> *suggesting the central question to be: how is gender discourse negotiated in the 'moments' of the*
> *construction of media meanings – production, text and reception?*
> *(Van Zoonen, 1994: 9)*

As seen, Hall's model proposes that televiewers negotiate meanings of media texts by relating them to their own personal experiences and also that media meanings are produced by media institutions and audiences as a social process embedded in the existing power structures. This can be a very useful instrument to analyze existing gender representations in the news as it helps to understand the way gender perspectives are coded by media producers and decoded by audiences. Considering that gender can be seen as a discursive construction and that media production is entrenched in power structures that produce meaning according to previous internalized stereotypes, one can easily infer the importance of changing gender portrayals in the media in order to prevent symbolic annihilation as a way of assuring women's rights to equal access to the public sphere.

### Understanding Gender Perceptions of the Evening News

This research was directed to the analysis of the audiences' interpretative activities of television evening news since news programs are a critical information vehicle when it comes to gender social roles and functions. Research has shown that the increasing engagement of women in media professions has not improved gender diversity in the news but quite the opposite: they have just internalized existing work routines that keep reproducing and reinforcing gender inequalities (Gallagher, 2001; Gallego, 2002).

In 2005, the Media Watch's Global Media Monitoring Project counted on the collaboration of 76 countries from all continents. Initially started in 1995, the project was repeated in 2000 and in 2005. Its purpose has been to monitor news stories on television, radio and press in a one-day study of the representation and portrayal of women around the world. In 2005, 13.000 news stories were coded and its results have shown that women have a meager presence in the news, as they are only 21% of news subjects, and that they are still portrayed according to gender stereotyped features by being, for instance, frequently presented as caregivers, celebrities and passive characters (Media Watch, 2005: 20). Women's viewpoints are scarce in the generality of the themes that constitute the core of the news agenda. They are more likely than men to be referred to as being victims of war, domestic violence, poverty and other misfortunes (19% female news subjects compared with 8% of men); and framed in a family status – as someone's mothers, daughters or wives (respectively 17% and 5%). Also, women's images are regularly used to give a dramatic dimension to a story.

Women are visible in the news as 'stars' – like celebrities or royalty figures – or as common people of the everyday life – eyewitnesses, giving individual opinions or as the people's voice. In what concerns women journalists, their looks seem to be more valued than their professional abilities and they are more likely than men to vanish from the monitors after the age of thirty four. When it comes to expertise and opinion making, women's presence is clearly scarce (men are 83% of experts and 86% of spokespersons): 'As authorities and experts women barely feature in news stories. Expert opinion in the news is overwhelmingly male' (Media Watch, 2005: 17).

The Portuguese collaboration in the 2005 Global Media Monitoring Project has shown that the national context is not an exception with regards to the portrayal of women, as they were represented in only 20% of the news stories.

Lopes' work on Portuguese weekly information television programs pointed out the same critical gender asymmetries: women are more likely to be related to social themes and to be shown using emotional speech, whereas men are placed as central figures in the political debate. The author believes that this scarceness of women in central roles within information programs is an outcome of the 'glass ceilings' that feature in the social structure (2005: 435). Lopes added that 'besides separating public space and private sphere, the interviews/debates and talk shows operate a gender division. Thus, men seemed qualified to discuss ideas and women to talk about emotions' (Lopes, 2005: 432, translated by the authors).

### The Social Uses of the Evening News

The Portuguese evening news program has been on air in RTP1 (Rádio Televisão Portuguesa), daily, since the 18th October 1959. It has been engaged in a public television service and, for a long time, was practically alone in the daily delivery of national and world-wide perspectives to the Portuguese people (Pinto and Lopes, 2009).

The evening news is broadcast daily at 8 p.m. (rare exceptions occur when there are other media events of recognized visibility), when Portuguese families are usually gathered and having dinner. This news program has been considered, throughout its history, an important and reliable resource of information, which includes a variety of themes that review the main stories of the daily news agenda. However, despite its enormous cultural and political relevance (it is still the predominant vehicle of news information), it has seldom been the object of national academic research (Pinto and Lopes, 2009).

It is important to underline the idea that television news' contents are not only influenced by their publics, rather are equally influencing them. As Tuchman's (1978a) pointed out news does not merely reflect society but also helps constructing it as a social phenomenon. Further, the social uses of television in the reception context as those described in James Lull's research, are particularly interesting:

> *Television was found to be useful to family members for purposes which range from structuring daily activities and talk patterns to far more subtle and involved tasks such as conflict reduction, the reinforcement of family roles, and intellectual validation as a means for dominating another family member.*
> *(Lull, 1980: 322)*

Lull claims that people frequently use television programs as common references to illustrate and explain issues that they want to discuss, creating conversation agendas in the family context. Being a prime time program, the evening news can count on the attention of a great number of Portuguese households that watch it on a regular basis, sometimes while performing other activities, and use its information inputs as a ground for conversation within a collective viewing experience, as suggested by David Morley's work on the reception of television in the family context. The author argues that it is important to frame reception in the family context since it is predominantly a '*domestic medium*' (1986: 13).

Given that previous literature indicates that men are the central figures in the main themes of the news agenda (Media Watch, 2005), the analysis of the evening news' reception can provide an interesting framework to develop a critical gender perspective on current television journalism and professional practices.

### *Method*

This qualitative research study was conducted between October 2008 and March 2009 with the purpose of inducing the students of both sexes to talk about their views concerning the evening news and eventually about their perspectives on observed gender asymmetries. In this context, a set of six focus groups discussions was organized with undergraduates of Communication Studies and Sociology. The participants were arranged by sex in order to compose two male groups, two female groups and two mixed groups in a way that would allow examining different discourse dynamics according to the group constitution. In total, data was collected from 43 individuals: 16 men and 27 women, aged between 18

and 48. Focus groups were scheduled so as to meet the students' availability and were conducted in the university environment[1].

The script was developed to meet our research questions: (1) Are news televiewers aware of gender asymmetries in the evening news? Or are they 'blind' to gender matters? (2) How do they explain the obvious discrepancies between the presence and portrayal of men and women in the evening news? (3) What do they think might be the social consequences of these differences?

Thus, participants were addressed three main questions. Knowing from previous experiences (Lobo, 2006; Fernandes, 2008) that gender matters are frequently discarded and provoke loss of interest among respondents, the first question was about their judgments on the effects of evening news on public opinion. Secondly, and after a group dynamic was settled, they were asked about their views on the presence and portrayal of men and women. Thirdly, they would be required to watch a recent news piece, randomly selected from a sample of evening news recordings, which was expected to act as an ice breaker or as an invigorating input to the debate. Finally, and if any gender based differences were identified during the discussion, they were invited to conjecture about its impact on social gender perspectives. The analysis of the focus groups transcripts displayed a range of diverse attitudes towards gender in the news, which has allowed disaggregating data in various topics and subtopics that shall be presented extensively in the succeeding sections[2].

### Gender as a non-issue

*One will not usually value that [gender asymmetries are present in the news], one cares about what*
*they are talking about and if the theme is interesting or not.*
*(Jorge, 20 years old, male focus group, Sociology)*

As anticipated, when confronted with the second question, most respondents (26 in total) showed some reluctance and referred to gender differences in general or specifically in the evening news as a non-issue since they considered that those differences no longer exist or that if there are still any, they must not be a source of preoccupation.

Some seem to see the evening news as a program that should be regarded from a more 'serious' point of view and not to be mixed with gender matters within the same discussion. Being Communication Studies and Sociology students, they tended to take into account other aspects of the news as the themes chosen, the manipulation of the facts or issues of objectivity/subjectivity and consider them to be more important and worthy to think about. Occasionally, participants engaged in the politically correct speech of gender equality in order to protest about the question itself.

*I think that the machismo of the 20th century is over, we are in the 21st century and nowadays it is*
*absolutely unimportant if it is a man or a woman presenting the news. That is how I see it.*
*(João, 19 years old, male focus group, Communication Studies)*

Although the above quotations come from men, women too demonstrated disinterest in the issue. In fact, in some focus groups, especially the male ones, there was the need to overcome this by asking for examples of male and female presence or even move to other topics. Most respondents considered that gender inequality is not an issue. Actually they seem to believe that balance has been achieved, in a recent past, when obvious sex discrimination supposedly left public speech and the established social discourses, legislation was adjusted in order to be more egalitarian and women left full-time domestic work to be engaged in professional careers. The word 'feminists' was mentioned only twice, in the same female focus group, and in a depreciative way, which corroborates the idea that feminism is commonly associated with radicalism and violence. In the following quotation, Beatriz (18 years old, female focus group, Communication Studies) feels the need to use the word 'feminist' within the conversation context but hurries to give her opinion on feminist action: 'There was this big fuss and the feminists, unfortunately, crossed the line by using violence and there was always a big argument until it [gender equality] was in the law, nowadays it is…'. Even though gender issues rarely caused enthusiasm among respondents, in all focus groups, differences between men and women portrayals in the evening news were identified, this allowed us to carry on the discussion and explore their perspectives on it.

### Identifying Asymmetries

The discussion instigated by the question about the presence and portrayal of men and women in the evening news was particularly prolific regarding to the *commentators'* issue. Despite the fact that most groups considered gender a non relevant theme to discuss, they have recognized the obvious discrepancy between the number of women and men among *commentators* in the news. This promptly became our most voluminous node under the *identified differences* item, with 27 references. In fact, though a few showed some reluctance in assuming the unevenness they rapidly admitted that they could not name more than one or two women in the function, while they could easily remember an extended list of men.

Regarding journalists and news subjects in the evening news, the *themes* to which they seem to be typically associated, as men or as women, were the most mentioned disparity, followed by differences in *appearance and age*. Women were more associated with soft news as fashion, society and family matters and men were related to the core of the news agenda – economy, politics and sports. According to the discussants, male journalists stay in the screen until they are 50 or even 60 years old, while female journalists disappear sooner. Also, women wear sensual outfits and are selected by their beauty and youth. In contrast, men dress formal dark suits and may remain outside the standard beauty parameters.

Participants, predominantly women, repeatedly referred to cases were women were portrayed in the news as victims or exceptions. Occasionally, this was the very first answer to the question about women in the news. They believed that they are often shown as victims of domestic violence, war,

unemployment, loss and other misfortunes. When first asked about women's presence in the news, Sofia (18 years old, female focus group, Sociology) answers:

> *Yes, every time I watch the news I see the woman who was a victim, who has been mistreated, who suffered, who has been humiliated, it is very rare to see news where men have been despised.*

Furthermore, they noticed that successful women are commonly presented in the news as exceptions, even though that is apparently well intentioned. For instance, if a woman has reached a high government position, the news anchor will probably enhance the fact that she is the first or one of the few women that ever achieved it, which might also underline the idea that men have always been better suited for that position.

Another significant discrepancy pointed out by some of the discussants involved *social status*. In their opinion, women are more likely to appear in lower social status than men.

> *No, they are very rare [women in high social status in the news], except for the cases I've just mentioned of high politics, which are very few: the German chancellor and the American secretary of state. There are very few women that appear in a high or even middle social status. We probably see them in that kind of reports about the deserted inlands.*
> *(Paula, 19 years old, female focus group, Sociology)*

The recognition of differences in gender portrayals in the evening news led the debates into a range of diverse conjectures about the possible social causes and, now and then, about the need for change.

### *Attitudes Towards Gender Differences in the Evening News*

Throughout the discussion and debates, several arguments were presented when it came to explain why men and women appear differently in the news. Since we were acquainted with the fact that gender issues are a delicate matter, we tried as much as possible to make participants feel comfortable to talk about their own views without feeling as if they were being judged. We always attempted to bring up the gender theme naturally and not to mention it too much during the discussion unless it was necessary. However, as the moderator was a woman, we sensed that this condition acted as an inhibitor, particularly in male focus groups. The natural empathy established between the moderator and the discussants, which resulted from the cooperative circumstances of these debates, certainly caused an instinctive worry about using a proper gender perspective. Nevertheless, it was possible to observe interesting differences concerning discourse dynamics among female groups, mixed groups, and male groups. When there were just men, they seemed to feel comfortable enough to conjecture freely about gender differences in a way that would often be detached from the politically correct speech and sometimes even express their disapproval concerning current parity policies[3]. In contrast, in female groups and with variable intensities,

the discussion frequently included 'feminist' standpoints and claims. Despite the fact that mixed focus groups were constituted to confront eventual dissimilar group dynamics, discussion in mixed environments turned out to be quite softened and all the participants adjusted themselves to a middle term discourse which would incorporate, at the same time, the public gender equality speech as well as the meritocracy premise.

A list of nodes referring to the various kinds of argumentation used was developed and, after coding, two main sets were constituted. A first set included the argumentation on gender differences in the evening news that exonerated the present scenario in a way that would be reassuring in what concerns gender inequalities; the second set comprised the positions that would critically point out specific features or processes within the social structure that explain and perpetuate the gender representation disparity.

### Reassuring perspectives on gender in the evening news

The idea that women only very recently moved out of the domestic sphere to enter professional careers and to participate in the public life remains in our discussants' minds. The absence of women in the news as journalists and as sources – especially in high positions as opinion makers, was often justified by the fact that women need time to reach men's level in what comes to professional achievements since women are in the beginning of their emancipation process. This reasoning would finish with the idea that in a few years men and women will be in the same circumstances and that there is nothing to worry about. When asked about the evident gender discrepancy in expertise in the news, these students explain that balance will be achieved and that it is just a question of time:

> *When it comes to commentators, to guests invited to talk about certain themes on the news and to opinion makers, they are mostly men because they have come a long way, in my opinion…there are more men because there is a long path, of many years, in engineering, in economy, in politics, in so many areas where men have been working…*
> *(José, 32 years old, male focus group, Communication Studies)*

> *In 15 or 20 years it will be more balanced but for now they [journalists] tend to look for experienced people, with 50 or 60 years old and they can only get men.*
> *(Manuel, 27 years old, male focus group, Sociology)*

This type of argumentation was coded under a node called *historical exoneration* since the participants referred to a biased version of their socio-cultural context[4] in order to restore confidence in a gender balanced future and, thus, encouraging passiveness towards gender inequalities.

Following a more simple but similar reasoning, participants would often argue that we are all involved in what seems to be a progressive social process irreversibly headed for a soon gender balanced society. The following quotations illustrate perspectives on gender asymmetries in the news:

*I have the impression, and in fact it's something that I've already thought about, that women are moving forward because they felt the need to emancipate and I believe now the world is ready for women's emancipation and when it happens, the evening news, as a public information institution, will move towards fairness…*
*(Lia, 19 years old, female, mixed focus group, Communication Studies)*

*No, no, it is not balanced [gender presence in the news]. There are themes that are directed to men and others to women but I still believe that there is an evolution towards equality.*
*(Margarida, 18 years old, female, mixed focus group, Communication Studies)*

Quotations involving this kind of justifications were gathered in a node called *positive evolution*. Subsequently, and in the same line of thought, the lack of women in the news would be naturally justified by the *lack of women* in important social positions. If they are still going through this recent emancipation process, they cannot be in functions that involve high responsibilities and prestige as well. Thus, some participants argued that there are no women in the news because there are no women to talk about. Again, there is no reason for concern.

*I just wanted to make something clear, why I think that more men than women are invited to be commentators. They could be called indifferently, men and women, because, precisely, in my opinion, they have the same authority in their opinions, but in a news piece like this that we have just watched, one normally calls the leaders of the organizations and the leaders of the organizations are men, thus, the leaders are called, he's right [reference to another participant], you can't blame the journalists.*
*(José, 32 years old, male focus group, Communication Studies)*

*A journalist cannot alter the truth to favor a fight for sex equality.*
*(Tiago, 19 years old, male focus group, Communication Studies)*

Interestingly, this last quotation illustrates the belief that journalists' role is to merely reflect society as it is.

The *meritocracy* argument, applied to gender in the news within these focus group discussions, assumed that all human beings, men or women, will attain what they deserve, what they have worked for, under the same conditions. This means that if women want to become more visible and to have a voice in the public arena of the national evening news, all they have to do is to work as hard as men do.

*I don't agree because I don't think this is a question of giving the opportunity or not giving the opportunity, if one excels and gets visibility, one has that because one deserves it and one deserves it because one has worked for it, whether it is a man or a woman. I think that before the 25th April [1974], yes, men had a more preponderant role in society but after the 25th April mentalities opened*

*up and, ok, I'm not saying that women's issue is finished but I think that, both men and women, if
they don't get the chance to excel in their field of work it's because they don't want to. Honestly.
(Nuno, 27 years old, male, mixed focus group, Communications Sciences)*

The news piece shown to the participants was, as previously stated, randomly selected from a sample of
evening news recordings. By the time the focus groups debates took place, evening news were almost all
about the world financial crisis and particularly regarding the Lehman Brothers bankruptcy. The news
piece brought to discussion was no exception and within a long sequence of national and foreign
journalists, governors and various spokespersons and stock market images only one silent woman
appeared. Particularly in the male focus groups, this piece helped us to ask participants to explain their
views on gender balance as something already achieved or as non-issue considering the perceived images.
This was one of the situations when the particularization reasoning was used. *Particularization* included
arguments which assumed that the examples watched on the images showed or given by other participants
throughout the debate were isolated cases and could not be considered representative of the general
scenario.

*Now, I think that this news piece is not the best to look for [gender asymmetries] because there isn´t
much choice, if the former Chairman of the American Reserve of the United States is a man, he
couldn't make up a woman to replace him…I didn't detect anything that could compromise or that
was shocking in what concerns the equality between men and women.
(Tiago, 19 years old, male focus group, Communication Studies)*

The category *declared gender stereotypes* contains quotations that comprise indications of gender
stereotyped thinking. As said before, the environment of the discussions has likely promoted the use of a
proper gender discourse and did not encourage the reference to obvious personal gender stereotypes. Even
so, there were some veiled mentions that are worth to examine. When asked about women's presence and
portrayal in the news, João (19 years old, male focus group, Communication Sciences) says 'They call the
audiences! Women wear lots of low cuts on television'.

The analysis of the results showed that in all the nodes containing reassuring attitudes towards
gender in the evening news, male references largely surpassed female references. *Historical exoneration,
declared gender stereotypes* and *particularization* are the items displaying larger differences between
sexes, as we can see in the succeeding chart.

**FIGURE 1**

**Reassuring Attitudes Towards Gender in the Evening News by Sex (Percentage Coverage)**
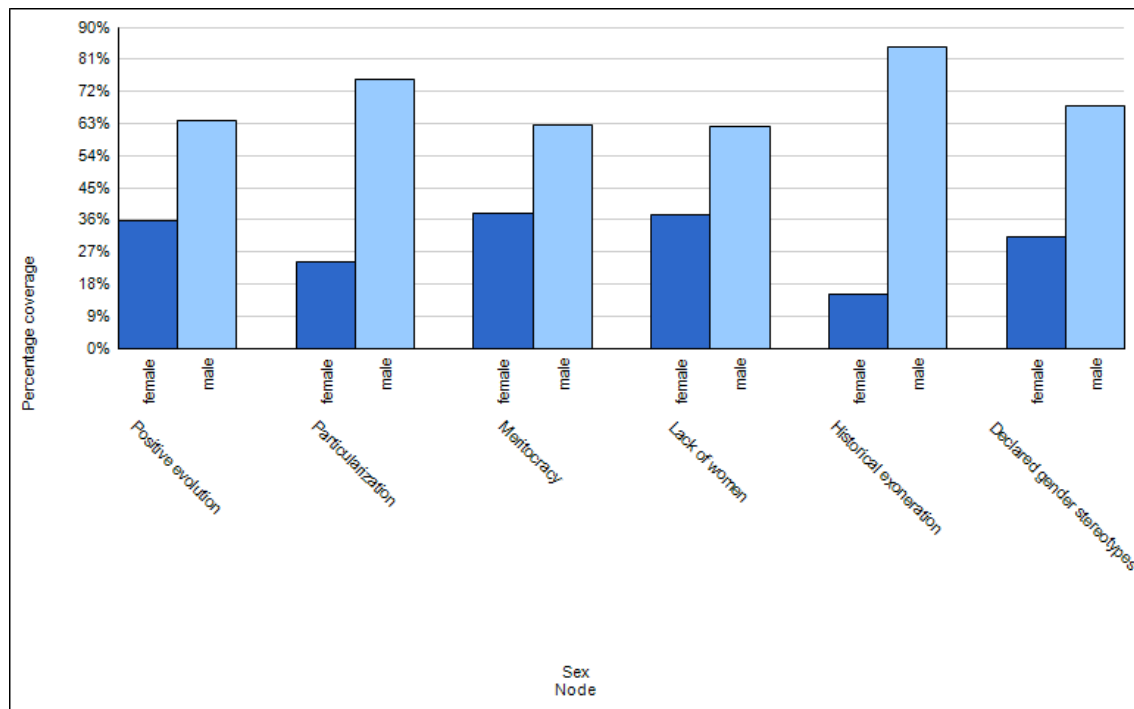


In what concerns to the number of references, the nodes *meritocracy, lack of women* and *historical exoneration* were the ones that gathered more frequencies.

### Critical Perspectives on Gender in the Evening News

The *socio-cultural* background was frequently referred to in order to explain gender unevenness in the news. Discussants would use this argumentation not to exculpate the present scenario but to understand it with the aim of looking for causes and, potentially, solutions.

> *Society was created and has been organized in this way, in a patriarchal way, for a long time. Of course in those times [reference to the Portuguese dictatorship], not only in Portugal, and according to the Nazi-fascist doctrines, there was a great prevalence of gender difference. Today, we are almost walking backwards, I mean we are moving back to a situation where we don't talk about it, we don't talk about the differences between men and women and we certainly don't talk about them in when it comes to the professional careers. But they exist and they are as present as they were before and with more influence than before, in the evening news too.*
> *(Eva, 20 years old, female focus group, Communication Studies)*

Different forms of *gender discrimination* constituted a voluminous node, abundant in references from both sexes. Discrimination was mentioned to explain the detected asymmetries and the examples given included also subtle forms of discrimination or 'ideological barriers' as one of the female discussants called it when explaining why she, being a Communication Studies undergraduate, did not intend to be a professional journalist but to work in another communication area:

> *We don't have the ideological barriers, we don't have mental barriers, we don't have prejudice and because we don't have those we can think that we might succeed... and at a certain point of our career it will be easier to follow the paths where we won't have those obstacles  because we won't have to work so hard. [...] It is not only the question of sex, but also beauty, age. The journalistic career, unfortunately, still has many obstacles and is very discriminative.*
> *(Beatriz, 18 years old, female focus group, Communication Studies)*

Another important node in what comes to the number of references coded was *gender stereotypes* (as illustrated in Figure 3). This involved mentions that point out traditional stereotypes deeply rooted in social structures which act as inhibitors to women's fair participation in the public life.

> *For instance, we have mentioned already that women are more associated with soft news and all that stuff but I think that also a woman gets less credibility than a man in the evening news because she is seen as a more sentimental being compared to a man... Men are more impartial and that's how journalism should be...*
> *(Susana, 18 years old, female group, Communications Studies)*

The set of critical attitudes towards gender in the evening news involved mostly references deriving from female participants; men were more sparing in allusions to these three positions as we can see in the graphs.

**FIGURE 2**

**Critical Attitudes Towards Gender in the Evening News by Sex (Percentage Cover)**
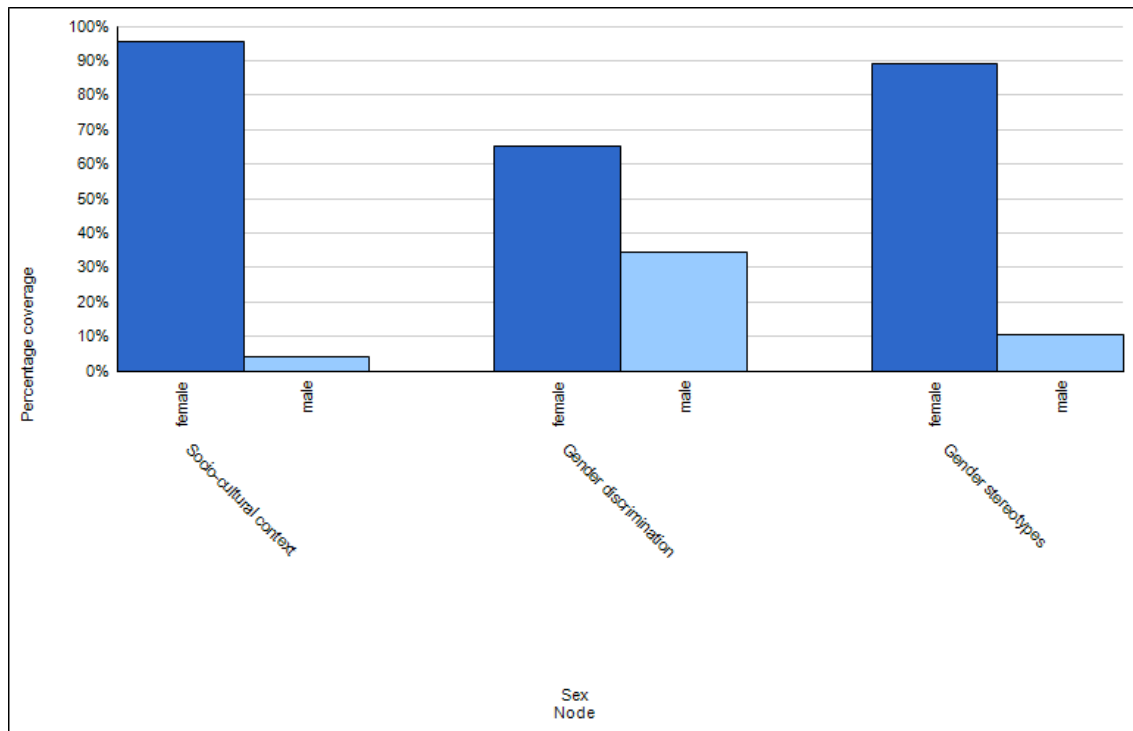


Interestingly, in the overall, the two nodes that collected the most references were gender stereotypes and gender discrimination. This illustrates that even though participants were not likely to recognize gender biases in the news, they were able to describe the social mechanisms that enable them.

**FIGURE 3**

**Attitudes Towards Gender in the Evening News by Sex (Number of References)**
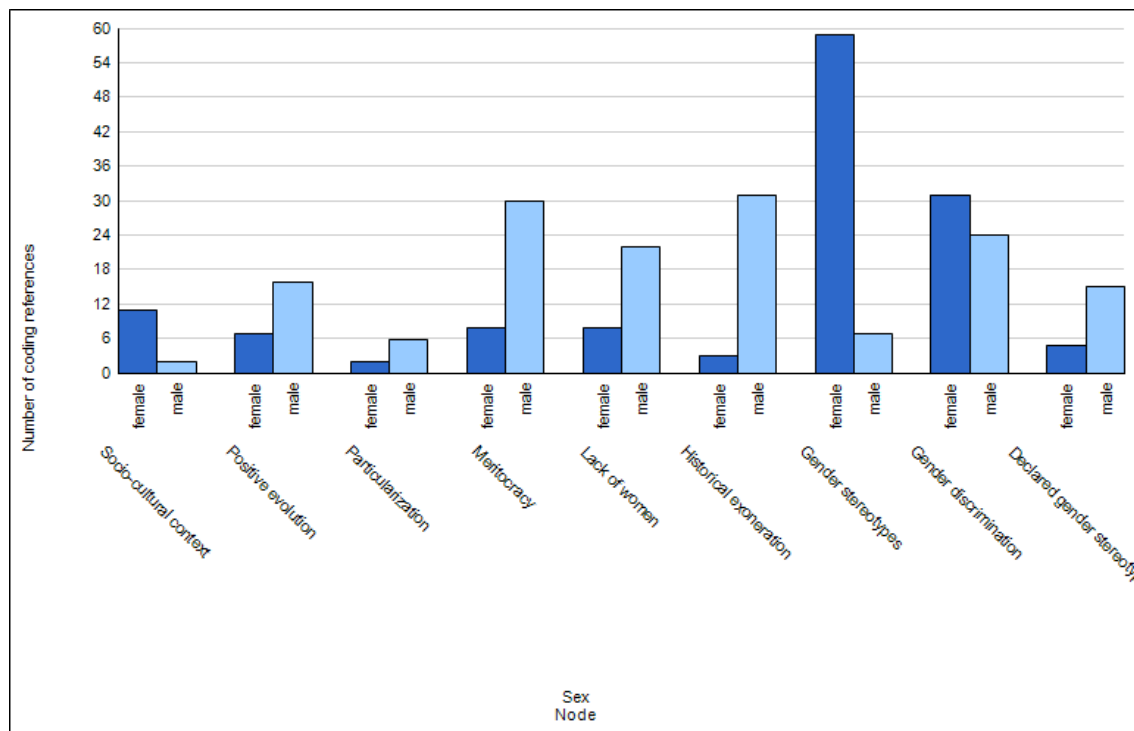


## Conclusions

The findings of this research reinforced the idea that gender asymmetries in the media are not noticed by most viewers. However, they have also demonstrated that this is not a matter of the past. If focus groups participants were reluctant to consider this theme a relevant matter, they had no difficulties in identifying and describing examples of gender biases in media content. In fact, some of the most voluminous nodes were *gender stereotypes* and *gender discrimination*, which included references to traditional gender stereotypes present in the news such as the association of women with soft news, secondary roles or low social and professional status; and explanations of gender asymmetries based on discrimination mechanisms still existent in society. Thus, it is interesting to observe that other nodes as *meritocracy*, *historical exoneration*, *positive evolution* and *lack of women*, reflect a coherent line of thought that sees the struggle for gender balance as something that has been unquestionably relevant in the past but does not constitute a central concern in the present. Thus, in most cases, gender asymmetries were not considered central in any domain approached during group discussions. The question appears to be that most forms of discrimination are subtle and are often embedded in the public politically correct speech, thus impeding their general awareness. This happens in a way that favors the impression that

gender balance has been achieved and that occasionally observed injustices are just a matter of necessary adjustments expected to occur in the gradual and slow process of social change. Ultimately, this positive social change is taken for granted.

Indeed, research has shown that gender portrayal in the media is no longer as 'monolithic' as it used to be in the 70's or in the 80's, yet, there is no doubt that 'the fundamental patterns of media representation that preoccupied the women's movement of the 1970's remain relatively intact thirty years later' (Gallagher, 2001: 4). Also, the author states that the problem is not simply about numbers but about the quality of the information. As a matter of fact, women are still invisible in the news not only when they are absent from the screen, but also when they are being symbolically annihilated.

The question of visibility is not merely a matter of 'appearing' on the screen, it is also a matter of how people are presented and contextualized. We could hardly say that someone gets to have a central role in the news if one is always presented as a representative of a homogeneous group and according to invariable stereotyped characteristics. This means that women may be visible as a homogeneous whole but remain invisible as 'persons', 'in all their plenitude and diversity' (Cabecinhas, 2007: 282).

Currently, in the Portuguese context, legislation and political communication have embraced media diversity 'as a fundamental democratic value' and 'contemplated pluralism as a vital social dimension' (Sousa and Costa e Silva, 2009: 89). The 2007 Television Law stipulates diversification and the assurance of access rights for minorities and underrepresented groups as one of the criteria for the ranking of broadcasting license tenders. Additionally, the national Media Authority (Entidade Reguladora para a Comunicação Social) promoted a study to address the question of pluralism in the news, however, in the opinion of Sousa and Costa e Silva 'the concept of pluralism underlying this study is very narrow as it merely takes into account the formal political structures, leaving out complex social processes and highly differentiated political participation mechanisms' (2009: 96). Consequently, and according to these authors, even though diversity, in the Portuguese media system, is supported by many important legal instruments, this 'does not translate into pragmatic action' (2009: 99).

This last concern seems to be a general condition. A review of sixty broadcasting organizations in twenty countries, within the European Union context, shown that very few had any written directives on gender portrayal and those 'were too vague to be operational' (Gallagher, 2001: 35).

In effect, pluralism and balance are two imperative guiding concepts to rethink media practices and choices in order to progress to more fair and diverse media systems. There is an acquaintance with the fact that women's portrayals in the media will not be improved only by increasing the number of female media professionals. It is also known that this is not a question of just giving women the opportunity to produce media contents but to make sure that those contents reflect the diversity of the female persons and that they do not keep on reproducing the same stories. Consequently, it is urgent to prevent the continuous internalization, by televiewers, of gender stereotypes in the news by making room for other female role models besides the ones that are currently being broadcast.

The Media Watch project and its monitoring experiences certainly helped (and still help) to draw attention to gender portrayals in the news and to bring some pressure on the media and governments. Other international initiatives have addressed gender asymmetries throughout time, such as the International Women's Day (yearly on the 8th March), the International Decade for Women (1975-85) or the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action – all promoted by the United Nations; as well as several UNESCO's programs for the inclusion of women in the media. Nonetheless, given the complexity and the extension of the gender problem, it cannot be solved without a sustainable cooperation of a number of approaches aiming at this same purpose (Gallagher, 2001).

Moreover, this is an issue that cannot be attended to without an adequate framing within the historical and political context of gender as a discursive social construction: 'What it actually requires is a wide-scale social and political transformation, in which women's rights – and women's right to communicate – are truly understood, respected and implemented both in a society at large and by the media' (Gallagher, 2001: 7-8). Considering the present circumstances, there is a critical need for measures capable of restraining the social mechanisms that reinforce and maintain gender asymmetries in the media, everywhere. Particularly, the development of more gender diversity policies in the media must be a priority, as well as the creation of the necessary instruments to make sure that they are properly implemented.

Thus, the regulation of news contents aiming to a more balanced gender portrayal has the potential to contribute in a significant way to the elimination of women's disadvantages in the access to the public sphere – a basic premise of democratic societies: 'Thus language is not a means of reflecting reality, but the source of reality itself' (Van Zoonen, 1994: 39). As for Van Zoonen's statement and also Tuchman's argument that news constructs society as a social phenomenon, one can promptly understand the importance of the equal access to communication in the public sphere. The evening news program provides audiences with daily information about events that are supposedly selected for their relevance to public life and which are displayed during prime time. By being absent from the news or portrayed in secondary and passive roles, women's voices are devaluated and their right to access communication within the public sphere is denied. This may cause many damages to women's lives as these messages reinforce the presence of gender stereotypes in the social structures and in individual worldviews. Also, by limiting female role models, news narrows women's perspectives of their possibilities, thus, keeping them in the shadow as a subordinated group.

According to Amâncio, the apparent lack of ambition often attributed to women must be linked to the limits imposed by gender representations. The author explains that the ideological gender frame interferes in the goals individuals set themselves and in what they think that they are able to reach, which 'imposes greater limits on the rights of the individual woman' and, therefore, 'makes the articulation of gender representations with human rights politically and theoretically relevant' (1998: 499).

This is mostly worrying when studies like the one presented by this paper show that there is no awareness of the invisibility of women in the media. Moreover, the particular condition of gender as an

entrenched social discursive construction (Van Zoonen, 1994) that has been organizing societies for hundreds of years requires a deep and vast change of the gender paradigm across the world. However, and despite the centrality of this problem, if there is no general awareness of the need for change, it will be very difficult to find the social motivation to move towards a more inclusive society.

Now, and in order to perform this intention, it is crucial to divulge the idea that positive social change towards gender balance is not an ongoing process that will reach its fulfillment on its own and that women's invisibility in the news is a critical issue with many consequences to women's lives and possibilities.

### Notes

1. Participants were asked to contribute to a research on national evening news, were informed about the conditions under which data collected would be used and signed an informed consent. Their identities were concealed, thus, all quotations and references involve fictitious names.

2. The examination of the transcripts was performed with the assistance of NVivo 8 software, which permitted to produce the charts that will be displayed ahead.

3. In Portugal, parity policies have been implemented for the first time in 2009 elections and their approval was involved in many controversies.

4. In fact, Portugal has a particular situation when compared to other EU countries. In the 1960's, the colonial wars (which implied men's displacement to the overseas) and the movements of massive emigration (particularly of male 'family-heads') encouraged many women to move out of the domestic sphere and to engage the workforce in order to sustain the national economy. Also, after the dictatorship period, which lasted from 1933 to the revolution, on the 25th April 1974, women have entered the universities and the professional careers in similar numbers as men. Actually, Portugal has an enviable rate of women's participation in the professional careers (Amâncio, 1994). However, and despite these indicators, studies have shown that women still hold most of the domestic tasks, women's employment is precarious and inadequately remunerated and that women are under-represented in the decision-making positions (Amâncio, 2003; Nogueira, 2009).

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