

Gender discourses in political campaigns and their impact on the perception of voters

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Abstract. The purpose of this study was to conduct a comparative analysis of gender discourses in political campaigns in the United States, Great Britain, and Sweden to identify their impact on media representation and voter perception. The study was based on a qualitative methodology of critical discourse analysis, which examined a targeted sample of materials that included articles from leading media outlets, social media posts, and debate videos. The main results showed that, despite differences in national contexts, women politicians continue to face persistent discursive challenges. In the United States, Hillary Clinton's campaign showed that the combination of narratives about "inauthenticity", belonging to the establishment, and external cyber interference created a uniquely toxic environment that made it much more difficult to communicate her own political agenda. An analysis of the coverage of Kamala Harris' candidacy in the British media demonstrated the key role of intersectionality, where her image was formed at the intersection of gender, racial, and political biases, forcing her to simultaneously resist various forms of stereotyping. The Swedish case has revealed the paradox of a society with a high level of formal equality, where women leaders such as Anna Lööf face informal but highly destructive barriers in the form of threats and systemic online harassment, which calls into question the effectiveness of only formal mechanisms for achieving equality. The study proved that problems for women in politics have evolved from formal obstacles to complex discursive traps, which requires the development of new communication strategies to counteract hidden forms of bias

Keywords: female leaders; stereotypes; sexist images; media representation; career

INTRODUCTION

The relevance of this study is conditioned by the growing role of women in world politics and the simultaneous increasing polarisation of societies where gender issues often become the central element of ideological "culture wars". In an environment where every election campaign becomes a battleground not only for votes, but also for social norms, the analysis of gender discourses takes on special weight. Despite significant progress in achieving formal equality and increasing the number of women in elected office, their participation and success in politics remain a complex and multifaceted phenomenon.

Contemporary political campaigns are unfolding in an increasingly complex environment characterised by a decline and deep polarisation of confidence in electoral institutions. C. Stewart III (2022) analysed the state of trust in electoral institutions, noting its significant decline and deep party polarisation, which is noticeable in the political context of the United States. In parallel with the

institutional crisis, there is a technological complication of methods of influencing voters. M. Abouei Mehrizi *et al.* (2022) investigated the mechanisms of election control through social influence, proving that these processes lend themselves to precise mathematical modelling in conditions of voter uncertainty. In this technologically rich and polarised context, gender discourses become an influential tool that can both promote and hinder political careers. The team of authors by J. Dolan *et al.* (2021), analysing women's paths to power, noted that despite decades of research, the question of the impact of gender perceptions on election results remains relevant, as old stereotypes adapt to new political realities, forcing women leaders to develop new strategies of influence.

Global scientific research actively studies the impact of gender stereotypes on electoral processes, gradually moving away from general surveys to the analysis of real voter behaviour. Thus, S.F. Anzia & R. Bernhard (2022),

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using the example of local elections in the United States, demonstrated that the success of female candidates largely depends on the context and compliance of the role with gender stereotypes: women are more likely to win school board elections, but less likely to win mayoral elections, especially in conservative districts. However, research by S. Saha & A.C. Weeks (2022) was complicated by the widespread perception that voters systematically “punish” ambitious women. Their experiments showed that the response to ambition depends on the party affiliation of voters and is more pronounced in non-partisan elections, where party markers cannot serve as a guide. The problem lies not only in the perception of voters, but also in the so-called “ambition gap”. The study by E. Mourelatos *et al.* (2024) focused on the gender gap in political ambitions and how the competitive nature of the political environment influences the decision of men and women to run for election. It has been experimentally confirmed that the competitive nature of politics is more likely to deter women from participating in elections than men, which is one of the main factors of their underrepresentation.

The impact of gender dynamics is largely determined by the specifics of the national political landscape, which is confirmed by a number of comparative studies. In particular, N. Aylott & N. Bolin (2023), examining the 2022 parliamentary elections, found that the country’s political system has become significantly fragmented due to the growing influence of the right-wing populist Swedish Democrats party, which led to the historic defeat of the social democrats. In the context of the UK, J. Mellon (2021) analysed electoral behaviour during the 2019 election and concluded that the deep public divide over Brexit significantly limited the effectiveness of tactical voting and cross-party agreements, creating specific barriers for candidates. This analysis of scientific evidence suggests that differences in political systems shape fundamentally different conditions in which women politicians are forced to build their strategies. K. Aggestam & J. True (2021) in their study shifted the focus from the passive role of women as objects of stereotyping to their active agency. The researchers proved that women leaders play a complex strategic game on several levels, consciously using and adapting gender norms as an effective tool for promoting their own interests in the areas of domestic and foreign policy.

Despite a significant amount of research on gender stereotypes and electoral systems in individual countries, there is a gap in comparative studies that would analyse exactly the discursive practices that shape images of women politicians in different national contexts. The purpose of this study was to conduct a comparative discourse analysis of political campaigns in the United States, Great Britain, and Sweden to identify and compare specific gender discourses that shape the media representation and public perception of female politicians, and to analyse how these discourses affect their electoral prospects. To achieve this goal, the following tasks were set: to conduct a comparative analysis of the discursive construction of images and

challenges faced by women politicians during election campaigns in the United States, Great Britain, and Sweden; to assess the causal impact of frame types on the assessment of competence, leadership and “selectivity” of women politicians, considering the moderators of the platform and audience characteristics; to check the mediation mechanism by which content frames affect the intention to vote through the perception of competence and leadership, and to determine the conditions under which counter-framing removes the “double trap”.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In the course of the study, a qualitative methodology based on critical discourse analysis (CDA) was applied, which allowed considering language not only as a means of communication, but as a tool for implementing power and constructing social hierarchies. The source base for the analysis was an exhaustive body of materials formed on the principle of a target sample to ensure the representativeness of various types of political communication: from the direct appeal of politicians to the electorate to the media interpretation of their actions. The chronological framework of the study covered three key periods corresponding to the peak moments of electoral activity and political crises in the countries studied: the United States during Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign in 2015-2016; the United Kingdom during the current election cycle with Kamala Harris in 2024; Sweden during the period of political activity and Anna Löf’s resignation in 2018-2022. The criteria for selecting materials were a high level of public response (*viral content*), the authorship of key political figures or leading media outlets with a large audience and the presence of explicit or implicit gender markers in the texts.

For Hillary Clinton’s case, her key programme speeches were selected (CNN Staff, 2015), official social media posts (Clinton, 2016a; 2016b; 2016c; 2016d; 2016e; 2016f), video recordings of the debate (Presidential debate highlights..., 2016), and a speech admitting defeat (Hillary Clinton full..., 2016). The media context was reconstructed based on analytical articles from leading publications, such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) (Bryant, 2016; Zurcher, 2016; Prasad, 2019), The New York Times (Lipton *et al.*, 2016) and National Public Radio (NPR) (Jensen, 2016), and video recordings of her opponent’s statements (Trump on Clinton..., 2016) and advertising materials (Mirrors|Hillary Clinton, 2016). The theoretical framework for this case was formed by biographical data (Hillary Clinton, *biografia*, 2021).

To explore the discourse surrounding Kamala Harris, the sample included her public appearances (Kamala Harris vs. Donald Trump..., 2024; Highlights from the..., 2024; ‘I’m not perfect’..., 2024) and communication in social networks (Harris, 2024a; 2024b; 2024c; 2024d; 2024e). The perception of her candidacy in the UK was studied based on materials from the BBC publications (Subramanian, 2024; Smith, 2024) and The Guardian (Freedland, 2024; Gambino, 2024).

The Swedish case was based on an analysis of social media posts by leading politicians A. Löf (2022a, 2022b; 2022c) and A. Löf Hedh (2018a; 2018b; 2018c; 2018d; 2018e). The context was supplemented by analytical articles from Svenska Dagbladet (Female politicians have..., 2022; Arenander & Nilsson, 2022; Thurfjell, 2022) and government documents (Sweden's feminist foreign policy, 2019).

The analysis procedure was carried out in three stages: primary encoding of texts to identify key thematic blocks; microanalysis of language tools (metaphors, epithets, euphemisms); macroanalysis of social context and power relations. The analysis framework included the identification of discursive strategies (legitimation, delegitimation, victimisation), media frames (e.g., the "competence" frame versus the "authenticity" frame), and rhetorical topoi (the topos of "threat", the topos of "glass ceiling", the topos of "double standards") used to represent women politicians. At the final stage, a comparative analysis of three cases was carried out to identify common patterns and national features in the construction of gender discourses.

RESULTS

Discursive construction of gender in the 2016 US presidential campaign

At the start of the campaign, Hillary Clinton's rhetorical strategy was carefully focused on promoting ideas of economic justice and inclusive social inclusivity. In her keynote speech on Roosevelt Island on June 13, 2015, she positioned herself as a defender of the interests of the middle class, purposefully contrasting her vision with Republican politics (CNN Staff, 2015). This communication line was maintained in the final stage of the campaign, as can be seen from the analysis of its activity in social networks. In the last weeks before the election, her Facebook page actively promoted several key narratives. First, the emphasis was placed on her experience and competence. Posts were published recalling her work as secretary of state and her ability to counter global threats (Clinton, 2016c; 2016d). Second, positive reviews from reputable and popular personalities were used, such as Michelle Obama and Beyonce (Clinton, 2016b; 2016e). Third, attempts were made to humanise her image by publishing information about her long-term human rights work (Clinton, 2016a). Ultimately, key ideological theses were actively promoted, such as the slogan "Women's rights are human rights", and direct mobilisation of voters was conducted (Clinton, 2016f). This social media strategy was aimed at creating a positive, multi-faceted image of a candidate who is both an experienced leader, a moral authority, and a compassionate person.

However, this carefully constructed positive narrative has undergone significant deformation under the influence of both internal and external factors. Clinton's candidacy became a clear personification of the political establishment, against which a significant part of the electorate was protested (Bryant, 2016). Her own reckless comment about the "basket of deplorables" instantly reinforced this image (Hillary Clinton, biografia, 2021). Academic research

has confirmed that Hillary Clinton is described more in male than female terms, with a higher frequency of gender insults (Conroy *et al.*, 2020). In parallel, her opponent actively used gender stereotypes, questioning her physical ability to serve as president (Trump on Clinton..., 2016). In response, the Clinton campaign tried to reverse her opponent's misogynistic rhetoric against Donald Trump. A number of advertising materials were created to demonstrate the incompatibility of Trump's views with the values of contemporary society. An illustrative example of such a delegitimisation strategy is a television advertisement during the primaries, which focused on the candidate's dubious business practices and questioned his integrity (Fig. 1).

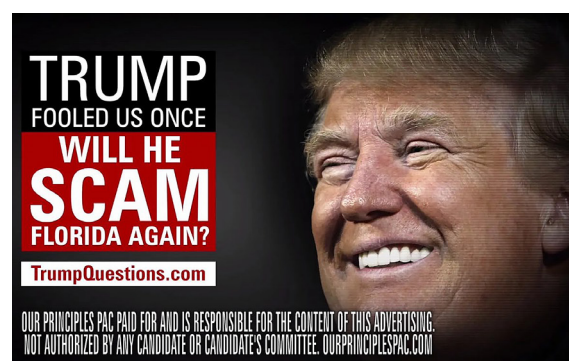


Figure 1. Footage from an anti-Trump advertisement broadcast before the Florida primary

Source: L. Vavreck (2016)

One of the most famous videos called "mirrors" showed young girls looking at themselves in the mirror, while Trump's real derogatory statements about women are heard behind the scenes (Mirrors|Hillary Clinton, 2016). The video ended with the rhetorical question "Do we want such a president for our daughters?", which directly appealed to the emotions of voters and positioned the choice not as political, but as moral. Other materials that were distributed online were direct compilations of Trump's most outrageous quotes, where he called women "fat pigs," "dogs," and "disgusting animals" (Prasad, 2019). This strategy was to use the opponent's own words as a weapon to demonstrate his inconsistency with the position of president and mobilise the female electorate. During the presidential debate, a key stage of the campaign, Clinton consistently presented her economic agenda, emphasising the need for investment in jobs, fair taxation, and empowerment for the middle class. She tried to focus on specific policy proposals, while Trump often turned to personal attacks and general accusations, which were also interpreted through the prism of gender expectations for candidates (Presidential debate highlights..., 2016).

The discrediting campaign culminated in an unprecedented intervention by the Russian Federation, which turned ordinary intelligence gathering into a full-scale operation of influence. According to an investigation published in the New York Times (Lipton *et al.*, 2016), this operation

began back in 2015, when hackers linked to the Russian government gained access to the computer networks of the Democratic National Committee. Despite early warnings from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), which were ignored, hackers spent almost seven months without hindrance studying internal documentation. The attacks subsequently spread to the personal mailboxes of key figures in the Clinton campaign, including her campaign manager John Podesta. The investigation revealed the activities of two different groups of Russian hackers, known as Cozy Bear and Fancy Bear, which indicated the scale and state support for the operation (Lipton *et al.*, 2016). The purpose of the operation was not just espionage, but political sabotage. Since the summer of 2016, stolen documents and emails have been systematically published through front persons such as Guccifer 2.0 and platforms such as WikiLeaks. These leaks were planned in such a way as to cause maximum damage to the Clinton campaign at key moments. For example, the publication of the letters on the eve of the Democratic National Convention provoked an internal split and reinforced the narrative of “dishonesty” of Democrats and Clinton personally, actualising the gender stereotype of “deceit” and “duplicity” of women seeking power (Lipton *et al.*, 2016). The publication of Podesta’s personal emails during the last month of the campaign created new negative information drives every day, diverting attention from her political agenda and forcing her staff to constantly be on the defensive (Zurcher, 2016; Jensen, 2016). This shifted the focus from her professional competence (a masculine trait) to the scandals and gossip traditionally used to trivialise female politicians. The mass media, including leading media outlets, have played a mixed role in covering the contents of the stolen emails extensively, often ignoring the fact that the source of the information was a foreign intelligence operation aimed at undermining the democratic process (Lipton *et al.*, 2016). Thus, external interference was a catalyst that reinforced already existing negative gender and political narratives about the candidate’s “inauthenticity” and “secrecy”, creating a toxic information environment in which the Clinton campaign’s positive communication strategy and its attempts to expose the opponent’s misogyny proved ineffective. In her speech after the election results were announced, Hillary Clinton addressed her supporters expressing disappointment, but emphasising the importance of continuing to fight for the values of democracy and inclusivity. She explicitly mentioned the “glass ceiling” that she could not break through, but stressed that one day another woman would do it. Her speech was imbued with messages of support and hope for young girls, encouraging them to believe in themselves and not give up despite obstacles (Hillary Clinton full..., 2016). This has become an element of post-campaign discourse aimed at rethinking the gender role in politics and maintaining the desire for equality, even in spite of defeat.

Deep discourse analysis of media materials allowed identifying specific lexical markers and strategies that formed this negative background. In the lyrics of the BBC (Bryant, 2016; Prasad, 2019; Zurcher, 2016) and The New

York Times (Lipton *et al.*, 2016) were dominated by two key frames: (1) the “inauthentic” frame, which was constructed through evaluative adjectives with negative connotations (“cautious”, “inauthentic”, “calculated”); and (2) the “establishment” frame, which was fixed through repeated tokens “establishment”, “old politics”, “corrupt”. But in relation to Donald Trump, despite criticism, masculine tokens were often used (“tough”, “strong leader”, “fighter”), which created a discursive opposition to “true man determination” against “false female symbolism”. The media used strategies of delegitimisation (emphasis on the mail scandal) and emotional feminisation (doubts about “strength” and “endurance”), where the candidate’s femininity acted not as a resource for renewal, but as a marker of weakness and belonging to the old system.

Thus, the results of the study of gender discourses in the framework of Hillary Clinton’s political campaign in the United States in 2016 showed a deep contradiction between the candidate’s rhetorical self-presentation and her perception in the media space and among voters. This campaign was launched against the backdrop of unprecedented political polarisation and a wave of populist anti-elite protests, which set the stage for increased gender attacks. An analysis of key programmatic speeches, media coverage, social media communication strategy, and outside interference revealed that Clinton’s attempts to position her gender as a historical advantage and an integral part of an inclusive political agenda faced well-established stereotypes and cultural biases. These stereotypes were actively used by both her political opponents and external actors to systematically discredit her. This process took place through the construction and replication of a complex image in the media, which combined the features of a corrupt political establishment, a fundamental lack of authenticity, and a blatant discrepancy with traditional gender roles. Such discursive framing, reinforced by unprecedented cyber operations on the part of a foreign state, affected the final electoral results.

Intersectional challenges and strategic dilemmas in British media discourse on Kamala Harris

An analysis of the coverage of Kamala Harris’ candidacy by leading British media, particularly the Guardian and the BBC, during the 2024 presidential campaign reveals a complex and multidimensional discourse that goes beyond simple gender analysis and brings the concept of intersectionality to the fore. Unlike Hillary Clinton’s campaign, where a central element of criticism was her status as a woman in the establishment, in Harris’ case, the narrative was formed at the intersection of her gender, racial, and political identities as vice president in an unpopular administration. British sources have described a campaign that, despite initial enthusiasm, faced fundamental strategic dilemmas and failed to overcome deep-rooted cultural and economic anxieties in American society (Subramanian, 2024; Freedland, 2024; Smith, 2024). This analysis demonstrated how the globalised media space translates and interprets the challenges faced by women politicians at the highest level.

One of the central themes in British coverage was the problem of continuity and Harris' inability to distance herself from President Joe Biden. Sources repeatedly recall her response in interviews to the question of what she would have done differently from Biden: "Nothing comes to mind" (Subramanian, 2024). The phrase instantly became a tool for Republican attacks and, as the BBC notes, highlighted the political obstacles that her campaign could not overcome. The Guardian noted in its analysis that in an environment where only 28% of Americans believed that the country was moving in the right direction, any candidate from the current government faced huge difficulties. By refusing to draw a clear line between herself and Biden, Harris effectively stripped herself of the mantle of "change," confirming Trump's key message: "Vote for Harris, get Biden 2" (Freedland, 2024). To counter this narrative, her social media campaign actively promoted the idea of a "new generation of leadership" (Harris, 2024c). She directly contrasted her approach with that of her opponent, saying that in the Oval Office, she would work on her "to-do list" for the American people, while Trump would be busy "planning revenge from his list of enemies" (Harris, 2024d). This rebranding attempt was aimed at presenting her as the future and her opponent as a representative of a chaotic and vindictive past.

Another important aspect of the analysis was her intersectional identity as a woman of African-American and South Asian descent. The Guardian emphasised that Harris was the "perfect opponent" for Trump: "a liberal, successful, rich woman from California, an avatar of the same cultural elite that he and millions of others despise" (Freedland, 2024). However, sources noted that Harris, as the first woman and woman of colour in such a high position, faced double standards. Michelle Obama, speaking in support of her, bluntly stated that critics set a higher standard for Harris than for Trump, ignoring his incompetence, but demanding that she "impress at every turn" (Gambino, 2024).

Harris' campaign was also accompanied by a flood of racist and sexist insults, including from her opponent, who called her "dumb as a rock" (Gambino, 2024). In response, her own communication strategy consistently built up the

image of a wrestler. In her posts, she noted that all her life she fought for people who were offended (Harris, 2024b). This narrative was supported by concrete examples, in particular, her struggle for the reproductive rights of women, who, according to her, were deprived of rights and protection because of Donald Trump (Harris, 2024e). She promised voters that if given a chance, "nothing in the world will stand in her way" (Harris, 2024a), positioning herself as a determined and uncompromising defender of the interests of the people.

The strategic dilemma of her campaign has also been the focus of British analysts' attention. The BBC noted that the initial positive message and attempt to position itself as a unifier with a list of cases (to-do list) has changed to a much more negative tone in the final weeks of the campaign. Faced with a tense pre-election campaign, Harris launched a direct attack on Trump, calling him a "petty tyrant" in her final address ('I'm not perfect', but..., 2024) and "fascist" (Smith, 2024), and warning of the danger of his second term. This change in tactics was evident during the presidential debate, which became a key battleground for narratives. During the debate, Harris tried to present herself as a representative of a "new generation of leadership," while simultaneously attacking Trump for his economic policies, which she called a "sales tax for the middle class," and his role in undermining democratic institutions (Kamala Harris vs. Donald Trump..., 2024). She repeatedly tried to catch him in a lie and provoke him to emotional, unrestrained responses, which was partly successful, namely when the discussion concerned issues of his presidential term and attitude to the law (Highlights from the..., 2024). However, as the BBC notes in its analysis, this tactical turn could have been a mistake, because, according to Republican sociologist Frank Luntz, voters who already knew everything about Trump wanted to hear more about Harris' own plans for the future (Subramanian, 2024). This inability to articulate own vision amid economic concerns and concerns about immigration was one of the key reasons for its defeat. Table 1 provides general information on a comparative analysis of communication strategies and discursive challenges.

Table 1. Comparative analysis of communication strategies and discursive challenges

Analysis criteria	Hillary Clinton (USA, 2016)	Kamala Harris (USA, 2024)
Main message of the campaign	Economic justice, experience, and continued progress in the Obama administration	"A new generation of leadership", protecting freedoms (in particular, the right to abortion), countering Trump's "chaos"
Gender framing	A historic opportunity to elect the first female president, "breaking the glass ceiling"	Defender of women's rights, in particular reproductive ones; personification of intersectional identity (woman of colour)
Main vulnerability in discourse	The epitome of the political establishment, the lack of "authenticity", the email scandal	An indissoluble connection to the unpopular Biden administration, criticism for "insincerity" and "excessive caution"
Type of attacks from the opponent	Issues of endurance and health, accusations of corruption, personal insults	Direct racist and sexist images ("stupid as a rock"), accusations of incompetence
External influence factor	Massive Russian intervention through cyber attacks and strategic information leaks through WikiLeaks	Broadcast attacks through a globalised media space; no external interference of the same scale as in 2016

Source: developed by the author based on the analysis of sources CNN Staff (2015), N. Bryant (2016), C. Subramanian (2024), J. Freedland (2024), L. Gambino (2024)

Despite these concerns, the British media recorded one asset of Harris' campaign, namely support for women. The Guardian and the BBC agreed that her electoral strategy was based on mobilising women who were outraged by the abolition of the constitutional right to abortion (Freedland, 2024). This factor created a striking gender gap, in which women mostly supported Harris, while men leaned towards Trump (Gambino, 2024). However, as analysts warned, this support may not be enough. The BBC pointed out that even among those who support the right to abortion, a significant proportion, up to one in five voters in Arizona, still planned to vote for Trump (Smith, 2024). Post-election analysis confirmed these concerns: although 54% of women voted for Harris, this figure was lower than the 57% who supported Biden in 2020. In addition, she failed to hold on to the coalition that led Biden to victory, losing support among black and Latino voters, and among young people (Subramanian, 2024). A unique challenge was the stance on the war in Gaza, which alienated a significant portion of Arab-American voters in the key state of Michigan (Smith, 2024).

An analysis of the British media field showed that the discourse around Harris was built at the intersection of two restrictive frameworks. The first is the "double bind" frame, when the candidate was presented simultaneously as insufficiently dissociated from Biden's policy and not "strong enough" for independent leadership. The second is the "intersectional load" frame, where her gender and racial background were described through the vocabulary of vulnerability rather than strength. The British media actively used contrasting markers ("perfect opponent for Trump", "liberal elite woman", "California progressive"), positioning it as "different", disconnected from "real America". Moreover, publications used various rhetorical strategies: the BBC (Subramanian, 2024; Smith, 2024) tended to dramatise, describing Harris' changing rhetoric as a sign of a "campaign losing control", whereas The Guardian (Freedland, 2024; Gambino, 2024) used a moralising strategy, highlighting the unfairly inflated standards (the "higher barrier") that society and the media apply to female leaders of colour. Thus, British media discourse portrays Kamala Harris as a historical figure whose campaign was burdened with the legacy of her predecessor, strategic miscalculations, and the unique challenges of her intersectional identity. Despite attempts to mobilise women around the idea of protecting freedoms and presenting themselves as a determined fighter for the future, she failed to overcome the general desire of voters for change and economic stability, which led to her defeat.

Discursive pitfalls in the Swedish political context: Between gender equality and media reality

The analysis of gender discourses in Swedish political campaigns presents a unique case that contrasts with the American and British contexts. Sweden, which has long positioned itself as a global leader in gender equality and has even proclaimed a feminist foreign policy (Sweden's

feminist foreign policy, 2019), should have theoretically demonstrated a more egalitarian political discourse. However, research on coverage of women politicians' debates in leading media outlets such as Svenska Dagbladet and analysis of social media communication reveals the persistence of hidden and explicit gender stereotypes that pose significant obstacles to women in politics. One example of this problem is the case of Anna Lööf, a former leader of the Centre Party. As Sandra Hokansson, a doctoral student in political science, noted in her paper, sexist attitudes in society lead to women in power becoming targets for attacks much more often than men in similar positions (Female politicians have..., 2022). When Anna Lööf announced her resignation, she spoke openly about the relief that she managed to avoid physical harm during the election campaign. She confirmed that the threats she received as party leader were one of the good reasons for her decision to retire from politics.

Her case is not unique, but only one of many, illustrating how the hostile environment created in particular and on social media can directly affect the careers of female politicians, forcing them to leave their posts for their own safety (Female politicians have..., 2022). Her public discourse during the 2022 election campaign and at the time of her resignation focused on ideological and political issues, rather than personal attacks. In her resignation speech, she proudly recounted the achievements of her party during her eleven years of leadership, including tax cuts, emissions cuts, increased use of solar energy, and the fight against violence against women, mentioning the breaking of the "glass ceiling" (Lööf, 2022a). Despite the threats, her communication was filled with determination and ideological struggle. For example, she took a tough stance against the right-wing extremist Swedish Democrats (SD) party, explicitly stating that this party "grew out of Nazism" and that "Sweden still does not fit in brown" (Lööf, 2022b). In addition, she was not afraid to take complex and pragmatic positions, such as advocating restricting the right to demonstrate for extremists like Rasmus Paludan to prevent violence (Årenander & Nilsson, 2022). She faced political challenges, in particular, according to Svenska Dagbladet, her party lost support among young women, which Lööf herself partly explained by the fact that a female prime minister appeared in the country for the first time, and in times of crisis, voters tend to rally around the largest government party (Thurfjell, 2022). In her post-election address, she acknowledged that the result was not what she had hoped for, but expressed pride in the way her team "stood up for what we believe in" (Lööf, 2022c).

Despite this hostile environment, an analysis of the public communication of Anna Lööf Hedh, a representative of the Social Democratic Party, showed her active participation in a meaningful political struggle. Her social media activities during the 2018 election campaign demonstrated several key areas of work. First, it explicitly articulated the importance of gender equality as the foundation of a safer society (Lööf Hedh, 2018e) and pointed

to specific imbalances in representation, noting that in the municipality of Kalmar, where women make up 50.32%, some parties have up to 72.5% of men on the ballot papers (Löf Hedh, 2018d). Second, her communication was aimed at directly mobilising supporters and organising work on the ground, in particular, through the involvement of the women's wing of the S-Kvinnor party (Löf Hedh, 2018c). Third, much of her discourse was devoted to criticising political opponents, in particular the Swedish Democrats (SD) party. She called Sweden's potential exit from the EU, or "Swexit" promoted by the SD, "a disaster for Sweden" (Löf Hedh, 2018a) and analysed their budget proposals to demonstrate their antisocial focus (Löf Hedh, 2018b). Thus, her work illustrated how women

politicians, despite systemic pressure, continue to conduct active ideological and organisational work, focusing on the key programme principles of their party. The analysis identified repetitive discursive patterns that are common to different media environments, but manifest with different intensity in the United States and Sweden. To systematise the results obtained, the main discourses of gender delegitimisation, which reproduce media through lexical markers, rhetorical strategies and frame constructions, were classified. Table 2 provides a comparative analysis of these discursive strategies, demonstrating how media texts shape the "image of a female politician" in two different political cultures – from direct verbal practices to structural forms of discrimination.

Table 2. Typology of gender issues in political discourse: a comparative analysis of the United States and Sweden

Type of gender challenge	USA (Hillary Clinton – 2016)	Sweden (Anna Löf – 2022)
Direct verbal attacks	Use of misogynistic vocabulary ("disgusting animals", "fat pigs"), public doubts about endurance	Less common in public debates, but present in the online space
Media focus on style	Excessive attention to "authenticity", tone of voice, emotionality, and appearance	Similar attention is paid to the style of conducting debates ("aggressive" or "weak"), appearance and clothing
"Double standard"	Criticism for showing both "masculine" (too ambitious) and "feminine" (too emotional) traits	A similar dilemma: criticism for "rigidity" in the debate or for "softness" and lack of determination
Online harassment and threats	Spread of disinformation and offensive content, reinforced by external interference	Systematic threats of violence, which became a direct reason for the resignation of the party leader
Relationship to the political context	Hyperpolarised environment where gender was used as a weapon in the "culture wars"	Paradox of an "egalitarian society", where formal equality coexists with informal pressure and threats

Source: developed by the author based on the analysis of sources N. Bryant (2016), R. Prasad (2019), *Female politicians have...* (2022), K. Thurfjell (2022)

The specificity of Swedish media discourse lies in the paradoxical formation of the frame of "dangerous politics", where a female leader appears not as a subject of power, but as an object of constant threat. Lexical analysis of publications in Svenska Dagbladet (*Female politicians have...*, 2022; Arenander & Nilsson, 2022; Thurfjell, 2022) found a high frequency of words with the semantics of victim and danger ("hotad" – threatened, "uthängd" – exposed, "angripen" – attacked), which are almost not used in descriptions of the careers of male politicians. The media coverage of Löf's activities clearly shows a combination of personalisation strategies (shifting the focus from the political programme to the issue of personal security) and political delegitimisation, when its ideological confrontation with right-wing populists was described not as a struggle of values, but as a "conflict of personalities". This shows that in Sweden, gender discourse has taken the form of hidden structures of violence, where a female politician is forced to constantly overcome the discursive barrier of "vulnerability".

Thus, the Swedish political context, considered using the examples of Anna Löf and Anna Löf Hedh, reveals a deep paradox. On the one hand, the Löf case clearly illustrates the high price women have to pay for participating in power, because real threats and a hostile environment become factors that can end even the most successful political career. This proves that in a society that is considered a leader in gender equality, there are powerful forces

trying to push women out of the public space. On the other hand, an analysis of public communication between both politicians shows that they are not passive victims. Their discourse focuses on ideology, political achievements, and specific programmatic frameworks, from combating extremism at the national level to promoting gender equality at the local level. Thus, this unit demonstrates that women in Swedish politics are forced to fight simultaneously on two fronts: to defend their right to participate safely in politics and to perform the meaningful ideological and organisational work that voters expect them to do. Comparative analysis has shown that structurally similar discursive mechanisms appear in the United States and Sweden, although their forms differ significantly. The United States is dominated by a mediatised framework of confrontational politics, where gender is used as a tool of attacks through direct lexical aggression and hyperpolarised markers ("disgusting animals", "too weak", "incompetent"). In Sweden, on the contrary, gender delegitimisation manifests itself more subtly, through a discourse of vulnerability, where a female politician is framed as a target of attacks, which undermines her authority not by direct insult, but by creating an image of the "object of threat". All these patterns demonstrate that even in formally equal societies, the media continues to reproduce persistent gender oppositions that position women as "others" in relation to the normative image of a political leader.

DISCUSSION

The study of gender discourses in political campaigns in the United States, Great Britain, and Sweden has identified persistent patterns that indicate the systematic use of gender as a tool for shaping the perception and delegitimisation of women politicians. The results, which demonstrate the challenges faced by Hillary Clinton, Kamala Harris, and Swedish women leaders, are consistent with broader academic research and simultaneously add important nuances to understanding current political processes. The main conclusion is that despite significant progress in women's political representation, discursive practices in the media and public sphere continue to reproduce stereotypes and create unique obstacles that require women politicians to develop complex and often contradictory communication strategies. This dynamic is part of a complex relationship between media, voters and campaigns, the analysis of which is key to understanding current electoral processes, as shown in comprehensive studies of recent UK elections (Jackson *et al.*, 2024).

The central theme that runs through all three cases is the constant presence of gender stereotypes, although their manifestations and intensity vary. Meta-analysis conducted by S. Banducci *et al.* (2025), confirmed that for forty years there has been a weak but consistent tendency to associate female candidates with “feminine” traits and areas of competence. The results of this study are consistent with this finding, showing how Clinton, Harris, and Swedish politicians have faced double standards. Research by E. DuBosar (2022) made a clarification: during the 2016 campaign, there were few differences in purely personal coverage of Clinton and Trump, which indicates a possible weakening of the most obvious stereotypes in the leading media. However, gender bias has manifested itself on a more subtle level, in particular, in the coverage of strategies and problematic issues. This echoes the study by I. Tischner *et al.* (2021) on the British media, which identified three main ways to construct the image of female leaders: as “traditionally feminine”, as forced to “balance” between masculinity and femininity, or as “exceptional but prone to failure”. The Swedish context, where, according to J. Erikson & C. Josefsson (2023), a dominant female ideal of leadership but preserved masculine practices, illustrates this constant balancing act. Women are forced to meet conflicting expectations, which creates additional obstacles for them, forcing them to constantly prove their compliance with unwritten, often androcentric norms.

The main one is an analysis of discursive strategies used to undermine the legitimacy of women politicians. The results of the Hillary Clinton campaign study find a theoretical explanation in the study by J. Sorrentino *et al.* (2022), which identified two key discursive repertoires: “meritocracy” and “outdated feminism.” The former devalued the gender aspect by filing any appeal against it as a requirement for special treatment, while the latter portrayed Clinton's feminism as irrelevant. These repertoires effectively created her image as one that did not resonate with the

female electorate. These processes are taking place within the framework of broader “culture wars” around gender and gender issues. From the standpoint of discourse theory, these phenomena can be viewed through the prism of Foucault's concepts, as suggested by C. Melis & D. Chambers (2021). The establishment of certain ideas about women politicians is a manifestation of the power/knowledge dichotomy, where media and political opponents create and normalise discursive fields that limit women's agency and determine “acceptable” ways of behaving. Thus, gender becomes not just a characteristic of the candidate, but a field of ideological struggle, where certain versions of femininity and leadership are labelled as legitimate, and others, as in the case of Clinton, are considered deviant or outdated. This mechanism works not only through direct criticism, but also through silence and ignoring, creating a situation in which it is more difficult for women to convey their ideas to voters, as their voices are drowned out by the noise of gender-coloured discussions.

Language analysis of pre-election debates and speeches has added another dimension to understanding gender discourses. The study by F. Kashif *et al.* (2022) confirmed the results of this analysis, showing that Clinton and Trump used different language processes: Clinton was more likely to appeal to cognitive and emotional aspects, while Trump dominated material and verbal processes, which created an image of a pragmatic and active politician. This was supplemented by hedging analysis by A.G. Assiaka & M. J.D. Ibo (2021), which showed that Trump was more likely to use the modal verb “will”, which projected confidence, while Clinton used the word “can”, which indicated possibility. These linguistic differences, while not exclusively gender-specific, can unconsciously activate stereotypical ideas about male determination and women's tendency to compromise. Interestingly, the study by L. Hargrave & J. Blumenau (2022) showed that in the British Parliament, women are increasingly adopting “masculine” communication traits over time, which may indicate a gradual weakening of gender differences in political rhetoric, at least within certain institutional frameworks. This raises the question of whether such a change in style is a form of adaptation to masculine norms, or evidence of a real evolution of political style regardless of gender.

The results of the analysis of the Kamala Harris case, where the media narrative was formed at the intersection of racial and gender biases, empirically confirm the theoretical provisions of V. Sapiro (2022) on the critical significance of intersectionality. This study proved that, as the author argued, a combination of social factors (race, gender) forms a unique, more challenging experience for female politicians than one-dimensional gender models predict. In the Swedish context, the fact established by this study that Anna Lööf's high political visibility led to an escalation of threats directly correlates with the conclusions of S. Håkansson (2021). The data from this study confirm the author's thesis that women in higher positions pay a “higher price” for power, since it was recorded how

discursive violence transformed into a real factor in the end of a political career. In addition, the role of social networks in spreading misogynistic narratives revealed in the analysis is consistent with the concept of C. Vaccari *et al.* (2024) on the “disinformation gap”. The results obtained in this study demonstrate in practice how online platforms become a medium of radicalisation, which confirms the conclusions of these researchers about the difference in the dynamics of traditional and new media. In addition, the results of this discourse analysis, which revealed mechanisms for artificially constructing the image of “inauthenticity” (on the example of Clinton), echo the approach of S. Aboim (2023), who viewed gender identity as a fluid discursive construct. This study showed that political images are constructed by the media in dynamics that correspond to the theoretical framework of the scientist. Simultaneously, the recorded strategies for adapting politicians to masculine norms find parallels in the paper by K. Celis & S. Childs (2024). The analysis confirmed their view that women, regardless of ideology, are forced not so much to change the nature of representation as to adapt to existing patriarchal structures in order to survive politically. Thus, the discussion of the results of the study in the light of contemporary scientific literature confirms that the challenges facing women in politics have transformed from formal obstacles to complex discursive traps. Analysis of campaigns in the US, UK, and Sweden has shown that gender stereotypes, while becoming less explicit, continue to be effectively used to undermine the legitimacy of female leaders through subtle media frameworks, language strategies, and ideological narratives. Understanding these discursive mechanisms is key to achieving not only formal, but also real gender equality in the political sphere.

CONCLUSIONS

A study of gender discourses in political campaigns in the United States, Great Britain, and Sweden found that, despite differences in political cultures and levels of formal gender equality, women politicians continue to face persistent and multifaceted discursive challenges that affect the perception of their voters. It has been confirmed that media and social media play a key role in creating and spreading

gender biases that function as a tool for delegitimisation. The analysis revealed three different but interrelated patterns of gender discourse. In the United States, the Hillary Clinton campaign demonstrated how the combination of traditional stereotypes, the narrative of “inauthenticity” and external interference created a unique toxic environment. Coverage of Kamala Harris’ candidacy in the British media revealed the key role of intersectionality, where discourse was formed at the intersection of gender, racial, and political biases. The Swedish case showed the paradox of a society with high formal equality, where female politicians such as Anna Lööf faced informal but extremely destructive barriers in the form of threats and systemic online harassment. In particular, it revealed how the discourse of “outdated feminism” was used to delegitimise Hillary Clinton, how intersectional biases created a “higher standard” for Kamala Harris compared to her opponent, and how real threats became a significant factor in Anna Lööf’s political career.

It should be noted that this study had certain methodological limitations. The research was qualitative in nature and is based on the analysis of three specific cases, so its conclusions cannot be fully generalised to all political campaigns and cultural contexts. The source base was limited to publicly available content, not including internal campaign documents or direct interviews with politicians and their teams, which could provide a deeper understanding of their strategies and motivations. Promising areas are testing the universality of the identified patterns in non-Western democracies and experimentally studying the influence of gender frames on various electoral groups. An in-depth analysis of intersectionality was also required, considering the wide range of social factors that shape political discourse.

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