

# Female journalists who have reached the top: perceptions on communication, leadership, and gender bias in the Portuguese press

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this study is to understand challenges and constraints in reaching top leadership positions for women in the Portuguese press. Specifically, it aims at characterizing their communication and leadership styles, and at identifying main gender biases in newsrooms routines from their point of view.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A qualitative method was employed by conducting in-depth interviews with four women who have held higher management positions in Portuguese leading newspapers. Participants were asked to characterize their communication and leadership style, but also newsrooms environment, trying to understand how gender asymmetries persist and manifest. Results were analyzed using thematic analysis.

**Findings** – While considering that Portuguese newsrooms are no longer environments marked by a sexist/macho environment, through increasing female participation, women still represent a minority in leadership. Leadership traits linked to male styles, including assertiveness and courage, were revealed, though mixed with a more participative/relational leadership. Also, female leaders regret when emotional ties with teams are not developed and recognized some degree of privilege towards other women through family support or not having children.

**Research limitations/implications** – There is a limited number of interviews, although they represent the few top women leaders in Portuguese journalism.

**Practical implications** – Policymaking recommendations derived from conclusions include participative leadership, implementing quotas, and monitoring tools of gender biases and special training.

**Social implications** – Media literacy policies and open debates on main media outlets concerning female leadership and communication styles may contribute toward the acknowledgement of lingering gender biases in the industry.

**Originality/value** – This study contributes to a fuller insight into the identification of leadership and personal traits among women who managed to disrupt stigmas and break barriers. Their voices are seldom heard in studies focusing leadership, so results enable ascertaining whether there is a female way of leading in journalism and comprehending the sense of privilege these women perceive.

**Keywords** Female journalists, Portuguese newsrooms, Leadership, Communication, Gender bias, Impostor syndrome, Glass ceilings

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Leadership and internal communication matters have been identified in all working environments. However, it can be argued that media outlets face specific challenges since they are responsible for producing contents that impact societies (Djerf-Pierre, 2011).

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Simultaneously, these outlets face internal issues related to how communication is managed and how leadership is performed, which is highly marked by gender issues (De Vuyst and Raeymaeckers, 2019; Ross, 2001).

The study of journalism as a profession across Europe, particularly in Portugal, reveals the existence of gender asymmetries (Crespo *et al.*, 2017). Certainly, a lot has changed since the 1960s, when the first women entered national newsrooms. If then their presence was nearly residual, amounting to only 2% (Ventura, 2009), today women represent, according to the CPCJ – Committee on the Professional Card of Journalists (2021), 2214 out of 5408 journalists, which totals around 41%. Nevertheless, women are still absent from the highest leading positions, either in management boards or in administrations of media companies and groups (Silveirinha and Simões, 2016). When, in 2017, at the closing ceremony of the 4th Congress of Journalists, all people in management positions were asked to go to the stage, the scene was as enlightening as it was embarrassing: only two women (one from *Rádio Renascença* and another from *Visão* magazine) stood up. Five years later there are changes in the national media panorama. There are more women in management positions, but they are still the minority (Subtil, 2009; Subtil and Silveirinha, 2021).

The existence of glass ceilings and other invisible barriers is therefore implicit (Byerly and Ross, 2006; Steiner, 2012), repeatedly and constantly placing obstacles to the professional progression of women, and ultimately conditioning produced content. This, in turn, ends up biasing the desired functions of representation, surveillance, and regulation that journalism is expected to have (Berkowitz, 2009; Djerf-Pierre, 2005).

This tendency to keep women away from the highest decision-making positions is not exclusively Portuguese nor just media related. In fact, according to data from the Global Gender Gap Report 2021 of the World Economic Forum (<https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2021>, accessed January 14, 2022), women remain absent from leadership roles, representing only 27% of manager positions in the 156 analyzed countries. In related areas, a research project developed an extensive literature review of works written on women in public relations across four decades of academic research (Topic *et al.*, 2020). This research showed “prejudices and discrimination towards women, (. . .) a system that prevents women from meeting their full potential and, for example, occupy leadership positions” (Topic *et al.*, 2020, p. 402). Also in the advertising industry, a study using interviews to women in England revealed a patriarchal culture in advertising offices, together with gendered social interactions and banter (Topic, 2021). Another study conducted by Nordicom in 2018 (<https://www.nordicom.gu.se/en/latest/news/media-male-business>, accessed 14 January 2022) likewise revealed that “the media is a male business,” since the leading positions of the major one hundred media companies in the world are occupied by men. In average, while 80% of directors are men, only 17% high-rank executives are women and there are just six female CEO’s leading this list of 100 main corporations (Djerf-Pierre and Edström, 2020). This is also in line with the conclusion of a Reuters Institute’s study in 2021 (<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/women-and-leadership-news-media-2021-evidence-12-markets>, accessed January 14, 2022): only 22% chief-editors across 240 media companies, online and offline, in four continents, are women, despite representing 40% of total workers. This suggests that increasing the presence of women is not in itself a guarantee for a paradigm shift. In fact, some authors (see Hamplová *et al.*, 2022) have been studying arguments for and against quotas to conclude that many of the negative arguments appear to be less sound than the positive ones, thus concurring in favor of quotas (Eckert and Assmann, 2021).

Understanding this substantial absence of women from leadership positions requires the dismantling what (still) appears to be a male power structure (Acker, 2006; Bruin and Ross, 2004; Gallagher, 2014; Steiner, 2012; Van Zoonen, 1998), whose values are deeply intertwined with the ones of the professional culture (Gill, 2007).

In recent decades, journalism has reinvented itself, responding to the challenges imposed by the technological revolution and the extension to digital, with impacts on the profession's own procedures, but also on the financing model of the media business. In this context, heavily contaminated by neoliberal logic, it is important to summon concepts such as *deprofessionalization* – which happens due to the lack of investment in journalists, to reduce costs, safeguarding companies' profit margins (Subtil and Silveirinha, 2021).

Despite these recent changes, moreover, aggravated by the constraints resulting from the pandemic, newsrooms seem to perpetuate a classic hierarchy of power, where concepts like social capital, as understood by Bourdieu (see Djerf-Pierre, 2005) still prevail. Social capital validates influence schemes and informal recruitment processes, nurturing an atmosphere of *homosociality* (North, 2009) or what Allan (1998) has designated as a *macho culture*. The question that arises seems to be: What is the real margin for progression for women in newsrooms? But also, what is the “secret of success” of those who have managed to break through barriers and reach the top? What are their individual characteristics? What perceptions do they have about the journalistic culture and their own leadership?

To assess female presence in leadership positions is a fundamental step towards understanding women participation in the media, and particularly in journalism (O'Brien, 2017). Although there has been already a significant contribution from academia concerning the analysis of newsrooms as gendered organizations (Bruin and Ross, 2004), the role of female leaders and the effects that they may trigger remain to be investigated (Byerly and McGraw, 2020; Eckert and Assmann, 2021). Besides understanding how they exercise power and impact contents, it is important to perceive to what extent they reinforce or contradict the male norm (Baumann, 2017), assessing how they facilitate or not the lives of other women lower down the hierarchy (Acker, 2009).

Hence, this study proposes to understand challenges and constraints in reaching top leadership positions for women in the Portuguese press: (1) to characterize their communication and leadership styles; and (2) to identify main gender biases in newsrooms routines from their point of view. To this end, a qualitative method was employed by conducting semi-structured interviews with women who, in different periods, held management positions in leading generalist publications in Portugal. With this, we contribute to a fuller insight into the identification of common traits among women who managed to disrupt stigmas and break barriers, ascertaining whether there is a female way of leading in journalism, and providing knowledge into breaking through barriers and reaching the top as women.

#### *Understanding female participation and leadership in newsrooms*

To investigate leadership dynamics and better understand the presence – at different levels – of women in newsrooms, one must start by recognizing that organizations are not gender neutral and we refer to feminist authors as Acker (1990, 2009), Connell (2005), and Gill (2007), followed by other more recent works of Skeath *et al.* (2019), Eckert and Assmann (2021), Topic (2021), and Silveirinha *et al.* (2023).

Acker (1990) had an important role identifying the five processes in which gender is daily (re)constructed: gender typing, referring to the notions of gender attached to certain fields/jobs; gender symbolism, associated to the unconscious constructions about a specific occupation; interactions – inevitably scarred by patterns of dominance and subordination; gender expectations, sustained in ideas and beliefs about the notions of masculinity and femininity; and, finally, gendered professional identities, i.e. the constructed beliefs which informs constructions and practices in every social structure, organizations included (Nilsson, 2010).

It is also important to consider the persistence of gender inequalities in organizations, understood as an outcome of cognitive mechanisms that, despite possible changes, endure

during times (Acker, 2009). Calás *et al.* (2013) explained how these cognitive processes, underpinned by theories of leadership also conditioned by stereotypes, impact the perceptions concerning women. Role Theory is most useful when trying to approach gender as a social role “understood to be descriptive of the ways people act and prescriptive of the ways they should act” (Eagly and Carli, 2007, p. 6) allowing researchers to conclude that women, at different levels and in different perspectives, “don’t fit” (Lobo *et al.*, 2017; Santos *et al.*, 2018). And do not only fit in the board rooms or in the management rooms, but also in the pages of newspapers.

The *Global Media Monitoring Project* (GMMP) is the largest longitudinal study that, every five years, analyzes media content from around the world using a gender lens. Detailed data presented in 2020 reports that, although women’s visibility as reporters and journalists has increased, gender inequality is still evident: women are the focus of only 6% of total news, without any growth of stereotype challenging stories, which amount to only 3% (Macharia, 2020). These inequalities are in fact quite prevalent, which is clear in a broader scenario concerning not only gender, but race and ethnicity, as reported in van Sterkenburg *et al.*’s (2021) study with Dutch sports media professionals.

Not only across Europe, but also in the USA, a study on communications organizations showed how organizational glass ceilings remained impenetrable especially to women of color already in the 21st century (Pompper, 2011). Moreover, if we consider other nonwestern contexts, gender inequalities may strike even harder, as showed in the Nigerian press, where traditional gender roles and norms are more reinforced than challenged, and women in leadership and management do not apply sufficient agency in challenging the status quo (Tijani-Adenle, 2016). In this respect, it is also important to consider the intersectional dimension contemplated by authors such as Acker, who not only articulated concepts such as class and race, but also underlined the importance of considering bodies in “their concreteness” (Acker, 2006, p. 191), arguing that only in this way is it possible to move from the level of abstraction to the level of interaction.

Moreover, the fact that media companies themselves refrain from monitoring diversity content is symptomatic of a certain lack of interest in representation issues (Vu *et al.*, 2017), promoting an opacity that erases the fact that gender diversity can improve business performance – by promoting innovation and expanding market access (Skeath *et al.*, 2019). Considering that women are, admittedly, strong consumers, we can consider that this lack of representation acquires other impacts, besides the symbolic ones (Baumann, 2017).

As Gill (2007) pointed at the beginning of the millennium, the desire to attract more women readers has transformed them into a driving force for change in the industry.

Women were used as a wedge to sell more papers and to attract more advertising, and there has been a trend towards the “magazining” of the press, with greater and greater emphasis placed upon myriad advertising-rich lifestyle sections largely targeted at women (Gill, 2007, p. 35).

Despite playing an important role in financing the media business, women continued to be overlooked as an audience (Byerly and Ross, 2006), resulting in what Ross and Carter (2011) classified as the “macho nature of the news.” In view of the above, the *symbolic annihilation* of women in the media Tuchman (1979) talked about in the late 1970s, referring to the multiple impacts of media on various roles and social dimensions of women, more than a distant and outdated idea, continues to be a useful concept. Not only to understand a reality dominated by the silencing of women, but also by their withdrawal from leadership positions (Eckert and Assmann, 2021).

In recent decades, despite having gained ground and managed to progress in the hierarchy of organizations, women remain distant from key positions, too often considered outsiders by their professional colleagues (Lobo *et al.*, 2017; North, 2016).

Literature suggests that women struggle with group expectations of a normative femininity (Santos *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, they seem to have to redouble their professionalism

and belonging. There's an ongoing dialogue between competence and gender, repeatedly presented as opposite and irreconcilable poles (Van Zoonen, 1998). It is in this context that Acker (2009) proposes the concept of *inequality regimes*, referring to gender dynamics that interweave the social fabric of organizations. Acker highlights the importance of procedures and routines – such as hiring, promotion, or salaries – in perpetuating asymmetries that, by remaining invisible or unquestioned, get amplified.

To analyze the evolution of female presence in newsrooms, Steiner (2014) recovered the concept of *critical mass*, originally proposed by Kanter in 1977. Imported from the universe of nuclear physics, it broadly argues that when an irreversible point is reached, change is inevitable. Applied to journalism, the theory suggests that only when women reach a minimum level of representation – in this case, it was defined as one-third of the total number of journalists in a newsroom, would it be possible to create a new group culture (Steiner, 2014). That would also affect practices: data suggests, for example, that women use a wider range of sources, going beyond what Ross (2007) referred to as the *indexing norm*, i.e. the tendency to rely on usual sources. However, as stated, in Portugal women already represent more than 40% of the journalistic class (Crespo *et al.*, 2017) but change did not take place (Martins and Cerqueira, 2018; Miranda, 2017; Santos *et al.*, 2018). The male culture of newsrooms still prevails (Byerly, 2013). Thus, although revealing weaknesses in a more cross-cutting analysis of gender in newsrooms, critical mass theory may still be useful to comprehend female leadership, namely in the analysis of the possible causality between the paucity of women in leadership positions and the prevalence of a male culture in newsrooms, which remains to investigate (Byerly and McGraw, 2020). According to Steiner (2014, p. 624), “the scarcity of female executives, publishers and editors would explain why women do not produce significant change despite their presence as reporters.”

In fact, Steiner (2014) evokes the *Topping Out Factor*, according to which the “mere” presence of women in the organizational structure is not enough, because change, if it is to happen, must come from the top. Attempting to map the territory of female leadership, Steiner also summons concepts such as the *Glass Cliff* (Ryan and Haslam, 2007), according to which leadership positions assigned to women tend to present more risks. The glass cliff represents the idea that

Women do not always fail as executives, of course; but they seem to be more often asked to take on difficult jobs before they get enough information and tools, or where no one is likely to succeed (Steiner, 2014, p. 626).

If, on the one hand, it is not uncommon for women to be under greater scrutiny than men, on the other hand, it is important to remember the male tendency to network, thus extending their sphere of influence – for example, advising friends and colleagues to reject projects deemed too risky, which demands the need to contemplate other important concepts related to leadership such as those of *symbolic power* and *elite* (Djerf-Pierre, 2005).

#### *Gender, leadership, and power relations in European media companies*

Gender differences in leadership and unequal power relations in media outlets have been recognized in the last decades of the 20th century. In 1995, following the 4th World Conference on Women, the Beijing Platform for Action (BPA) set an international agenda to fight for gender equality in the media, presenting a long list of recommendations to be adopted by Governments, national and international communication systems, non-governmental organizations, and professional associations. Nevertheless, companies seem to have chosen to ignore or devalue GE promotion policies (Macharia, 2015). Looking specifically at the Portuguese case, and considering the mechanisms implemented by the National Plans for Equality, despite of important gains, the sense remains that the measures

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taken were more symbolic than effective (Alvares and Veríssimo, 2016; Subtil and Silveirinha, 2017).

Media companies and systems present singularities across different countries, mirroring diverse cultural realities, although similarities prevail over differences. This conclusion was highlighted by Gallagher already in 1987, when after comparing and analyzing data from global research studies in Canada, Ecuador, Egypt, India, and Nigeria the conclusion was that differences existed, but similarities prevailed. Women were found as a minority in a 'man's world' of media, especially in technical and senior media management positions, but represented in presentations and announcements, and segregated in program-making, more prone to be responsible for educational and children's programs (Gallagher, 1987, p. 13).

Analyzing gender equality in European media outlets, for example Djerf-Pierre (2005) focuses on Sweden, where almost 50% of the professionals are women, to explore the concept of *elite*, identifying its main characteristics as exclusivity, unity, and concordance. She concludes that its expression is masculine. Furthermore, to understand how the power elite in the media is constructed, the author calls upon some of Bourdieu's concepts, namely those of *social field* and of *capital*. Distinguishing the different forms of capital, Djerf-Pierre (2005) focuses on *social capital*, where access to formal and informal networks is included, and where a key figure is discovered in the maintenance and perpetuation of the elite, which is that of a mentor, traditionally male. Therefore, men as agents of power reveal themselves, once again, to be key elements in the possibility of change, and "whether they will be willing to open the door to major reforms is an important strategic question" (Connell, 2005, p. 1082).

On the other hand, and this should not be disregarded, there are several studies showing that women themselves do not form a unitary block (Gallagher, 2001). Moreover, when placed in positions of power, they do not perform substantially differently from men (Nilsson, 2010), which drives us to reflect on the specificities of leadership from a gender lens. Furthermore, a more recent study in the English advertising industry stated that women report masculine expectations as a condition to succeed in their careers while revealing internalization of masculine habitus (Topic, 2021).

In a small-scale study in Ireland, female leadership in the media was analyzed from the experience of five women who occupied management positions (O'Brien, 2017). One of major research goals was to identify characteristics and specificities of a female leadership, observed from relational leadership theory, that conceives leadership as a socially constructed changing process (Uhl-Bien, 2011). Within this context, marked by collective and interdependence ideas, characteristics usually related to female leadership, as collaboration, empathy, and sensitiveness, gain relevance. Dismissing an essentialist approach, since "all spectrum identities may possess 'female' leadership capacities because they are socially constructed" (O'Brien, 2017, p. 4), the perception women had of their own leadership and impacts it might cause within a gender equality perspective was foremost acknowledged. It was hence concluded that there are, in fact, specificities of a female leadership, although this does not necessarily make it a feminist leadership, because it does not provide the change and equality feminism requires. Also in Croatia, Polić and Holy (2021) study on the PR industry revealed that gender inequality is still visible from the smaller representation of women in leadership positions.

Therefore, while the literature review points to men and women not substantially differing in terms of performance (Nilsson, 2010) – either by sharing values and/or moving within the same organizational mentality, or by having to answer the demands of highly profit motivated structures (Steiner, 2014) – it also seems evident that there is space for other less coercive, and more participative leadership forms. As Rosener (2011, p. 20) stated, "women success shows that a non-traditional leadership style is adequate for the conditions of certain work environments (. . .) in an uncertain world."



Finally, studies point to the persistence of a generalized absence of reflection within the professional class concerning procedures, and routines, too often sustained by stereotypes and gender biases that remain unquestioned (Sharda, 2014; Shor *et al.*, 2019). Fostering an awareness movement that may bring more gender equality to the profession (Kalra and Boukes, 2020) involves this attempt to map with more detail women participation in the media. It thus seems crucial to consider individual perceptions, even though they might be “contaminated” by a certain inevitable subjectivity.

### Method

This study explores the professional paths and profiles of female journalists who have reached leadership positions in the Portuguese press.

Thus, its purpose includes understanding challenges and constraints in female leadership in the national press. Specific aims are to characterize their communication and leadership styles, and to identify main gender biases in newsrooms routines from their point of view.

Designing this study involved reflecting on methodological approaches in feminist and gender studies that have been dominated since the mid-1990s by qualitative methodologies, involving the analysis of small-scale studies, considering the particularities of the context (Mills and Mullany, 2011, p. 92). We also refer to Bryman (2012) choosing the view that qualitative research may enable greater feminist sensitivity. Thus, we chose this approach as it allows for women’s voices to be heard (Bryman, 2012) and using Skeggs’ (2001) general argument that this approach is best suitable for focusing on women’s experience and exploring shared meanings between women which could help reformulating traditional research, which fits our purpose.

The research technique used in this study was then semi-structured interviewing. We followed other small-scale studies already mentioned (e.g. O’Brien, 2017) to women who have experience in management positions in journalism. Due to research constraints related to the fact that Portuguese media scenario is in fact limited when it comes to women in top leadership positions, the four interviewees represent the women with best known careers in the industry.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out during the months of May and June 2021, based on a script obtained from a selection of questions made within the scope of the International Project EUPREPREA, with the objective to support women in the public relations profession in the European context (Topic *et al.*, 2020). Considering the affinity of the proposals and objectives, which include monitoring the sector, the identification of challenges and opportunities for public relations professionals, and the identification of specificities of leadership in terms of gender, we benefited from using an already validated script. Therefore, 13 questions were asked in interviews that lasted about an hour and that could not be face-to-face (due to the constraints brought by the COVID-19 pandemic) but were conducted through the Zoom platform. Interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis with an emphasis on *what* is said (see Bryman, 2012), referring to the above-mentioned main categories applied in constructing the interview guide.

Hence, interviews were transcribed, and the results were compared. Specifically, thematic analysis was applied through considering key concepts such as communicating and leadership styles, discrimination and sexism, relationship with the administration, challenges in the articulation of personal/family life with professional life, career progression, and gender equality in the newsroom. Rather than focusing on representative opinions, we intended to consider qualitative and subjective views in the gendered leadership experience they represent.

Regarding ethical concerns, all interviewees gave their informed consent of providing answers. Their careers have led them to being directors of the most renowned newspapers

and magazines of Portuguese media scenario. Questions and goals of this study were shared with them, and interviews were therefore recorded after consent and used for academic analysis purposes. Even though they have given full consent regarding the use of the actual names, fictitious names are used: Maria, Francis, Juliet, and Patricia.

## Results

### *Desired personality traits in leadership*

Before characterizing the specificities of female leadership in the Portuguese press, we searched for common characteristics among the interviewed women to understand whether there are personality traits deemed indispensable in the design of a good leadership profile. Frankness, clarity, firmness, straightforwardness, and assertiveness were some of the predicates pointed out by the female directors who agreed on the importance of a solid communication style. Foremost, they established a direct relationship between the way of being/acting and one's own personality. As Maria stated:

I am free. Today I feel that, regardless of circumstances, this is a word that defines me, as a person and as a boss. I'm not afraid of what might happen next, and I express my opinion, defend, or criticize an idea with freedom and detachment. I don't waste a second calculating whether it will be good or bad for me.

Another interviewee, Francis, also underlined the importance of self-confidence:

There is one characteristic that I consider very important in my career and that has to do with self-confidence. I always thought I knew what I was doing, and I never questioned my work. I would criticize to improve it, but I never thought I was worse than others (. . .). To reach a leadership position you need to have that ambition, that drive, and not be afraid to be in charge. My way of communicating was always very clear, concise, direct. I always said what I thought in a direct way. Whether it was up or down.

Considering self-confidence and assertiveness, or even courage, as essential traits in the construction of what is considered a good leader, the interviewees manifested that they did not have to make substantive changes in their way of communicating. However, as they moved up in the hierarchy, namely when working directly with the administrations, they felt the need to make small adjustments to achieve a more assertive action. Such changes include oral communication, but also nonverbal communication: Francis mentioned that in more formal moments, for example in meetings with the administration, she tried to smile less and avoided expressing herself extemporaneously, controlling nods, gasps, or sounds that could denounce an opinion that would leave her in a position of greater vulnerability. She did this, also, because she noticed that this is the attitude amongst men. Another interviewee also stated that:

I don't know if there is a female leadership. There are characteristics that I don't identify in men, such as the way they speak, their tone, their voice, allowing emotions to enter the decision-making process in a natural way, not eliminating them artificially (Maria).

Sometimes these posture changes manifest themselves in an evident way, but often they take place at the level of the internal dialogue, in what some interviewees characterized as an urgent need to overcome the denominated "Impostor Syndrome."

There were several times when I questioned myself if I had the conditions to assume certain positions and I said it out loud. I am very self-critical. I have some qualities, but I lack others. I always think that I haven't read enough books, that I should study more. But I also think that this kind of self-critical analysis is very feminine. Men, in general, don't stop for a second to ask themselves if they are good at doing a certain thing. They assume they are (Juliet).



*Gender discrimination in the newsroom.* As far as gender discrimination is concerned, given answers are very disparate, ranging from *yes*, *no*, and avoiding the direct answer. The interviewees do not consider Portuguese newsrooms to be, in 2021, places marked by a sexist atmosphere, not least because they are increasingly inhabited by women. It is noted that communication science undergraduate degrees have been, in recent years, mostly attended by women – which leads us to believe that the feminization of the profession, although not yet a reality, may not be a distant scenario. This also explains that – as stated by the interviewees – women are increasingly presenting for recruitment. The laddish atmosphere, mentioned by Gill (2007) as one of the main barriers for women entering the profession, seems to have been losing expression. But if the “male culture marked by heavy drinking, dirty jokes and pornography” (Gill, 2007, p. 123) that alienates and antagonizes many women no longer manifests itself in newsrooms, it may still echo at other levels of the hierarchy:

The only times I felt a little outside the system, but not exactly discriminated against, was when I had contact with administrations, that is, outside the purely journalistic business. There, there were people who treated me equally, but also other people who treated me differently. The way we are treated in the sphere of administrations is different from the newsrooms environments, which are more egalitarian places (Francis).

It turns out that women are still a minority in boardrooms (Byerly, 2013; Byerly and McGraw, 2020). Interviewees report that, frequently, they were the only women sitting at the table, which forced them to make their presence known in more imposing ways:

There were countless meetings where men tended to speak over women. I think it’s a classic thing. I repeatedly had to say: I’m not finished, I’m talking. It also happened more than once that I received professional proposals where the leadership situation was unclear. That is, I was offered to co-ordinate sections with men. I am not sure that this would have happened if it was two men (Juliet).

*Reporting leadership styles.* Such experiences are reflected in the leadership style adopted, even though, in some cases, and considering our participants, there seems to be no in-depth or systematized analysis of gender equality issues and how they become visible in the newsroom. In several moments, when confronted with their own perceptions, the interviewees stated that they had never done that reflection, expressed doubts or moments of hesitation, or resorted to professional culture values to dissipate possible factors of discrimination. This was Maria’s case: when asked about the possibility of a sexist or discriminatory environment, she denied it, because this was not the culture of the entity she represented.

The interpersonal dimension was widely mentioned and valued, taken as a fundamental part of a successful leadership:

I care about the people around me. I started out in a leadership position at a very young age and, maybe because of that, I was much more intransigent and thought there was only one way through. Then I realized that I could do things in a more pleasant way for others. People don’t need to fear to be led. You need others to be with you along the way (Francis);

In a newsroom, or anywhere else, it is very important to know how to listen. When you work in environments where personalities are very strong and where there is permanent teamwork, where you need to involve everyone and do political management, you can’t do it without reconciling perspectives (Juliet);

Not lying and being close to people, getting to know them. I think that characterizes me. I have always had the habit of going to the cafeteria alone, then sitting next to different people, from different sections. I would say: “May I? Now you’ll have to stop bad-mouthing me.” I believe that the most beneficial thing for a team is for people to be happy. That earned me criticism, even from female colleagues who thought that valuing happiness was synonymous with weak leadership. I think exactly the opposite. Valuing happiness is synonymous with courageous leadership (Maria).

A conciliatory attitude and the willingness to listen and involve the team in decisions was stated, together with the ability to praise – a gesture that Maria considers still unusual in the culture of newsrooms, perhaps because they are still strongly supported by male values. It should also be noted that this absence of compliments is seen as an aspect that needs to be worked on to develop a more positive leadership. In general, the interviewed directors believe that individual performances can be enhanced when people feel happy and fulfilled in the workplace and, to this end, it is essential to have that feeling of group belonging.

Still regarding the indispensable characteristics of a good leadership, qualities such as exigency, rigor, innovation, and originality are highlighted, but also the ability to be a model, an example to be followed by others:

A leader must always be aware of the latest trend. In the newsroom, this strategic vision goes through the willingness to perceive and embrace what's new. I see many editors who are resigned to the idea of doing things the same way. This is impossible for those at the top because, from then on, everything goes backwards. You need leadership to be encouraging, to be the first to go down that path. I am very much that early adopter. Not only do I have it done, but I like to learn how to do it and be the first to test it (Juliet).

*Work/life conciliation.* Another aspect was the articulation between personal and professional life and the way in which this relationship may represent added challenges for women, who are usually more burdened with domestic and family care tasks (Torres *et al.*, 2018).

In the observed cases, two journalists do not have children, considering that such a condition gave them an important freedom in managing schedules, enabling a total dedication to work.

I have no children and I have a husband who loves to cook. I have always been able to dedicate myself 100% to work. I could work almost 24 hours a day. I am not one of those miracle women who can reconcile super demanding careers with taking care of their children (Patricia).

Maria and Juliet may then fit into what Patricia defines as “a miraculous woman”: they have three and four children, respectively, having tried throughout their careers to reconcile the demands of journalism with motherhood, almost always sacrificing personal time (expression from Juliet). They also say that such articulation was only possible because they have marital relationships where gender equality is evident, but also because they had important family and domestic contributions, having the financial resources to resort to external help. Such balance not only allowed them to develop a gender equality perspective, but it also reflected itself in terms of leadership, as it opened space for customized policies that met workers' specific needs:

Like the case of a journalist who had a baby son, no family support, and asked to adjust her schedule: she would arrive earlier at the newsroom, leave early to pick up her son from daycare, and work at night, from home, to make a news story that would be published online the next morning, at 7 or 8 a.m., when the newsroom is empty. Telecommuting was frowned upon at the time. It was necessary to find a solution within the newsroom and the section, with colleagues, editors, and other managers. It was an extraordinary case, a lesson about humans. Tolerance and the ability to create different solutions are indispensable in a leader. It is something I am proud of: I have always fought to breakdown the idea that we are all the same and that solutions should be the same for everyone (Maria).

Motherhood and the valuing of family life – still – is pointed out by female directors as a possible explanation for the absence of women from management positions. Since these are positions that demand a great deal of time consumption and almost full dedication, many women choose not to move up in the hierarchy, refusing promotions when these mean more working hours and more responsibility:

After becoming mothers, women naturally change their priorities, and their dedication ends up not being the same as it was before. This is frowned upon and misunderstood. On the other hand, I also notice that women don't get ahead in newsrooms. They don't want to take on positions of responsibility because they know, on the one hand, that it will be difficult to reconcile work with their personal lives and, on the other hand, they will bring themselves a lot of trouble. A person who takes on a position of responsibility knows that he or she is going to get upset a lot, is going to be questioned, is going to be confronted. I think that women are often not up for this (Juliet).

When asked if they have any gender preference in a recruitment situation, the interviewees are divided. While some admit that they don't, focusing only on the resume and the candidate's profile, others acknowledge that they prefer to work with women. This is due to their capacity for work, but also to their straightforwardness or what they consider to be an absence of "scheming."

I have promoted women to positions where there were men. I think that women are very focused, they have an immense capacity to separate the wheat from the chaff. Maybe because they are, for a long time, used to doing many things simultaneously. I recognize their ability to focus. They are great editors. And then, in general, they also have the other side that I consider important: being empathetic, knowing how to listen to people (Juliet).

Francis refers to the figure of the sponsor, someone who, at key times, believed in her work and pulled her up, which ended up making all the difference. It happens that, by tradition, in the journalistic class, this figure of power and authority is still male, and the norm is that men promote other men, thus amplifying their circle of power. Betting on a woman still seems to be an exception, though mentalities are beginning to change:

We are living a phase in which women are no longer ashamed to pull other women. They talk about this issue and put it on the agenda. This didn't happen before. Women couldn't push other women to get ahead in their careers. This has changed and we can see it objectively (Patricia).

## Discussion

Portuguese newsrooms are no longer environments marked by a sexist or macho environment, a fact directly related to the increase in female participation in journalism (Crespo *et al.*, 2017). Though there is a common thought that the diversity factor can bring value to a newsroom, as stated, for example, in Meyers and Leide (2020), the interviewees recognized that women still represent a minority in terms of leadership, which goes in line with Djerf-Pierre and Edström (2020). There is also the shared recognition that this affects, directly or indirectly, their performances, namely in dialogues with administration boards.

As Acker (2009) stated, it is still necessary to recognize the existence of glass ceilings and structural asymmetries that transform communication companies into regimes of inequality, governed by male norms. This, along with concepts as "social capital", as mentioned by Djerf-Pierre (2005), may be key factors in understanding the absence of women at the top of hierarchies. In fact, this study concurs with the idea that women are still a minority in newspaper boardrooms (Byerly, 2013; Byerly and McGraw, 2020). Furthermore, and as Lefley and Janecek (2022) recently put it, the target should not just be to place women in what is currently a masculinized board culture but to change this culture to reflect non-masculinity.

However, and according to the interviewees, it is important not to devalue women's choice of having other priorities and responsibilities, personal and family, voluntarily withdrawing from these positions. This idea, close to what Gill (2016) defined as a post-feminist sensibility, requires careful reflection, insofar as it may camouflage structural asymmetries that silently continue to condition women at different levels and should therefore be the target of future research (Subtil and Silveirinha, 2021).

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Interviewed women, for various reasons, end up admitting that they fit into a kind of exceptionality regime. This is a result of two things: either because, at key moments in their careers, they had the support of a mentor who pulled them up the ladder, highlighting the importance of mentoring, concurring with Djerf-Pierre's study (2005), or because, at more advanced stages of leadership, they managed to find strategies that allowed them to reconcile their personal and professional lives, a particularly delicate management in a profession marked by unconventional schedules and the unforeseen.

The perception of having to work harder and prove themselves twice as much is in line with the literature review that concluded that women in journalism are still often considered outsiders (Lobo *et al.*, 2017; Silveirinha and Simões, 2016), and repeatedly asked to double prove their professionalism and competence (Van Zoonen, 1998). Women have stated to express doubts or have moments of hesitation, resorting to professional culture values to dissipate possible factors of discrimination (Lobo *et al.*, 2017). This may still reveal the lingering of the *impostor syndrome* with women, described by Paterson and Vincent-Akpu (2021) as a persistent psychological experience of perceived intellectual and professional fraudulence.

Regarding leadership styles, and despite current hesitations of claiming to adopt a markedly feminine style, interviewees admitted the existence of some specificities, namely in the way of communicating, which is more dialoguing and inclusive, but also more transparent and direct. Also, conciliation and the willingness to listen and involve the team in decisions has been identified as characteristic of a female leadership (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Rosener, 2011). Moreover, they defended the possibility of a more participative and relational leadership, with space for customized solutions that meet individual needs and, at the same time, satisfy organizations' demands. It is this ability to energize others that Rosener (2011) refers to when analyzing the participative leadership that tends to be exercised by women. In related areas as Public Relations, it's been found that there are in fact mixed communication and leadership styles, and for example in Spain high levels of self-demand of female communication managers stood out (Zeler *et al.*, 2022).

Considering leadership itself, the interviewees valued different but complementary aspects, almost always in line with the Theory of Relational Leadership values, as proposed by Uhl-Bien (2011), i.e. a vision of leadership as a social construction, created from the connections and interdependencies between people. However, some studies (e.g. Rosener, 2011) have shown that the focus on participative leadership opens space for criticism and greater vulnerability. In this context, it makes sense to invoke the concept of "critical mass" (Byerly and McGraw, 2020; Steiner, 2014) which, after being considered a failed theory in the attempt to analyze gender equality in newsrooms (Steiner, 2012), may prove useful to decode the perpetuation of media power regimes. Since there is no female critical mass in leadership, and assuming change must come from the top, as so-called *topping out factor*, the possibility of installing a new paradigm remains unachieved.

Answers given by these four female leaders enable the understanding that career advancement is strongly dependent on the discrimination factor, and that the increasing presence of women in newsrooms is still dependent on several glass ceilings and gender constructions.

## Conclusion

This study focused on comprehending main factors and gender bias perceptions of female Portuguese press journalists who have reached leadership positions.

Aware of the dangers that essentialist theories represent, interviews were designed to understand whether there are specificities of a female leadership. Results indicate that despite showing characteristics generally considered to be closer to the male universe –

assertiveness, courage – or to what are conventionally considered to be classic predicates of a good leader (Eagly and Carli, 2007), interviewed women do not reveal any difficulties in exercising a more participative or relational leadership, regretting when they feel unable to develop emotional ties with their teams. They consider rapport, dialogue, and collaboration fundamental to the health of an organization, having a strong impact on collective performance and the achievement of goals and results.

Knowing that female leadership is not synonymous or a warranty for a feminist leadership (O'Brien, 2017), we sought to establish a relationship between the two ways of leading: while no causal relationship may be proven, it is more likely that participatory and relational leadership lead to feminist leadership, in the sense that it enhances more egalitarian situations.

It is thus understood, as argued by Byerly (2013), that the collective challenge for women is to understand the nature of leadership structures, trying to develop strategies that can impact the policies of the communication companies.

This research, while reflecting women's small participation in top leading positions in Portuguese main journalistic outlets, was limited by the number of interviewees. Nevertheless, several implications for future research may be highlighted: (1) considering more female top decision makers voices seems to enable in-depth knowledge into journalism hierarchies and structure construction; (2) In the same path of other Portuguese authors (Subtil and Silveirinha, 2021), structural asymmetries that silently continue to condition women at different hierarchical levels should also be the target of future research concerning major media outlets, in journalism and related communication industries.

Moreover, we may also establish some policy-making recommendations from discussing our research in light of other contexts: (1) The implementation of recommendations for a more participative and relational leadership style, with space for customized solutions that meet individual needs and, at the same time, satisfy organizations' demands; (2) after our participants' experiences, it seems that ideas of quotas in corporate boards for media organizations might be considered, as likewise presented by Hamplová *et al.* (2022, p. 3). the adoption of monitoring tools seems to be an essential step so that the class itself may move towards eliminating biases and diluting stereotypes; 4. special training for decision-makers in the industry seems important not to devalue women's choice of having other priorities and responsibilities, personal and family, aiding to fight the mentioned structural asymmetries that render communication companies into regimes of inequality, governed by male norms, in particular the *impostor syndrome* with women, having to work harder and prove themselves twice. Finally, at the larger societal level, media literacy policies and open debates on main media outlets concerning female leadership and communication styles may contribute towards the acknowledgement of lingering gender biases in the industry.

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