

# **Silenced by stereotypes: the gender bias in media discourse on female politicians**

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## **Abstract**

The representation of female politicians in media discourse has long been a topic of concern due to the pervasive gender bias that is often present in their portrayal. This study examines the gender bias in Czech media discourse on female politicians, with a particular focus on how stereotypes contribute to the marginalization and silencing of women in politics. Using a content analysis approach, the study analyzes Czech newspaper titles to uncover the ways in which gender stereotypes are constructed and perpetuated in media discourse. The findings reveal a clear gender bias in the language used to describe and refer to female politicians, with women often being subjected to double standards and negative stereotypes. The implications of this bias are significant, as media discourse has the potential to shape public perceptions of female politicians and influence their political careers. This study highlights the need for media outlets to adopt more inclusive and equitable language in their coverage of politics, in order to promote gender equality and support the representation of women in political leadership.

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## **Keywords**

female politicians, media discourse, gender bias, Czech language, stereotypes, newspaper titles

## **Setting the stage: an introduction to the topic**

Gender bias is a pervasive issue in many aspects of our society, including the media. In particular, political newspaper headlines have been shown to display significant levels of gender bias, perpetuating gender stereotypes and reinforcing gender inequality.

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Research has shown that gender bias in political newspaper headlines is a prevalent issue that continues to exist today. Various academic studies have examined the representation of male and female politicians in the media and have found gender bias to be often present in newspaper headlines (Norris, 1997; Miller and Peake, 2013; Trimble et al., 2013; Leavy, 2020).

Studies (Bauer, 2013; Rebecca et al., 2014; Håkansson, 2021; Estévez- Abe, 2023) have consistently shown that women are underrepresented in the political news coverage and are often portrayed in a negative light when they do receive media attention. This is reflected in the language used in the newspapers headlines, which tend to focus on a woman's appearance or personal life rather than her qualifications or policy positions.

In this regard, a study by the Women's Media Center found that during the 2016 USA presidential campaign, 62% of the articles written about Hillary Clinton focused on her personal characteristics, while only 38% focused on her policy positions. In contrast, articles about her male opponent, Donald Trump, were more likely to focus on his policy positions than his personal characteristics (Women's Media Center, 2017). Similarly, a study by the Pew Research Center

found that women in political news coverage were more likely than men to be described using gendered language, such as “emotional” or “ambitious”, which can reinforce negative stereotypes and undermine their credibility (Pew Research Center, 2018).

These findings are concerning because they suggest that political newspaper headlines can shape public perceptions of women in politics and contribute to the persistence of gender inequality. By focusing on a woman's appearance or personal life rather than her qualifications and policy positions, these headlines suggest that women are not as capable or deserving of political power as men.

This study focused on analyzing newspaper headlines during a period of presidential election in 2023 in the Czech Republic. This time period was chosen due to its historical significance and political consistency, which allowed for an opportunity to investigate the representation of politicians over a prolonged period and to reduce the impact of specific events or individuals on media language. To achieve this goal, three newspapers in the Czech Republic, namely Deník N, Lidovky, and Blesk, were analyzed using digital sources, which provided researchers with easily accessible, consistent, and cost-effective information. The methodology employed in this research is offered to make scalability possible, enabling it to be applied to text from different media sources in the future. Natural language processing techniques were employed to extract data from the newspaper text, and existing language models were used to classify headlines automatically based on gender. However, the accuracy of predictive models did not reveal the extent of differences in the treatment of male and female politicians as these models were primarily designed for English language analysis. Nevertheless, it facilitated the provision of a general perspective on gender bias in Czech media. Concordance analysis was employed to examine the context in which gender differences occurred in the headlines.

To gain a deeper understanding of the potential impact of gender bias, this study employed the perspective of critical discourse analysis (CDA). This attitude focuses on examining the social, cultural, and political factors that shape language use. It seeks to uncover the ways in which language reflects and reinforces power relations within society. CDA is a convenient viewpoint for analyzing gender bias because language is a powerful tool for perpetuating and challenging gender norms and stereotypes.

## **1. Uncovering the layers: understanding the context**

Language is one of the primary means by which gender is constructed and maintained. Gender is reflected in language use, and language reinforces gender norms and expectations. It is important to consider that gender is a complex and dynamic system that is shaped by a variety of social and cultural factors (Wodak & Meyer, 2015: 83).

Researches have demonstrated that language usage can inadvertently perpetuate gender bias in a systematic way. This bias can manifest in various forms, including word choice, sentence structure, and even cultural norms surrounding language use (Leavy, 2020; Corbett et al., 2022). Language is used to construct and negotiate social and political identities, and gender is one of the key points. Wodak argues that gendered language is often used to reinforce traditional gender roles and stereotypes. For example, women may be described as emotional or irrational, while men are described as logical and rational. These gendered stereotypes can have a powerful impact on how women are perceived in political contexts, making it more difficult for them to be taken seriously or to gain influence (Wodak, 2015: 699-700).

Women face significant challenges in accessing political leadership roles due to a pragmatic bias, which is a tendency to perceive women as less competent and less suitable for leadership positions. This bias is rooted in traditional gender roles and stereotypes that are deeply ingrained in society. Some authors (Corbett et al., 2022) argue that reducing pragmatic bias is essential for achieving gender equality in political leadership and increasing women's participation in politics. In their study pragmatic bias refers to the tendency of individuals to refrain from supporting a member of a particular group, as they perceive the attainment of success to be challenging or unattainable for individuals within that group. They suggest that increasing exposure to female leaders and highlighting their accomplishments can help to combat this bias, as can implementing policies that promote gender diversity in political leadership. Ultimately, the authors argue that changing societal attitudes towards gender and leadership is critical for achieving gender parity in politics.

The scholars argue that women's underrepresentation in politics can be partly explained by the double bind that women face. Women are expected to adhere to gender norms and fulfill traditional roles such as being a caretaker or being nurturing, which makes it difficult for them to succeed in politics where aggression and assertiveness are often necessary (Hayes and Lawless, 2016).

Gender stereotypes have a significant impact on the electoral success of women candidates. Voters often hold stereotypes that women are less competent and less suited for political leadership roles than men, which can lead to biases against female candidates. The impact of gender stereotypes on voting for women candidates is influenced by several factors, including the candidate's appearance, personal background, and issue positions. Voters may be more likely to support female candidates who conform to traditional gender roles or who emphasize their qualifications and experience. The researchers believe that gender stereotypes can be overcome through efforts to change attitudes and beliefs about women's political leadership. This might involve challenging stereotypes through public education campaigns, promoting women's leadership in the media and popular culture, and encouraging women to run for office and participate in politics at all levels (Dolan and Lynch, 2016).

The latest studies show that female politicians received significantly less coverage in the media than their male counterparts, and when they were covered, they were often portrayed in more negative terms. Specifically, the study found that female politicians were more likely to be described as “inexperienced”, “emotional” and “irrational”, while male politicians were more likely to be described as “confident”, “strong” and “assertive”. Leavy notes that these findings are consistent with previous research on gender bias in media coverage, which has shown that women are often subject to a “double standard” in which they are judged more harshly than men for the same behaviors or actions. (Leavy, 2020).

NLP systems perpetuate masculine biases and stereotypes because they are trained on large datasets that reflect historical and cultural biases (Seaborn et al., 2023). Various concerns have been explored in text classification research, including an author's political views, gender, personality traits, and subjective perspective. Although not directly related to gender bias, these studies have revealed how language can encode information on personal qualities and opinions. One significant benefit of using machine learning algorithms for text analysis is the ability to identify unexpected patterns. This can be accomplished by enabling the algorithm to analyze all terms in a corpus, minimizing the need for text encoding or preprocessing (Boulis and Ostendorf, 2005; Kucukyilmaz et al., 2006; Nowson and Oberlander, 2006; Opsomer et al., 2008; Otterbacher 2010). In a comparable investigation, Yu and colleagues (2008) analyzed a corpus of speeches from the US Senate and House, utilizing words as features while excluding uncommon and overused terms.

By utilizing critical discourse analysis and language modeling techniques to examine media content, it is possible to reveal previously undiscovered language patterns in addition to analyzing the text for particular linguistic characteristics. The main aim of this study is to investigate the gender bias in Czech media discourse on female politicians and to examine how gender stereotypes contribute to the marginalization and silencing of women in politics. To that end, the following question will try to be answered: How are gender stereotypes constructed and perpetuated in Czech media discourse on female politicians, and what are the implications of this bias for the representation of women in political leadership?

## **2. Exploring the frameworks and methodology techniques**

To investigate potential gender biases in media coverage, a corpus of newspaper headlines from leading Czech newspapers—Deník N, Lidovky, and Blesk—was compiled and analyzed using the corpus management and text analysis software Sketch Engine. These newspapers were selected based on their readership, influence, and distinct editorial stances, ensuring a diverse representation of political discourse in Czech media. This approach enabled a systematic and quantitative examination of gendered language in media representations of male and female politicians. By leveraging a large and representative sample of headlines from each newspaper, this study provides a comprehensive overview of gender portrayals in the Czech media landscape during the 2023 presidential election campaign.

This study employs the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) (Wodak and Meyer, 2015), a socio-linguistic methodology that examines language use in social and political contexts to uncover power relations, ideologies, and social practices. The DHA integrates insights from discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, and critical theory, emphasizing the role of language in constructing social identities, shaping public discourse, and reinforcing dominant power structures.

Key concepts from the DHA utilized in this study include interdiscursivity, which recognizes that media discourse does not exist in isolation but is shaped by overlapping historical, political, and social narratives. Another important concept is hegemony, which refers to the ways in which dominant groups maintain power through language and discourse, thereby influencing public perception of male and female politicians.

By applying the DHA to the Czech media context, this research aims to identify recurring linguistic patterns that may reinforce gender biases or challenge existing power structures.

The corpus comprises 1,171 newspaper headlines featuring male and female political candidates during the 2023 Czech presidential election campaign. Headlines were systematically collected using predefined search criteria, including whether the headline directly pertains to a candidate in the 2023 presidential election, whether it was published during the official campaign period, and whether it focuses on campaign-related activities rather than personal matters. Additionally, opinion pieces, satire, and entertainment-focused articles were excluded to maintain a focus on journalistic reporting. Headlines that mentioned political parties or government entities without referencing a specific candidate were also excluded. These criteria ensured a targeted and relevant dataset, capturing the media portrayal of male and female candidates within a politically significant timeframe, and manually filtered to remove irrelevant or non-gendered content. Inclusion criteria required that headlines explicitly refer to a politician, while exclusion criteria ruled out headlines with ambiguous gender references or non-political content. In cases where a headline referenced both male and female politicians, it was duplicated and labeled accordingly to enable separate analysis for each gender. The corpus includes both direct quotations and paraphrased statements to assess differences in citation patterns.

Various computational text analysis techniques were employed to examine gendered language in media representation. Collocation and word frequency analysis were used to identify recurring linguistic patterns associated with male and female politicians, utilizing Sketch Engine's keyword and n-gram extraction tools. Additionally, the Gender Decoder tool developed by Kat Matfield was applied to categorize words as masculine- or feminine-coded to detect implicit gender biases in language usage. Since the Gender Decoder was originally designed for English, its application to Czech required adaptation, particularly in handling grammatical gender variations.

Unlike English, where established gender bias detection tools exist, the Czech language presents unique challenges due to its grammatical structure and lack of a pre-existing gender bias detection model. Czech is a heavily gendered language, meaning that verbs, adjectives, and nouns often change based on gender, complicating automated bias detection. Consequently, researchers must develop custom methodologies tailored to the linguistic intricacies of Czech. In this regard, the researcher in question is planning to create a language model within the framework of her IGA project. The development of such a model will pose several challenges, such as the need to ensure that it is both accurate and reliable, as well as the need to overcome any limitations related to the size of the dataset used for training.

Due to privacy concerns and copyright restrictions associated with the collected newspaper headlines, the full documentation of the dataset cannot be publicly shared. Many of the sources used in this study are subject to publisher rights and proprietary access agreements, which prevent unrestricted distribution. However, to ensure methodological transparency, a general overview of the data collection and processing steps has been provided, as the full

documentation cannot be shared due to proprietary data access agreements and ethical considerations regarding the use of journalistic content. Key findings and processed results will be made available, allowing future researchers to validate and compare findings within similar research frameworks.

Despite these challenges, the use of a gender decoder can be a powerful tool for identifying gender biases in newspaper headlines. By examining a corpus of newspaper headlines through the lens of a Gender Decoder, researchers can gain valuable insights into the ways in which male and female politicians are being portrayed in the media. Through careful analysis of the results, researchers could then identify discriminative features that are contributing to gender bias and use this information to develop strategies for addressing these issues. Ultimately, the use of a Gender Decoder in combination with other text analysis techniques would be an effective means of shedding light on gender inequality in the media and promoting greater equity in the representation of male and female politicians.

### **3. From data to discoveries: investigating the results**

The research findings revealed that gender bias exists in the political news content of Czech digital media. The study also demonstrated that feature engineering, in conjunction with online language model tools for classification, can uncover various aspects of gender bias in language. Unlike other text classification applications that focus on achieving high predictive accuracy, these methods are effective for English, which is still the prevailing language. Schneider argues that AI relies on large datasets of language to learn and improve, and these datasets are often dominated (Schneider, 2022) by a small number of languages, primarily English. This creates a “regimentation” of language, where non-standard forms of language are marginalized and excluded from the dataset, leading to the reinforcement of dominant languages and the marginalization of others. The consequences of this regimentation of language are significant. Schneider argues that it contributes to the spread of linguistic imperialism, where the cultural and linguistic dominance of certain countries and languages is reinforced at the expense of others. It also exacerbates existing power imbalances and inequalities, as those who speak dominant languages have greater access to the benefits of AI (Schneider, 2022). Although some features revealed only minor differences in quantitative terms, when combined with qualitative analysis, these differences were significant indications of gender bias.

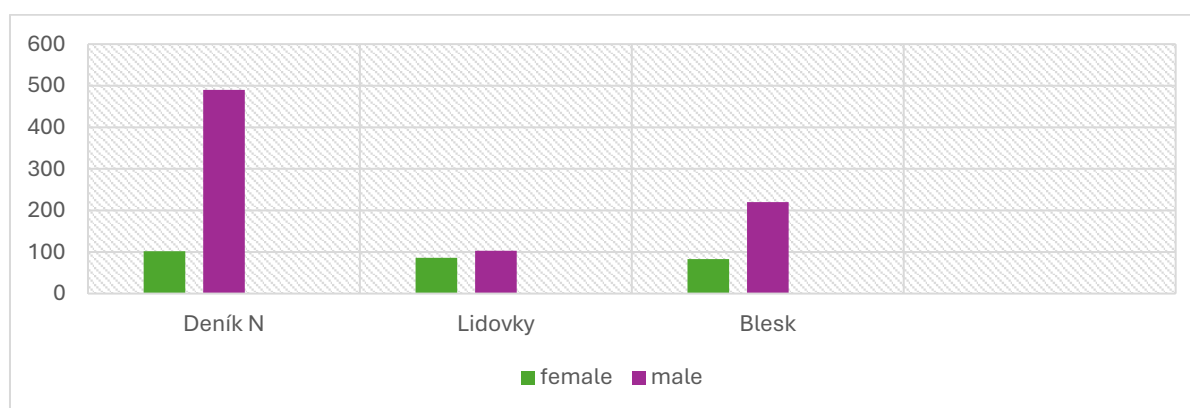
In DHA, the analysis typically begins with a thorough examination of the discursive and social context in which a text is produced and interpreted. This is followed by a detailed analysis of the linguistic features of the text, including lexical choices, grammatical structures, and rhetorical strategies. Finally, the analysis considers the broader social and political implications of the text, and the ways in which it contributes to the reproduction or transformation of power relations in society.

### **4. The gender gap in news: a closer look at headline volume**

The study aims to shed light on the ways in which language is used to depict male and female politicians and how gender bias may manifest itself in the corpus. The data provided represents the number of females and males mentioned in three different newspapers: Deník N, Lidovky, and Blesk during a period of presidential election in 2023 in the Czech Republic. The data is presented in a table format, with the names of the newspapers listed in the first column, and the number of females and males mentioned in the second and third columns, respectively.

Looking at the data, it is clear that there were more males mentioned overall than females in all three newspapers. Among the three newspapers, Deník N had the highest number of males mentioned (490), followed by Blesk (220) and Lidovky (103). Similarly, Deník N also had the highest number of females mentioned (102), followed by Lidovky (86) and Blesk (83) (Figure 1). This outcome can be elucidated through various factors. Initially, the presidential election featured a pool of 42 candidates, encompassing both qualified and disqualified individuals, among whom only 7 were women<sup>2</sup>. Remarkably, only one female candidate, Danuše Nerudová, successfully completed the registration process. Furthermore, the underrepresentation of female candidates is systemic within the Czech parliament, where the overall percentage of female candidates stands at a modest 26%<sup>3</sup>.

Figure 1. Average number of articles featuring male and female politicians in newspapers headlines (Deník N, Lidovky, Blesk).



Source: author's own research.

To analyze the gender bias in this data, a discourse historical approach is applied, which focuses on the use of language and discourse to construct power and dominance relationships between social groups. Ruth Wodak's DHA assumes that gender bias is not a simple individual phenomenon, but is involved in social and cultural structures and processes.

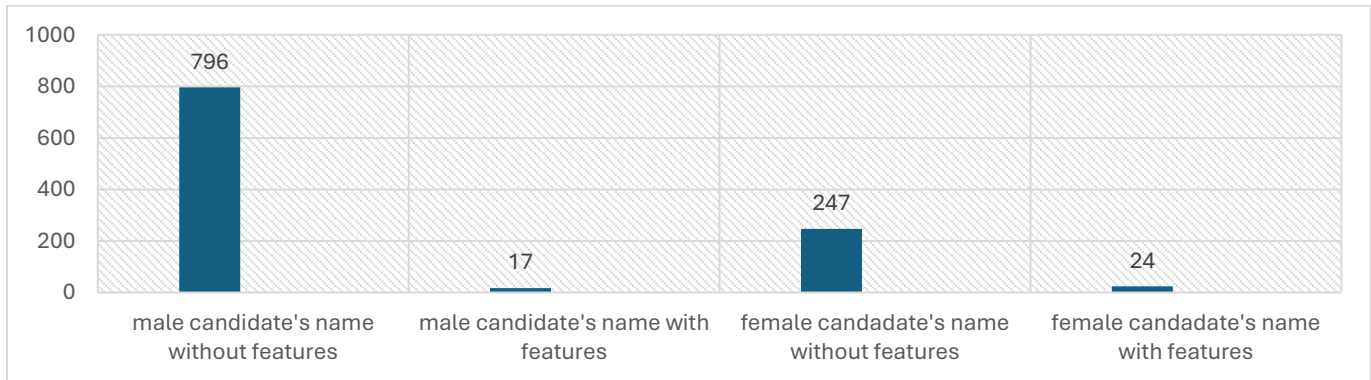
In the context of the presidential elections in the Czech Republic, various discursive practices can be seen that replicate gender bias. The received results show that article headlines often only feature the candidate's name, but not their counterpart. This leads to the perception of men as the primary and more significant actors in the political space. Similarly, it can be observed

<sup>2</sup> List of candidates for the election of the President of the Czech Republic 2023: [https://cs.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seznam\\_z%C3%A1jemc%C5%AF\\_o\\_kandidaturu\\_ve\\_volb%C4%9B\\_prezidenta\\_%C4%8Cesk%C3%A9\\_republiky\\_2023](https://cs.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seznam_z%C3%A1jemc%C5%AF_o_kandidaturu_ve_volb%C4%9B_prezidenta_%C4%8Cesk%C3%A9_republiky_2023)

<sup>3</sup> Global data on national parliaments: [https://data.ipu.org/node/45/data-on-women?chamber\\_id=13507](https://data.ipu.org/node/45/data-on-women?chamber_id=13507)

that some reports focus mainly on male candidates and their political programs, while female candidates are mainly presented in the context of their family and personal lives (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Representation of male and female candidate’s names without and with features.



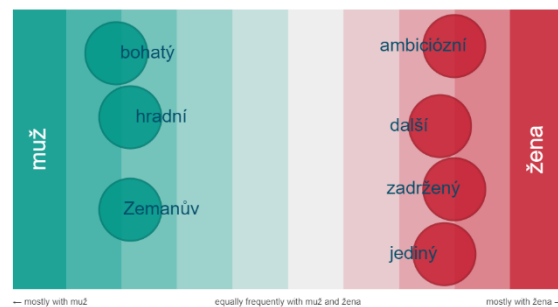
Source: author’s own research.

Another discursive practice that can perpetuate gender inequality is the use of gender-specific and stereotypes. Analyzing the corpus created for pairs such as “male candidate” - “female candidate” and “man” - “woman” yielded the following results: modifiers for “male candidate” include former, next, failed, mature, potential, other, moved, presidential, and successful, while modifiers for “female candidate” include successful, Pavel's, and other. Modifiers for “man” include rich, Zeman's, keystone, while modifiers for “woman” include next, only, ambitious, restrained, iconic, and angry.

Political leadership in most cases is linked to masculinity (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011). As a consequence, leadership has a masculine connotation. Also considering that political functions are perceived with qualities as agenda, journalists may portray male candidates as more feasible. Because of the news value of power feasible (Bennett, 1990) candidates are acknowledged to be important to cover. Under similar circumstances, journalists may prioritize coverage of male contenders over their female counterparts.

The findings demonstrate that a female candidate may be portrayed as emotional and sensitive, while a male candidate is described as decisive and strong. This type of representation can contribute to the perception of women as weaker and less capable political actors, reinforcing gender stereotypes and potentially hindering progress towards gender equality (Figures 3-4).

Figures 3-4. Representation of modifiers for corpus created pairs : “male candidate” - “female candidate” and “man” - “woman”.





Source: author's own research.

Gender Decoder is a tool designed to identify and eliminate gender bias in job descriptions. However, this tool can also be used to analyze newspaper headlines about female and male politicians. Gender Decoder works by analyzing the language used in the created corpus to see if it contains any stereotypically masculine or feminine words or phrases. Using this tool helps to get a better understanding of whether there are any gender biases in the way that these politicians are being portrayed.

Looking at the list of masculine-coded words, we can see that they are largely associated with power, strength, and assertiveness. Words such as “courage”, “decisive”, and “dominate” evoke images of strong, confident leaders who are willing to take charge and make tough decisions. The use of such words may reflect an underlying gender bias that associates these qualities more strongly with men than with women.

Similarly, words such as “fight”, “battle”, and “aggressive” suggest a confrontational approach to problem-solving that is typically associated with masculinity. By contrast, the feminine-coded words in the list emphasize collaboration, support, and empathy. Words such as “support”, “collaboration”, and “empathy” suggest a more nurturing, cooperative approach to leadership and problem-solving. However, the use of some feminine-coded words, such as “whining” and “quieter”, suggests a negative stereotype of women as overly emotional and passive. Similarly, the use of the word “warmonger” suggests a negative stereotype of men as overly aggressive and warlike.

Overall, the analysis reveals how language is used to construct and reinforce gender stereotypes and social norms. The use of masculine and feminine-coded language in these newspaper headlines reflects broader societal attitudes about gender roles and expectations. Wodak might argue that the use of such language reinforces and perpetuates gender stereotypes, which in turn can have real-world consequences for how individuals are perceived and treated in professional settings. By identifying these linguistic patterns, it allows better understanding on how language shapes our perceptions of gender and contributes to the reproduction of gender inequalities in society. It is worth noting that while these words are often gender-coded, they are not inherently masculine or feminine. Rather, they have become associated with certain gender roles and stereotypes over time.

## Conclusion

Last but not least, the issue of gender bias is still prevalent in various sectors of society, including the media. This has been exemplified in political newspaper headlines, where the

representation of male and female politicians is unbalanced and perpetuates gender stereotypes. This investigation's use of corpus, Gender Decoder, and Wodak's DHA was essential in identifying and examining gender biases in the headlines. However, the lack of language models for identifying gender biases in some languages, such as Czech, presents a challenge to researchers. Further development of tailored language models is necessary to address these issues.

Moreover, the study's findings indicate that there is a need for more gender-balanced reporting in the media, particularly in political news. It is crucial to encourage media outlets to prioritize gender sensitivity and promote unbiased reporting. Addressing gender bias in the media will not only promote gender equality but also contribute to the development of a more inclusive and diverse society. The media plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions and attitudes towards gender, and it is essential to ensure that this role is used positively.

Another important aspect that must be taken into account is the historical context that can influence the development of gender bias in the political space. Further discussion could be focused on how societal expectations of gender roles influence discourses on women's political participation. Historical examples where roles and expectations towards men and women have changed and how these changes have affected women's political participation can be examined. Also, there is a space to discuss ways in which prejudices and stereotypes can be overcome, such as education, awareness and support. The use of these tools in the past to promote women's political participation, and how their use has evolved over time can be further examined.

While this study focuses on the Czech media landscape, future research could expand comparative insights by analyzing similar gender bias patterns in media discourse across different linguistic and cultural contexts. Given that media representations are shaped by broader socio-political factors, cross-national comparisons, particularly within Central and Eastern Europe, could provide valuable perspectives on whether gender portrayals in Czech media align with or deviate from regional trends. Future studies could also incorporate larger multilingual corpora and apply machine learning models adapted for gender bias detection in various languages, further enhancing the understanding of gendered media discourse on a global scale.

To situate the findings within a broader context, this study will compare results with existing research on media bias in other linguistic and cultural settings. Comparative insights will be drawn from studies on gender representation in European media, particularly in countries with similar journalistic traditions, such as Germany, Austria, and Slovakia. This will allow for an evaluation of whether Czech media follows broader European trends or exhibits unique gendered discourse patterns.

Finally, it is important to continue conducting research in this area to ensure that gender biases are adequately addressed. Researchers should continue exploring new methodologies and language models to help identify and address gender biases in the media. As evidenced by the data collected in this investigation, there is a clear need for greater awareness and action to address gender bias in the media and promote more equitable representation of all genders.

## Acknowledgments

This publication was made possible thanks to targeted funding provided by the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports for specific research, granted in 2023 to Palacký University Olomouc (IGA\_FF\_2023\_054)

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