

MCKAY, F. 2020. A stairheid rammy: female politicians and gendered discourses in the Scottish press. *Journal of language and politics* [online], 19(1), pages 30-47. Available from: <http://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.20004.mck>

# A stairheid rammy: female politicians and gendered discourses in the Scottish press.

MCKAY, F.

2020

© John Benjamins Publishing Company. Permission to re-use or reprint the material in any form must be requested from the publisher.

# **A Stairheid Rammy: Female politicians and gendered discourses in the Scottish press**

Fiona McKay

Robert Gordon University

This article explores the mediated representation of gender in the Scottish public sphere during the independence referendum in 2014. In particular, it focuses on a media sample drawn from the Scottish press that centres on two key political figures, Johann Lamont and Nicola Sturgeon, who took part in a televised debate during the campaign. Using critical discourse analysis, it looks at how language is used to construct overlapping discourses of gender in a specific cultural and national context. Findings show representations pivot on expectations that female politicians should embody a specific feminised style; and when gender norms appear to be violated, this is represented in negatively gendered terms. Though there is evidence of contestation of male-dominated politics, discourses still reify traditional gender norms and situate women as outsiders to the political sphere. This study shows how specific discursive frames can contribute to a cross-cultural practice of gendering women in politics.

**Keywords:** gender, female politicians, Scottish politics, Scottish press, critical discourse analysis.

## **1. Introduction**

On 18 September 2014, the Scottish people voted in a referendum that asked: “Should Scotland be an independent country?” The electorate was requested to consider a vote for independence, and accordingly independent statehood, or to remain part of the group of four nations of the United Kingdom. The campaign period drew widespread praise for high levels of public engagement, particularly during the campaign’s latter stages. On polling day, voter turnout reached an unprecedented 84.6% and the global media commended Scotland and the UK for its “exemplary democratic culture” and the referendum for its “peaceful democratic nature” (Bajekal 2014). During this time, a number of political issues and policy questions were intensely scrutinised and debated in the public sphere, including the role of women and gender equality. Though the initial stages of the campaign arguably did not match the level of women’s involvement or visibility in the build-up towards Scottish devolution (Bell and Mackay 2013; Kenny 2014), this also changed towards the latter stages of the campaign. A number of new women’s grassroots organisations and networks on both sides of the debate were established to counteract this lack of gender focus (Ritch 2019), including the groups Women for Independence and Women Together, which were active in the local community and in wider media (Kenny 2014; McAngus and Rummery 2018).

Female politicians were also particularly prominent, with a number holding key positions within the official referendum sides: *Yes Scotland* and *Better Together*. At the time, two of the main parties in Scotland had women in leadership roles: Johann Lamont, leader of the Scottish Labour Party; and Ruth Davidson, leader of the Scottish Conservatives and Unionists. The role of Deputy First Minister, the most senior political role behind the First Minister, was also held by a woman: Nicola Sturgeon,

who was then deputy leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP), prior to becoming First Minister of Scotland and leader of the SNP. Women, “far from identikit men” as the *Guardian* reported, were at the forefront of the campaign “in a way currently inconceivable in UK politics” (Brooks 2014).

Nonetheless, as McAngus and Rummery (2018) suggest, specific feminist messages and aims varied across participants and campaign groups. Questions relating to the role of the women’s vote were prominent, though not always entirely positive: for example, a widely-visible TV broadcast from the *Better Together* side, “The woman who made up her mind” (Better Together UK 2014), was much maligned for what many considered to be a sexist portrayal of women, with commentators branding it patronising, if not insulting (Cresci 2014). There was also much discussion during the campaign about increasingly volatile behaviour, both offline and online (BBC 2014), which also took on a gendered dimension with reports in the media stating that political figures received sexist and homophobic abuse on Twitter in particular (Pedersen et al. 2014, 25).

To this end, it is evident that the Scottish referendum can be seen as a significant political moment when gender was very much to the fore in public and political discourse in a number of complex arrangements. Research in this area has tracked cultural differences in the media representations of politicians, which can be set in the overall context of broader trends emphasising gender difference (see for example: Ibroscheva 2007; Cantrell and Bachmann 2008; Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen 2012). Given the unique political situation and relative newness of the Scottish

Parliament, there has been little research conducted around the specific nexus of the media, gender and Scottish politics. This article seeks to examine gendered discourse during an intense moment of political scrutiny in the Scottish context, thus contributing to a growing body of literature that analyses the nuanced discursive regimes surrounding women and politics.

## **2. Women, Media and Politics**

This article is grounded on the concept that gender is socially constituted, which can inform how constructions of masculinity and femininity are culturally and historically variable (Richardson 2015). Gender is therefore performed in a mediated context (Harmer, Savigny, and Ward 2017) with attitudes about what constitutes gender identity redefined through negotiation. Analysis exposes the arbitrary links between sex and gender – allowing for the unpicking of assumptions about gender norms commonly associated with certain activities or domains, such as caregiving or, indeed, politics. Moreover, the socially constructed nature of gender means it is formed in discourse and not located within the individual, so it can also be considered a process that is done *to* an individual. Gender relations can therefore be subject to contestation, but also limited and constrained by the surrounding context in the diffusion of power, and have ideological underpinnings. Structures may privilege particular articulations of gender over others which are embedded in discourse to appear consensual and common sense in complex hegemonic constructions.

One of the ways women are gendered is through an ongoing association with the private sphere, with traditional expectations (re)producing dominant patriarchal structures. Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen (2012, 424) suggest that the media play a key role in this hegemonic struggle, which contributes to the “disseminating, constructing, normalising and legitimising [of] accepted definitions of desirable gender attributes, roles and behaviours”. Historical analysis of women in the media has observed a marginalisation and trivialisation in their representations compared to male counterparts (Tuchman 1978). Arguably, this can be related back to their systemic and discursive exclusion from the public sphere and wider public life. In this way, women are more readily associated with their familial and domestic roles (Macdonald 1995; Lovenduski 2005) and this can also extend to the mediated representations of female politicians (see, for example, Sreberny and van Zoonen 2000; Harmer 2012; O'Neill, Savigny, and Cann 2016; Ross et al. 2018).

Contemporary analysis confirms that, though the marginalisation and trivialisation of female politicians remains evident in many cases, it may also be realised in far more nuanced ways: a form of “gendered mediation” embedded in social norms (Gidengil and Everitt 2003). Indeed, different patterns may emerge under more subtle discursive practices when the construction of gendered identities intersects with other facets of identity. To Gidengil and Everitt (2003, 560), gendered mediation is problematic, in that it represents a more “insidious” media bias which has become embedded in the news framing process and the “conventional language of political news”. Gendered discourses therefore may not initially appear overt or negative. For example, women may be mediated as bringing different or feminised attributes to the political process and cast in various frames such as “women leadership breakthroughs”, “first women”

news stories or as “agents of change” (Norris 1997, 161) – all of which may be positively received. Yet, as Gidengil and Everitt (ibid) argue, this still functions as a way of perpetuating women’s difference in the public sphere, reinforcing their outsider status, or indeed subordination. Such gendered representations still point to the distinction between the “*male-politician-norm* and the *female-politician-pretender*” which cast women as interlopers in the political process (Childs 2008, xxvii *italics in original*).

### **3. Scottish Women, Media and Politics**

Discussions concerning Scottish identity have often been framed as a negotiation of cultural identity and national belonging in the context of wider British statehood (McCrone 2017). However, historically, women and gender have taken a secondary role in these debates at best (Howson 1993; Breitenbach, Brown, and Myers 1998). Patterns of gender and political representation in Scotland have also, for the most part, been considered in terms of UK-wide parliamentary figures. This has changed in recent decades, however, with the catalyst of devolution and the creation of the Scottish Parliament in 1999. During this time, the improved representation of women was pushed onto the political agenda, grounded in campaigns both within and outside Scotland (Brown 1998). Holyrood was established with a strong commitment to enhancing the role of women – stemming, in large part, from the participation of women themselves (Breitenbach and Mackay 2001, Mackay 2004). Since then, female political representation in Scotland has remained consistently higher than its UK counterpart, though this trajectory has taken a slower turn and stalled in recent election cycles (Kenny, Mackay, and Murtagh 2016).

Scotland has also witnessed similar challenges as other western societies regarding the media representations of women. Historical reporting on early female politicians placed similar emphasis on their appearance, body and domestic lives to frame them as outsiders to the public sphere (Pedersen 2016). Meanwhile, Hughes (2010, 199) argues that the “gender antagonism” of the inter-war years led to a form of post-war backlash and a discursive onslaught that reinforced women as docile, subservient and apolitical. The subsequent female resistance to this – a “rough kind of feminism” - has often been depoliticised and represented as a “temper”: a construction of femininity that still surrounds women in the public sphere in modern Scotland, particularly those associated with the working-class/trade union movement (ibid). Recent research, though limited, has found similar gendered discourses around female politicians in Scotland, including marginalisation (Ross et al. 2016) links to domesticity and appearance (Higgins and McKay 2016; Pedersen 2016), while wider commentary has considered the sexism around representations of Scottish female politicians in the Scottish and UK media (Yaqoob 2016). This referendum therefore offers a unique discursive moment – allowing us to interrogate the way female politicians have been constructed in components of a distinct political public sphere.

#### **4. Method**

This study adopts the critical discourse analysis approach to investigate the gendered discourses around two prominent figures in Scottish politics. In this case, the focus is on press coverage of a televised debate between Nicola Sturgeon, then Deputy First Minister and deputy leader of the SNP, and Johann Lamont, then leader of Scottish



Labour. Eleven newspapers were chosen to give a representative sample of the most prominent print media as a component of the Scottish public sphere.<sup>1</sup> The data is drawn from a wider study which uses a mixed-method design of content analysis and critical discourse analysis to look at the gendered media representation of a number of key political figures who took part in televised debates during the referendum period.

Critical discourse analysis draws on the resources of linguistic practice in order to provide a micro analysis of texts which is situated in wider social analysis (Fairclough 1992; Fairclough and Wodak 1997). With a view of discourse as a site of struggle and contestation, critical discourse analysis can therefore look to the linguistic means by which those in power can contribute to the (re)production of inequality (Smith and Higgins 2013). Arguably, the media play a prominent role in the construction of identities, with discourses emergent through processes of mediation. Looking at discursive practices as a space of emergence is important in aiding the understanding of how individual and collective identities are constituted in public sphere dialogue and whether they are welcome participants in the political process. Underpinning this study, then, is the premise that, for the effective operation of a deliberative democracy, different groups should be sufficiently represented in the public sphere and political discussion.

Lazar (2005, 5) argues that critical discourse analysis can provide “a political perspective on gender concerned with demystifying the interrelationships of gender, power and ideology in discourse”. As outlined, the socially constructed nature of gender means that these constructs are discursively formed: i.e. “that gender is

accomplished *in* discourse” (West, Lazar, and Kramarae 1997, 119). According to Lazar (2005), the prevailing gender ideology is patriarchal but it is also hegemonic, whereby mechanisms of power work discursively in placing women in a subordinate role to men. A distinctly feminist approach to critical discourse analysis and the masculinist model of mediated politics can illustrate how gendered subordination can be perpetuated in discourse, showing how women who have been elected as public representatives may still be undermined in different ways through a form of “gendered mediation” (Gidengil and Everitt 2003). Though this approach acknowledges the polysemy of texts, a gender-sensitive approach to dominant readings may offer particularly important insights whereby “dominant readings – based on common sense (hegemonic) notions of gender – are visible and powerful” (Loke, Harp, and Bachmann 2011, 210).

The debate, which is the focus of this article in question, was screened on STV’s current affairs programme, *Scotland Tonight*, on Tuesday February 25, 2014. Though this was before the official campaign period had started (which was 16 weeks prior to polling day), at this point campaigning had already featured heavily in public discourse (effectively from the SNP’s 2011 Scottish election win and subsequent mandate for a referendum). As a media event, the leadership positions of Sturgeon and Lamont (as well as current and past female party leaders) meant the debate would not be entirely novel, as seeing women together in political contexts would not be unexpected for the Scottish public. Nonetheless, it is significant as it was the first to feature the two most senior political women as its sole participants – and was framed as such by the Scottish media. Though Sturgeon had taken part in debates screened in the previous

year, Lamont would be her most senior opponent at that point in time and the first woman to debate her in the referendum series.

In order to construct a corpus, newspaper articles were gathered for the participating politicians via a keyword search of their names during the week that the debate was screened. There were 73 combined mentions of Johann Lamont and Nicola Sturgeon in 49 articles across the targeted sample. These articles were subsequently coded for the tone of the content, with 36.99% of these found to be negative in tone, compared to 35.62% which were neutral, 16.44% of mixed tone<sup>2</sup> and 10.96% which were positive.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, these articles were also coded for explicitly gendered labels and terms,<sup>4</sup> with some 27.40% of the total found to contain them. A critical analysis was then undertaken around those discourses that came to prominence which showed how the women were gendered in a particularly negative way. The following analysis is structured around two discursive frames which reveal locally pertinent and resilient gendered narratives which may be extended to wider mediated representations connected to women in politics.

It is important to note that the articles used in this analysis were predominantly found in opinion and editorial sections, rather than news stories that would have more likely maintained a more neutral tone. While this may at first hint towards more equitable representation in relatively straightforward and routine coverage, it also highlights the important role of op-eds in the context of political debate because of the evaluative function they perform. These can be considered a valuable part of public sphere discussion, in that they aim to create a space for deliberation for an “enlightened

public” (Habermas 1996), which also serves as representative of sections of public opinion and a mouthpiece *for* the public (Habermas 1989). In this way, op-eds can be seen to send important signals to the public and political actors about what constitutes both public opinion and who constitutes the public.

## 5. “A Stairheid Rammy”

The use of the Scottish vernacular term “Stairheid Rammy” has traction in the Scottish media<sup>5</sup> and denotes a fight (rammy) which takes place at the “stairheid” – the stair head or top of a flight of stairs. This situates the fight as one between neighbours occupying the same common domestic space (usually in a Scottish tenement). The term itself has evolved from its original use to become a form of journalistic shorthand to describe political exchanges, and even football match fights (Cairns Speitel 2017), with the collocation of the private and domestic (stairheid) with that of fighting (rammy) producing a trivialising effect. In following the principles of critical discourse analysis, the focus of this article is on the various lexical items which have been chosen to define the debate, showing how linguistic practice can expose underlying power dynamics (Fairclough 1992; Fairclough and Wodak 1997). In this case, the term “stairheid rammy” emerges across the sample in reference to the politicians’ mode of performance. Though it is worth noting that the phrase may not always be used in a gendered female context, in its usage here situates the women in an extended gendered discourse, evoking a social discourse of working-class women formed in the Scottish popular lexicon. This is reminiscent of the complex Scottish dynamic characterised by Hughes (2010, 199) as a “rough kind of feminism” - though, rather

than a Scottish working-class identity being met with respect and approval, the terms here are used to trivialise by depicting a transgressive kind of femininity. This doubly undermines these women through their additional characterisation as outsiders in the political sphere alongside an overall association of women with the domestic realm (see for example Macdonald 1995; Lovenduski 2005), showing how lexical choice exposes (hegemonic) constructions of gender (West, Lazar, and Kramarae 1997; Lazar 2005).

Looking to the newspapers' main articulation of the debate, much of this focuses on the uncivil performance of the two women, with discussion and criticism centred on how both Lamont and Sturgeon talked over one another. In these instances, their gender was introduced as a way to emphasise what Norris (1997) describes as their "breakthrough" role as politicians. Articles describe the women as "Scotland's two leading female politicians" (Herald 2014), "two lady leaders" (Shearer, *Scottish Sun* 2014) and "the two most senior women in Scottish politics" (Drumlanrig, *Scotland on Sunday* 2014). As Fairclough (1995) argues, word choice, including collocations such as these, can be seen as "ideologically significant" and reveals traces of power relations in texts. In these instances, the use of gender and rank reveals a hierarchy: they are the most senior *women* in Scottish politics, not senior figures overall. Here, though, the layering of gender and rank alongside appraisals of their performance bring an added dimension that makes the women's gender a pivotal facet of their identities. This was described in hyperbolic terms in one headline in *Scotland on Sunday* as: "Stairheid Rammy sets back women's cause" (Drumlanrig, *Scotland on Sunday* 2014) – a judgment connoting potential wider ramifications of their aggressive performance. Here "women's cause" can be interpreted in two ways: firstly, if taken to

mean a form of descriptive representation, it suggests the access and progress of women in political contexts (with echoes of past women's movements); and secondly, if taken as an interpretation of women's cause more substantively, it points to the cause of advocacy for women generally. The ambivalence of the title, which is not fully clarified in the article itself, suggests that both explanations could apply. The implication therefore creates a tension whereby the use of an "all women" frame (Childs 2008; Ross 2017) establishes Lamont and Sturgeon's poor performance as reflecting on both other female politicians and women more broadly.

Throughout the article, overlapping gendered discourses imply the political performance of women should adhere to specific behavioural expectations. The author writes of the definitional inevitability of it being known as "*The Stairheid Rammy*" (Drumlanrig, *Scotland on Sunday* 2014, italics my own). The performance of Lamont and Sturgeon is depicted as deviating from the expectation that they would introduce a softer, feminised political style compared to the combative, aggressive and "antagonistic" style associated with male politicians, silencing "those who argue that more women in parliament would guarantee a more civilised, and a less yah-boo kind of politics" (ibid). Here, "yah-boo" politics is also used as a way of implicitly gendering male politicians in a negative way, with women expected to embody a civilising influence on boisterous and immature male politicians. Yet it is still confined within normative expectations, with women who display this kind of gendered political performance criticised in emphatically negative terms. This creates a paradox reminiscent of the "feminine/competency" double bind discussed by Jamieson (1995), whereby women are required to both conform to the feminine expectations of their gender role while simultaneously adopting more masculine qualities associated with

political leadership (or de-emphasising their feminine ones), which are established as dichotomous and incompatible (see also Murray 2010; Campus 2013). The implication is that female politicians' participation in the public sphere is rendered conditional on both their behaviour adhering to specific feminised norms and being representative of "all women", or by extension avoiding tarnishing the reputation of "all women" when seen to deviate from these expectations, exposing the iniquitous nature of gendered political representation.

In another article from the sample from the *Scottish Daily Mail*, "stairheid rammy" is also foregrounded in the headline: "How this televised stairheid rammy sank the debate to a new low" (MacLeod, *Scottish Daily Mail* 2014), emphasising the readiness to apply this phrase in this particular context. The use of such terms can be considered an example of the "conversationalisation" of discourse, which aligns the subject position of the news giver (the columnist/journalist) and the news receiver (the reader) through a particular shared discourse (Fairclough 1992; Fairclough 1995). Here, the recognisable Scottish colloquialism creates a form of shared national identity through the modality, whereby the proposition in the headline involves a high affinity with the assertion (Fairclough 1992). This is also informed by the genre type of the article itself, with the conventions of the opinion piece allowing for the subjectivity of the columnist/journalist to be constructed in objective terms (the rest of the article contains minimal subjective modality markers and hedging), allowing for "partial perspectives to be universalized" (ibid 161). The situation of the performance of the two women in these terms is therefore portrayed as being representative of a recognisable form of public opinion.

The article divides the debate into two parts. The latter stage is established as more transgressive than the former: “The first half - snide, patronising, evasive - was merely a cold-blooded, dainty little cat-fight. The second half, grandly billed as 'cross-examination', was a fullblown stairheid rammy with ruthless interruption, incessant rantage, dark and baleful tones and much postured faux outrage” (MacLeod, *Scottish Daily Mail* 2014). The contrasting word choice first establishes the “fullblown stairheid rammy” as an emotive, frenzied state; with the first-half “cat-fight” paradoxically described as both “cold-blooded” and “dainty” – terms denoting much more tempered and dispassionate behaviour. These two terms are significant in that the first can be seen to denote a form of rationality as well as implying a more feminine, seemly behaviour. The placement of the terms, therefore, can be positioned as the preferable of the two behaviours when compared to the ultimate transgressive act of the domestic “stairheid rammy” fight. Research has suggested that women who have been seen to violate the gendered expectations of their behaviour are shown in depictions of escalating aggression (Kahn 1996). In this case, the more combative behaviour of Lamont and Sturgeon is rendered inauthentic and deviant: a form of “postured faux outrage” counter to expectations of their gender.

As the extract comes to a close, it makes reference to the women’s performance as also representative of a marker of Scottish identity, “saying who we as Scots might be”. Yet this is elaborated with the concluding line: “and then you watch two Glasgow wummin [sic] slugging it out in our name and you see just who we are” (ibid). Here, the stress on the gender of the women is made keener by the use of Scottish



vernacular, “wummin”, a term particular to the west of Scotland and Glasgow, denoting the archetypal figure of an older, working-class Glaswegian woman. To use the terms of Howson (1993, 48), gender, class and Scottishness are deployed in this case here as a “symbolic category” to depoliticise the women.

## 6. “Like dentists' drills on Dexedrine”

So far, the analysis has shown how the gendered discourses of decorum and expected “womanly” behaviour work together with the “all women” discursive frame, which highlights the politicians’ uncivilised performance as reflecting on women more generally (Childs 2008). These representations show how women may be looked at unfavourably when transgressing accepted behavioural norms. This section shows how more negative depictions play out in relation to this, particularly in regard to descriptions of the women’s voices. To return to the previous extract from the *Scottish Daily Mail*, another dimension of its discursive othering of the politicians as transgressive women is the emphasis it places on their “incessant rantage” and “dark and baleful tones”, which illustrates the usefulness of identifying overlapping discourses within extracts:

- (1) The first half - snide, patronising, evasive - was merely a cold-blooded, dainty little cat-fight. The second half, grandly billed as 'cross-examination', was a fullblown stairheid rammy with ruthless interruption, incessant rantage, dark and baleful tones and much postured faux outrage.

Meanwhile, Miss Dougall quite failed in what is surely the most crucial aspect of her job - to stop the two women talking at the same time, ever shriller, ever more incandescent, like dentists' drills on Dexedrine.

(MacLeod, *Scottish Daily Mail* 2014)

The vocabulary used employs hyperbolic imagery and onomatopoeia along the common theme of discomfort arising from the sound of their voices, established through the evocation of the uncomfortable, sharp noise of a dentist's drill. This simile is further heightened through the alliterative use of the reference to the drill (and women) being under the influence of the stimulant drug Dexedrine: a form of amphetamine. Research suggests that women's voices are often referred to as high-pitched and jarring and can "connote unreasonableness, silliness or edginess" (Macdonald 1995, 45). This is further emphasised through the representation of the relentless nature of the exchange ("incessant rantage") as well as the notoriously gendered term "shrill": a term often used when women appear to violate behaviour expectations when seen to be acting more aggressively (Kahn 1996, 33).

This can also be seen through other texts in the news corpus. In another opinion article in the *Herald*, the women cause "bleeding" ears through their exchange (Rowat, *The Herald* 2014), while a *Scottish Sun* piece uses the term "screeched" to describe them (Leckie, *Scottish Sun* 2014). The connotations with noise and pain are significant, in that the discourse establishes the content of their exchange as trivial and provoking discomfort in the assumed audience. In an overview of online reaction to the debate afterwards, a different article in the *Scottish Daily Mail* comments that "many viewers

were left exhausted with sore heads after the ‘rammy’ in which the pair spoke over each other, shouted and simply failed to get any points across” (Sugden, *Scottish Daily Mail* 2014). Here, the collectivised identity to emerge in this case is situated in accord with the commentator, which furthers the implicit “othering” of the women.

Simile is used to similar effect in an editorial in the *Sunday Mail* which comments: “It is hard to properly describe the depths plumbed for those lucky enough to have missed it but two washing machines tumbling down a tenement stair would make a similar noise and slightly more sense” (*Sunday Mail* 2014). The hyperbolic description of the women as provoking a noise worse than washing machines crashing down stairs is doubly significant in that an appliance, which is already associated with the domestic space, is located in a specifically working-class, domestic setting – emphasised, in this case, through the collocational word-choice (a tenement stair, rather than just a stair, interdiscursively recalling the “stairheid rammy”). In the same extract, Lamont and Sturgeon’s performances are again depicted as transgressing desirable behavioural gender norms when the article uses yet another simile “like a couple of drunks in a taxi queue” (ibid), giving obvious connotations of disorder and impropriety alongside this discursive connotation of working class Scottish identity.

Similarly, evocative terms were used to describe the women’s performance across a number of articles in the sample, including “barney” “car crash”, “carnage”, “wreckage” (*Sunday Mail* 2014) “dreadful car-crash telly” (MacLeod, *Scottish Daily Mail* 2014). The hyperbolic language used to gender the women’s voices as irrational and emotive

suggests a lack of composure and incompetency. Even though the campaign period was described as increasingly heated and heightened on both sides, these extracts show that this is particularly problematic with regard to female politicians, as their exchanges are depoliticised and trivialised through explicitly gendered terms.

This extends to overlapping discourses which describe the two women using metaphorical animal imagery. The debate is again described as a “cat-fight” (MacLeod, *Scottish Daily Mail* 2014): a notoriously gendered term used in a similar way to “shrill” in order to characterise women as aggressive and irrational (though, in this case, with more physical and violent connotations to feline scratching and hissing). As Douglas (1995) argues, this motif is often used in the media to belittle women by presenting feminised fights as hysterical and frenzied, and used to downplay women’s serious exchanges. According to Carlin and Winfrey (2009, 328), describing women in such ways reduces their credibility or may cause them to be seen as “less human”; animal terms specifically focus “on the appearance and sexuality of young women (foxy), and as women grow older, or are seen as too aggressive, they may be called barracuda, old bat, shrew, or cow”. In this way, the cat-fight metaphor alludes to a baser nature and also takes on a titillating dimension, suggesting sexualised undertones, which is also reminiscent in a similar extract from the *Scottish Sun*, which describes the women as “yawling at each other like foxes raking your bins at midnight” (Leckie, *Scottish Sun* 2014).

Folklinguistic discourse is also drawn upon to describe the women as “looking like a mad harpie” (Leckie, *Scottish Sun* 2014). The harpy (harpie) is a reference to mythological creatures of half-human and half-bird hybrid form known for their aggressive and violent screeching: “In classical mythology a monster with the head and body of a woman and wings and claws of a bird. It was fierce, ravenous-looking and loathsome, and lived in an atmosphere of filth and stench, contaminating everything it came near” (Brewer 2014). This intertextual simile, which draws upon allusions to Homer and Milton (among others), has now become idiomatic, acting as shorthand for a “cruel, greedy woman” (ibid) associated with cacophonous noise and disorder.

In summary, the resultant overlapping discourses of noise/pitch and animals/creatures ultimately trivialise the performance of Lamont and Sturgeon. This is echoed in another extract which says of the women that they “niggle[] each other repeatedly” (Drumlanrig, *Scotland on Sunday* 2014), rather than taking part in more serious, mature political discussion. The gendered terms of the discourses also shows evidence of the “silence/shame” double bind (Jamieson 1995), as the references act as a form of “public shaming” of these women for transgressing their expected gendered performance. A desire for silence – or seemly behaviour – is implied when the women are criticised for talking over one another, which is also emphasised in another extract imploring the women to either have a “calm chat” or keep a “dignified silence” (Shearer, *Scottish Sun* 2014). The representation of discordance is symbolic of the transgressive performance of these women as they deviate from expected gender norms.

## **7. Conclusion**

This article has attempted to show the efficacy of linguistic choice and the deployment of overlapping discourses in gendering female politicians in specific ways. Though there is evidence which suggests a desire for a more feminised public sphere – moving away from the “yah-boo” politics with which prominent male politicians are commonly associated – the automatic assumption that all women should display a feminised political style establishes them at odds with and potentially subservient to this dominant male narrative. The underlying assumption that women (and men) embody a gendered – and divergent – political style suggests evidence of the “separate spheres” ideology (Macdonald 1995; Lovenduski 2005) which has thus far positioned women as interlopers to the public sphere, as well as being expected to adhere to traditional gender norms of feminine behaviour, such as cooperation, accord and seamliness. This renders problematic those women who deviate from this expected norm. Generalisations of women’s political performance – through the “all women” frame in particular – places a further burden on the individual performance of women and exposes an underlying confusion about women’s role in politics. While the election of female politicians is important with regard to the substantive representation of other women, it is deeply problematic to suggest that female politicians only serve the function of giving democratic representation to women or are incapable of serving constituents of all genders (unlike, by inference, men).

As a distinct discursive space, then, the Scottish press arguably still rehearses the same problematic discourses regarding gender and political identity that has emerged in wider analyses. The use of culturally specific terms can be seen to foster a form of identity which arguably partly fulfils a public sphere function. In doing so, however, it shows how terms such as these may be tied to more embedded and historical constructions of gender. The use of the term “stairheid rammy” as a shorthand for a trivialised fight depoliticises the women and also recalls the normative associations of the domestic space as the natural habitat of women and the site of their petty and insignificant, if emotive, exchanges. Although this term is specific to Scotland there may be cultural equivalents elsewhere, and the discourse examined here can be considered to contribute to a cross-cultural practice which aligns women in politics to specific stereotypes (see, for example, (Lundell and Ekström 2008). This trivialising effect is also further emphasised when interplaying with further problematic behavioural discourses which appear to locate these within normative expectations of women, such as alluding to them as shrill, animalistic and/or as metaphorical drunks.

Women’s representation can be considered a matter of democratic fairness and equality and, based on the evaluation of their constructions in Scotland’s public sphere, this has not yet been achieved in the Scottish context. In this case, the discursive representation of female politicians suggests an unequal participatory status which, in turn, exposes regimes of patriarchal power contributing to women’s continued subordination in the public sphere. More representative portrayals of the diversity of women’s experience, therefore, are needed to help progress women’s wider democratic inclusion. The results of this study should be of concern to researchers interested in how gendered discourses may be articulated in different

contexts, particularly as more women come to prominence on the Scottish, UK and global stages. Nicola Sturgeon's promotion to First Minister as well Theresa May's period as Prime Minister show that women can, and do, reach top levels of British government, yet the results of this study show that this does not necessarily mean they will not be subjected to forms of gendered mediation which expose the complex and discriminatory discursive construction of gender and politics.

### **Acknowledgements**

The author would like to thank the guest editors of this journal and the anonymous reviewers for their useful comments. Thanks also to Dr James Morrison for comments on earlier drafts.

### **Notes**

1. Four Scottish daily titles were chosen (the *Herald*, the *Scotsman*, the *Daily Record*, and the Aberdeen edition of the *Press and Journal*), three Scottish versions of British papers (the *Scottish Sun*, the *Scottish Daily Mail* and the *Times (Scotland)*) and four Sunday titles (the *Sunday Herald*, *Scotland on Sunday*, *Sunday Mail* and the *Scottish Sun on Sunday*). The papers are spread between different formats (broadsheets, tabloid and mid-market) and include the highest circulations across Scotland.
2. Mixed tone encompasses articles which have both elements of positive and negative tone contained within them.
3. Intra- and Inter-coder reliability tests were performed on all variables which were coded in the wider study using Cohen's kappa (K), which reached .812 or above for each of the reliability tests.
4. These include when the text: calls to attention something significant due to the politician's gender; if gender or gender issues were the main focus of article; or if



gendered labels or descriptive nouns – such as “female politician” or “the mother” – were used.

5. This is arguably more so in central rather than northern parts of Scotland, particularly where other forms of Scottish dialect are prominent such as Doric in Aberdeenshire. This also indicates the central belt dominance of the Scottish media and partly-confirmed by the absence of this term in the Aberdeen Press & Journal in the sample.

## References

Aitken, Mark, 2014. "Expert TV Debate was Like Kids in a Playground." *Sunday Mail*, March 02.

Bajekal, Naina, 2014. "The World Reacts to Scotland's Decision Not to Leave the UK." *Time*, September 19, <http://time.com/3402688/scotland-reactions>.

BBC, 2014. "Scottish Independence: Campaigners Condemn Online Abuse." *BBC News*, June 15, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-27856920>.

Bell, Christine and Fiona MacKay, 2013. "Women and Constitutional Debates: Engendering Visions of a New Scotland." *Scottish Constitutional Futures Forum*, February 25, <https://www.scottishconstitutionalfutures.org/OpinionandAnalysis/ViewBlogPost/tabid/1767/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/1169/Christine-Bell-and-Fiona-MacKay-Women-and-Constitutional-Debates-Engendering-Visions-of-a-New-Scotland.aspx>.

Better Together UK, 2014. *The woman who made up her mind*, August 26,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OLAewTVmkAU>.

Breitenbach, Esther, Alice Brown, and Fiona Myers. 1998. "Understanding Women in Scotland." *Feminist Review* 58: 44-65.

Breitenbach, Esther and Fiona Mackay. 2001. *Women and Contemporary Scottish Politics: An Anthology*, edited by Breitenbach Esther and Fiona Mackay. Edinburgh: Polygon.

Brewer, Ebenezer Cobham. 2014. "Harpy" *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase & Fable*, edited by Susie Dent, [https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/brewerphrase/harpy\\_greek\\_harpazein\\_to\\_seize/0?institutionId=396](https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/brewerphrase/harpy_greek_harpazein_to_seize/0?institutionId=396).

Brooks, Libby. 2014. "Scottish Independence Debate: Women Hold the Key Far from Westminster." *The Guardian*, May 04. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/may/02/scottish-independence-debate-women-key-far-westminster>.

Brown, Alice. 1998. "Deepening Democracy: Women and the Scottish Parliament." *Regional & Federal Studies* 8 (1): 103-119.

Cairns Speitel, Pauline. 2017. "Stairheid Rammy N., a Quarrel between Neighbours". *Scots Language Centre*, <https://www.scotslanguage.com/articles/view/id/5134/type>.

Campus, Donatella. 2013. *Women Political Leaders and the Media*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Cantrell, Tania H. and Ingrid Bachmann. 2008. "Who is the Lady in the Window?"  
*Journalism Studies* 9 (3): 429-446.
- Carlin, Diana B. and Kelly L. Winfrey. 2009. "Have You Come a Long Way, Baby?  
Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin, and Sexism in 2008 Campaign Coverage."  
*Communication Studies* 60 (4): 326-343.
- Childs, Sarah. 2008. *Women and British Party Politics: Descriptive, Substantive and  
Symbolic Representation*. London: Routledge.
- Cresci, E. 2014. "#PatronisingBTlady: how Better Together's latest ad went wrong".  
*The Guardian*, August 27,  
<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/aug/27/patronisingbtlady-how-better-togethers-latest-ad-went-wrong>.
- Douglas, Susan J. 1995. *Where the Girls are: Growing Up Female with the Mass  
Media*. New York: Three Rivers Press.
- Drumlanrig. 2014. "Stairheid Rammy Sets Back Women's Cause." *Scotland on  
Sunday*, Mar 03.
- Fairclough, Norman. 1992. *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- . 1995. *Media Discourse*. London: E. Arnold.
- Fairclough, Norman and Ruth Wodak. 1997. "Critical Discourse Analysis." In  
*Discourse as Social Interaction*, ed. by Teun A. Van Dijk. 258 - 284. London:  
Sage.

Garcia-Blanco, Iñaki and Karin Wahl-Jorgensen. 2012. "The Discursive Construction of Women Politicians in the European Press." *Feminist Media Studies* 12 (3): 422-441.

Gidengil, Elisabeth and Joanna Everitt. 2003. "Conventional Coverage/Unconventional Politicians: Gender and Media Coverage of Canadian Leaders' Debates, 1993, 1997, 2000." *Canadian Journal of Political Science- Revue Canadienne De Science Politique* 36 (3): 559-577.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1996. *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

———. 1989. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, edited by Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Harmer, Emily. 2012. "Gendered Election Coverage: The Representation of Women in British Newspapers, 1918 to 2010." Doctoral Thesis. Loughborough University.

Harmer, Emily, Heather Savigny, and Orlanda Ward. 2017. "'Are You Tough Enough?' Performing Gender in the UK Leadership Debates 2015". *Media, Culture & Society*, 39 (7): 960-975.

Herald, The. 2014. "Battle Stations." *The Herald*, Feb 26.

Higgins, Michael and Fiona M. McKay. 2016. "Gender and the Development of a Political Persona: The Case of Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon." *British Politics* 11 (3): 283-300.

- Howson, Alexandra. 1993. "No Gods and Precious Few Women: Gender and Cultural Identity in Scotland." *Scottish Affairs* 2 (1): 37-49
- Hughes, Annmarie. 2010. *Gender and Political Identities in Scotland, 1919-1939*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Hutchison, David. 2008. "The History of the Press." In *The Media in Scotland*, ed. by Neil Blain and David Hutchison. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Ibroscheva, Elza. 2007. "Caught between East and West? Portrayals of Gender in Bulgarian Television Advertisements." *Sex Roles* 57 (5): 409-418.
- Jamieson, Kathleen Hall. 1995. *Beyond the Double Bind: Women and Leadership*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kahn, Kim Fridkin. 1996. *The Political Consequences of being a Woman*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kenny, Meryl. 2014. "Engendering the Independence Debate." *Scottish Affairs* 23 (3): 323-331.
- Kenny, Meryl, Fiona Mackay, and Cera Murtagh. 2016. "Analysis: The Representation of Women in the Scottish Parliament". *Holyrood*: <https://www.holyrood.com/articles/inside-politics/analysis-representation-women-scottish-parliament>.
- Lazar, Michelle M. 2005. "Politicizing Gender in Discourse: Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis as Political Perspective and Praxis." In *Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis*, ed. by Michelle M. Lazar, 1-28. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Leckie, Bill. 2014. "Happily entrust nation's future to one of these two? Aye, right".

*Scottish Sun*. Feb 27.

Loke, Jaime, Dustin Harp, and Ingrid Bachmann. 2011. "Mothering and Governing."

*Journalism Studies* 12 (2): 205-220.

Lovenduski, Joni. 2005. *Feminizing Politics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Lundell, Åsa Kroon and Mats Ekström. 2008. "The Complex Visual Gendering of

Political Women in the Press." *Journalism Studies* 9 (6): 891-910.

Macdonald, Myra. 1995. *Representing Women*. London: Edward Arnold.

Mackay, Fiona. 2004. "Gender and Political Representation in the UK: The State of

the 'Discipline'". *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations* 6 (1): 99-120.

MacLeod, John. 2014. "How this Televised Stairheid Rammy Sank the Debate to a

New Low." *Scottish Daily Mail*, Feb 27.

McAngus, Craig and Kirstein Rummery. 2018. "Campaigning for the Female Vote in

the Scottish Independence Referendum: Comparing Women for Independence and Women Together." *Scottish Affairs* 27 (2): 145-168.

McCrone, David. 2017. *The New Sociology of Scotland*. London: Sage.

Murray, Rainbow. 2010. *Cracking the Highest Glass Ceiling: A Global Comparison of*

*Women's Campaigns for Executive Office*. Santa Barbara: Praeger.

Norris, Pippa. 1997. "Women Leaders Worldwide: A Splash of Color in the Photo Op." In *Women, Media, and Politics*, ed. by Pippa Norris, 149-165. New York: Oxford University Press.

O'Neill, Deirdre, Heather Savigny, and Victoria Cann. 2016. "Women Politicians in the UK Press: Not seen and Not Heard?" *Feminist Media Studies* 16 (2): 293-307.

Pedersen, Sarah. 2016. "Press Response to Women Politicians." *Journalism Studies* 19 (5): 709-725

Pedersen, Sarah, Graeme Baxter, Simon Burnett, Ayse Goker, David Corney, and Carlos Martin. 2014. "Backchannel Chat: Peaks and Troughs in a Twitter Response to Three televised Debates during the Scottish Independence Referendum Campaign 2014." *Aberdeen Business School Working Paper Series*, 7 (2).

Richardson, Diane. 2015. "Conceptualising Gender." In *Introducing Gender and Women's Studies*, ed. by Victoria Robinson and Diane Richardson. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ritch, Emma. 2019. "Foreboding Newness: Brexit and Feminist Civil Society in Scotland." In *Gender and Queer Perspectives on Brexit* ed. by Moira Dustin Nuno Ferreira and Susan Millns, 333-362: Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

Ross, Karen. 2017. *Gender, Politics, News: A Game of Three Sides*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

- Ross, Karen, Karen Boyle, Cynthia Carter, and Debbie Ging. 2018. "Women, Men and News." *Journalism Studies* 19 (6): 824-845.
- Rowat, Alison. 2014. "Much Heat but no Light at the Palaver on Pacific Quay." *The Herald*, Feb 28.
- Shearer, Catriona. 2014. "Come on, Girls, it's Time for You all to Beyhave." *Scottish Sun on Sunday*, Mar 03.
- Smith, Angela and Michael Higgins. 2013. *The Language of Journalism: A Multi-Genre Perspective* New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Sreberny, Annabelle and Liesbet van Zoonen. 2000. "Gender, Politics and Communication: An Introduction." In *Gender, Politics and Communication.*, ed. by A. Sreberny and E. A. van Zoonen. Cresskill: Hampton Press.
- Sugden, Maureen. 2014. "Astonishing: Sturgeon and Lamont Reduce TV Independence Debate to a Farce." *Scottish Daily Mail*, Feb 26.
- Sunday Mail*. 2014. "We Need to Step Lightly and Go Easy." *Sunday Mail*, Mar 2.
- Tuchman, Gaye. 1978. "Introduction: The Symbolic Annihilations of Women in the Mass Media." In *Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media*, ed. by Gaye Tuchman, Arlene Kaplan Daniels and James Benét. New York: Oxford University.
- van Zoonen, Liesbet. 2006. "The Personal, the Political and the Popular: A woman's Guide to Celebrity Politics." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 9 (3): 287-301.
- Walsh, Clare. 2001. *Gender and Discourse*. Edinburgh: Pearson Education.



West, Candace, Michelle M. Lazar, and Cheri Kramarae. 1997. "Gender in Discourse." In *Discourse as Social Interaction*, ed. by Teun van Dijk. London: Sage.

Yaqoob, Talat. 2016. "The Tiresome Sexism in our Media". *Women 50/50*: <https://women5050.wordpress.com/2016/07/04/the-tiresome-sexism-in-our-media/>.

*Address for correspondence*

School of Creative & Cultural Business

Robert Gordon University

Aberdeen

AB10 7QE

f.mckay5@rgu.ac.uk

*Biographical note*

**Dr Fiona McKay** is a Lecturer in Journalism at the Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen. She has previously worked as a journalist and her research interests relate to media discourse, media, gender and politics and journalism practice.