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## **Women with thick skins: the experiences of Portuguese political candidates with online violence**

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Master in International Studies

Supervisor:

Doctor Ana Espírito Santo, Assistant Professor  
Iscte - University Institute of Lisbon

September, 2023



SOCIOLOGIA  
E POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS

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Department of History

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## Resumo

A violência contra as mulheres na política é responsável por restringir a participação política feminina e reforçar normas de género tradicionais. Apesar do seu impacto, a violência contra as mulheres na política permanece um fenómeno desvalorizado pela sociedade, constituindo um obstáculo para a igualdade de género (Krook, 2020). A presente dissertação procura explorar, no contexto português, as manifestações do fenómeno da violência online contra as mulheres na política e o seu impacto nas mesmas. Uma abordagem de métodos mistos foi aplicada. Em primeiro lugar, foi realizada uma análise do discurso de comentários no Twitter dirigidos a candidatas políticas, durante o período de campanha eleitoral das Eleições Legislativas de 2022. Com base no número de seguidores e o índice de engajamento do Twitter, nove candidatas foram selecionadas. Após extrair os tweets publicados pelas candidatas durante o período de campanha, foram extraídos e analisados 2365 comentários a esses tweets. Posteriormente, estes resultados foram triangulados com uma análise temática de entrevistas às deputadas Isabel Moreira e Joana Mortágua. A análise mostra como as mulheres na política portuguesa vivenciam formas de violência psicológica, semiótica e sexual. Confirmou-se que as políticas com maior visibilidade e de partidos de esquerda são sujeitas a maior violência online e que as deputadas, quando são vítimas de violência, são forçadas a alterar o seu comportamento nas redes sociais de modo a garantir o seu bem-estar.

Palavras-chave: Género, política, redes sociais, violência online, política portuguesa.





## **Abstract**

Violence against women in politics is responsible for restricting female political participation and reinforcing traditional gender norms. Despite its impact, violence against women in politics remains a phenomenon dismissed by society, constituting an obstacle to gender equality (Krook, 2020). This dissertation seeks to explore, in the Portuguese context, the manifestations of the phenomenon of online violence against women in politics and its impact on female politicians. A mixed methods approach was applied. First, a discourse analysis of comments on Twitter directed at political candidates was carried out during the electoral campaign period of the 2022 Legislative Elections. Based on the number of followers and the engagement rate on Twitter, nine candidates were selected. After extracting the tweets published by the candidates during the campaign period, 2365 comments to those tweets were extracted and analysed. Posteriorly, these results were triangulated with a thematic analysis of interviews with deputies Isabel Moreira and Joana Mortágua. The analysis shows how women in Portuguese politics experience forms of psychological, semiotic and sexual violence. It was confirmed that politicians with greater visibility and from leftist parties experience greater online violence and that women deputies, when facing violence, are forced to change their behaviours on social networks in order to guarantee their well-being.

**Keywords:** Gender, politics, social media, online violence, Portuguese politics.



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## Introduction

The traditional way of thinking that men are more suitable for holding power positions is still very much present in society, particularly, in the political space. With the idea that power is natural for men while being a strange concept for women (Lakoff, 2003), those women who dare to venture into this male path and become active individuals in the political game may experience criticism for not complying with the roles traditionally attributed to their gender. Despite suffering an increase in the last decades (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2022), women's political participation still has a long road ahead. With women's qualifications being constantly questioned, perpetuating the belief, both among men and women, that a woman does not have enough merit to run for public office, the political context becomes coded as masculine (Kenny, 2013).

The genderization of the political space creates a set of rules and practices that benefit men at the expense of women's political success (Palmieri, 2020). From being discouraged from running for public office to suffering gendered criticism and harassment when performing their political activities (Krook, 2020), women's violent experiences in politics continue to be overlooked and interpreted as the simple cost of being in public office (Krook & Sanín, 2020). To punish and shame women for intruding into the political space, violence against women in politics (VAWIP) is perpetrated with the ultimate purpose of excluding women from politics along with their contributions (Krook, 2020).

The online space, in particular, is becoming a dangerous space for the dissemination of violent and gendered discourse directed at female politicians (Esposito & Breeze, 2022). When perpetrated through online channels, its worldwide reach has the potential to transform criticism of a female politician into a warning to all women in politics and those who seek to reach public office (Erikson, Håkansson, & Josefsson, 2021). Acknowledging the specificities that make the online space a unique platform for spreading hate against women in politics, the present analysis will investigate the phenomenon of online violence against women in politics (OVAWIP) in the Portuguese context.

Portuguese society continues to be disseminated by traditional gender norms and stereotypes. Reflecting these dynamics, women in Portuguese politics endure a variety of discriminating and abusive behaviours. Seeking to contribute to the growing, but still relatively

scarce, body of literature that accounts for the violent experiences women in politics are forced to endure in the online space, the present dissertation aims to answer the following research question: “How does online violence against women in politics manifest itself and impact Portuguese female politicians?”. Inspired by Krook and Sanín (2020) typology of violence, I argue that online violence against female political candidates for the position of MP (Member of Parliament) on Twitter constitutes a form of psychological, sexual and semiotic violence. The present dissertation has two goals: 1) explore the manifestations of the phenomenon of online violence against female political candidates for the position of MP and 2) understand the impact of online violence against women in politics on female politicians.

The analysis was divided into two components: Twitter analysis and interviews. Twitter was chosen due to its unique characteristics that facilitate and prompt the distribution of aggressive discourse (Ott, 2017). In the Twitter analysis, female candidates were selected according to two criteria: number of followers on Twitter and engagement rate. Extracting the tweets (also called “posts”) published by the candidates during the electoral campaign previous to the 2022 Legislative Elections (16 January to 28 January 2022), it was performed a discourse analysis of the content of the direct replies to those posts. A total of 2365 replies were extracted. Followed by a thematic analysis of two interviews with the MPs Isabel Moreira and Joana Mortágua, the selection of the MPs for the interviews was done based on the incidence of gendered criticism they suffered on Twitter.

The present analysis shows how women in Portuguese politics experience psychological, semiotic and sexual forms of violence, perpetrated by “common citizens”, that seek to punish and degrade them. Contributing to previous literature and promoting the analysis of the Portuguese context of violence against women in politics, it was concluded that social media, despite its benefits, can become dangerous channels for the dissemination of gendered and hateful content against women in politics. Despite varying from case to case, often perceived as not competent enough for politics, it was found how Portuguese political candidates are subjected to intimidation practices on social media, in particular Twitter, responsible for forcing them to develop defensive attitudes and, sometimes, live in a state of fear, insecurity and anxiety.

The dissertation is structured as follows: the first chapter will be dedicated to a better understating of the phenomenon of violence against women in politics. Explaining how the political space remains gendered, drawing insights from Krook and Sanín (2020), this chapter will focus on the definition of the phenomenon of violence against women in politics. The end of the first chapter will offer a profound understanding of how the online world has become a

space for the dissemination of hate against women in politics. Second, the contextualisation of the Portuguese case study will be elaborated. The third chapter includes a theoretical framework and the presentation of the expectations for the Portuguese case. Those expectations relate to the factors that interact with gender and trigger the phenomenon of online violence against women in politics, along with its manifestations and impact. Fourth, a description of the methodological approach adopted for each component of the analysis will be performed. Lastly, after analysing the results, a conclusion of the analysis will be made, in addition to ideas for further research.





## **Gender and politics: Violence against women in politics**

### **1.1. Debates in the study of gender, violence and politics**

Political violence can be defined as the intentional or accidental use of force, or threatened use of force, for the prosecution of political ends (Della Porta, 1995, p. 2) and, thus, the ultimate goal of this phenomenon is the destabilisation of others and the social system. Political violence in elections, or election violence, is a sub-type of political violence. With the purpose of influencing the electoral process before, during and after elections, perpetrators either seek to gain power or shift the political order (Höglund, 2009). At the intersection of political violence and gender, a major concept arises – gender-motivated political violence – whose goal is to harm politically active individuals based on their gender identity (Bardall, 2018).

Studying gender-motivated political violence leads to the emergence of two important questions for the broader field of violence studies. First, does a violent act have to be intentional? According to Bufacchi (2005), minimalist definitions of violence focus on intentionality, arguing that an act can only be considered violent if the destruction that it caused was intentional by the perpetrator and unwanted by the target. An opposing perspective – a comprehensive approach – however, advocates that violence cannot be defined solely by the intentional use of force. Instead of focusing on the perpetrator’s intentions, a comprehensive framework strongly emphasises the survivor’s experiences, paying attention to the harm that was caused rather than the intentionality of the harasser (Bufacchi, 2005).

The second concern questions what typologies of violence exist. Classical research on political violence recognises a single type of physical harm. While for political scientists a single type may be more beneficial for clearer identification of patterns of violence, for feminist scholars of gender-motivated violence the same cannot be affirmed. When applying a gendered approach to political violence, the term “violence” is employed to identify a range of misogynistic acts and so, a variety of forms of bodily, psychological, economic and social harm are included (Bardall, 2018). Seeking to analyse the phenomenon of violence against women in politics through a feminist perspective, a comprehensive approach to violence, with the term “violence” being employed to describe the gendered violent and harassing behaviours women in politics experience, will be applied in the present analysis for it allows the recognition of a spectrum of different, yet interacting forms of violence (National Democratic Institute, 2018).

From the concept of gender-motivated political violence, another important debate – “women vs. gender” – emerges for the definition of the studied phenomenon. While Krook (2020) argues in favour of the term “violence against women in politics”, Bardall, Bjarnegård and Piscopo (2019) prefer the term “gendered political violence”. Arguing that the term “violence against women in politics” puts an excessive focus on women’s experiences, supporters of the “gendered political violence” term advocate that men’s experiences should also be considered. Since gendered attacks can target any individual with a non-hegemonic gender identity, men’s experiences should also be taken into account to comprehensively ascertain in which cases violence is gendered (Bardall, Bjarnegård, & Piscopo, 2019). For that reason, Bardall, Bjarnegård and Piscopo’s (2019) framework for recognising gendered political violence distinguishes between gendered motives, forms, and impacts.

Krook (2020), however, maintains that only the term “violence against women in politics” will comprehensively account for the experiences of women in politics. On one hand, unlike what other perspectives assume, defenders of the term “violence against women in politics” do not assume all incidents of violence that politically active women experience to constitute cases of violence against women in politics; only gender-motivated incidents are accounted for. Developing an empirical approach for identifying cases of gender bias, inspired by hate crimes literature, Krook and Sanín (2020) were able to ascertain which cases of violence against female politicians were violence against women in politics without having to regard the acts and motives behind these incidents. On the other, according to Krook (2020), supporters of the term “gendered political violence” are mistaking two different phenomena: “violence in politics” and “violence against women in politics”.

As Krook (2020) explains, in some cases, the “political” of an act of violence is not the motivation but rather the target. When that happens, instead of being an act of political violence, that phenomenon is known as violence against politicians. Regardless of the sex, age or party of the victim, the behaviours associated with the phenomenon of violence against politicians tend to be prompted by mental illness, facilitated by direct and easier access to politicians and their privileged information (e.g., contacts and work schedules). It is here that becomes relevant to properly distinguish between “violence in politics” and “violence against women in politics”.

According to Krook and Sanín (2016b), while “violence in politics” targets both men and women, “violence against women in politics”, specifically targets women as a group. Due to their gendered nature, these attacks gain a meaning that goes beyond the particular incident; an attack on a woman in politics is a threat and warning to all women in politics and those who seek to reach it. Employed to shame, discredit, silence and, ultimately, exclude politically active

women, these gendered attacks serve as a serious reminder that the ability to attain a seat at the table does not equal the end of discrimination against women (Krook, 2020).

When studying the phenomenon of violence against female politicians in Latin America, Piscopo (2016) argues that the distinction between “violence in politics” and “violence against women in politics”, and the consequent focus on the latter concept, does not only erase the sociopolitical context of violence but also dismisses the role of the State. Following a different approach to Krook and Sanín (2016b), Piscopo (2016) contends that women in politics are targeted mostly because of their profession rather than their gender. Defending, instead, the need for understating the phenomenon of violence against women in politics as part of a larger problem of political violence, Piscopo attributes the abuse of female politicians as a result of the State’s lack of capacity to maintain the monopoly of violence and to fight the patriarchal order (Piscopo, 2016).

Despite presenting a compelling and valuable essay, the present dissertation will not be following Piscopo’s (2016) framework, which was formulated exclusively based on the case of Latin America. For analysing the case of Portugal, the framework developed by Krook and Sanín (2020) seems to be most appropriate. Even more, because the analysis intends to capture the violent behaviours that only female politicians experience, supporting the distinction between “violence in politics” and “violence against women in politics” and, consequently, employing the latter term is believed to be the most suitable approach. As mentioned, if the goal is to attack politically active women based on gender, conceptually, only the term “violence against women in politics” will allow the proper analysis of the gender discrimination behind the attacks some women are subjugated to in politics. Still, it is important to highlight that, in practice, women may experience both forms of violence (“violence in politics” and “violence against women in politics”), being attacked for their ideas and for being politically active women.

Society’s bias against women enables the creation of a gendered political environment, in favour of men, prone to the intimidation and abuse of women in politics. Due to its relevance for the emergence of the phenomenon of violence against women in politics, the subject matter of the genderization of the political space will be developed in the following section.

## **1.2. Politics as a gendered space**

Regardless of the existing targeting of men in politics, the reality that violence against women in politics works differently cannot be ignored. When harassing men, most of the time, the goal

is to annoy, upset or anger people (Krook & Sanín, 2020). However, when women are the victims, harassment often involves sexualised and gender-based insults that infringe on the boundary between public and private life (National Democratic Institute, 2021). These differences are a result of the genderization of the political space.

Many academics have sought to explain how the political space is gendered. Focusing on the impact of institutional configurations, the feminist institutionalist approach analyses the way gender relations shape the formal and informal practices of the political space (Kenny, 2013). Perceiving political institutions as not gender-neutral structures that produce and reproduce power inequalities that benefit men (Kenny & Verge, 2016), feminist institutionalists are aware of how informal practices can undermine the formal aspects of the legislature. Taking the example of gender quotas, despite seeking to counter gender bias in the legislature, the impact of these policies ultimately depends on the willingness of the party elites to implement them (Kenny & Verge, 2016). That being said, internal party dynamics greatly shape the level of influence gender has in the daily culture of political institutions and, thus, gender quotas cannot always surpass institutionalised gender bias (Kenny & Verge, 2016).

Being aware of the significant role political parties take on legislature dynamics, following an institutional feminist approach, Kenny and Verge (2016) developed a model to explain the relationship between political parties and gender. Social gender relations are responsible for the creation of gender norms which dictate how men and women should behave. Those norms become entrenched in political parties' practices, defining the culture in which parties operate. In simpler terms, parties institutionalise ideas that have gendered propositions. For example, the characteristics that make an ideal candidate are stereotypically male traits. The gendered culture of political parties, in turn, creates an environment where masculine codes will lay the foundation for party structures and processes (Kenny & Verge, 2016, p. 358). Ultimately, because political institutions produce experiences that benefit men over women, parliaments can reinforce and reproduce gendered social relations through the meanings their functions take (Verge, 2022).

Previous research, taken together, has established that political institutions are gendered organisations that work according to gendered propositions that have beneficial implications for men and negative ones for women (Collier & Raney, 2018; Kantola & Agustín, 2019). That is not to say that femininity constructions are not present. Despite both femininity and masculinity constructions being present, the masculine code overrules the feminine. Overall, while formal rules of politics are created by men to benefit men, the informal norms dictate that a politician should behave according to traditional male traits (Erikson & Josefsson, 2022).

Set as a game that seeks to make women fail, it can be argued that politics remains a gendered space where traditional gendered ideals are constantly produced and reinforced, discouraging other women from becoming politically active (Kenny & Verge, 2016). Being programmed based on a set of norms, practices and expectations that grant power and legitimacy to those who behave in a masculine manner (Palmieri, 2020), once women decide to run or occupy positions in public office, they are confronted with a previously established culture that understands them as intruders, making them victims of discrimination and harassment practices (Krook, 2020). This is where the central phenomenon of the present analysis emerges. The following section will then be dedicated to the theorisation of the phenomenon of violence against women in politics following Krook and Sanín's (2020) framework.

### **1.3. Theorising violence against women in politics**

Violence against women in politics is a specific gendered phenomenon perpetrated by political opponents as well as party colleagues, government members, family and friends, social media commentators, and police and military forces, among others (Krook, 2020). In both public and private spaces, this phenomenon occurs before and during elections and after women have occupied their positions in politics (Krook & Sanín, 2016a). Following Krook and Sanín's (2020) perspective, violence against women in politics works at three levels – structural, cultural and symbolic – which interact together to create an environment of domination where patriarchal inequalities are bolstered, further validating and maintaining gender inequalities (Bardall, 2018).

Gender inequality begins with structural violence, where, by imposing the public/private divide, the idea that men belong in the public sphere of politics while women's place is the domestic private space is constantly supported. As a result, even when women gain access to the political space, they must face a series of challenging beliefs and attitudes that treat them as intruders in the space of men (Krook, 2020). Cultural violence justifies structural violence. By convincing people that the established beliefs are good and desirable, citizens uphold the existing social, economic and political settings, even if those conflict with their self-interests (Krook, 2020). Despite varying across contexts, in the case of violence against women in politics, cultural violence enables a general pattern of ideas and values responsible for questioning women's character and righteousness as political actors. In turn, cultural violence produces symbolic violence. A more subtle form of domination responsible for making women

invisible, symbolic violence excludes, punishes and degrades women for not following the status they are destined to occupy (Krook, 2020).

### **1.3.1. Typology of violence**

When developing their typology of violence against women in politics, Krook and Sanín (2020) followed previous recommendations, by recognising physical, psychological, sexual and economic acts of violence, while adding a fifth type, semiotic violence, a category developed by Krook (2020). Before advancing with the definition of each type, it is relevant to mention that despite the conceptual and analytical differentiation of these categories, in practice, they can be interrelated: on one hand, one act can have different meanings since it can be interpreted differently; on the other some acts escalate with time, starting in one typology and ending with all (Krook & Sanín, 2020).

*Physical violence*, as the name states it, involves some form of bodily harm, touching, or unwelcome physical proximity (Krook & Sanín, 2020). With perpetrators usually preferring to resort to the least costly forms of violence, this typology is one of the rarest (National Democratic Institute, 2021). According to an IPU (Inter-Parliamentary Union) worldwide investigation on violence against female parliamentarians, 25.5% of the interviewees had experienced some sort of physical violence while performing their duties as MPs, with 20% of those women saying they had witnessed an act of physical violence against a female colleague (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2016). In its follow-up report on violence in European parliaments, in 2018, the IPU identified a lower, but still evident, incidence of physical violence (14.8%) – with 55% of these incidents happening in political meetings and election campaigns (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2018).

*Psychological violence* seeks to undermine targets by degrading, demoralising or shaming them through actions that cause fear (Krook & Sanín, 2020). Despite being widely recognised as the most common type of violence against women in politics (National Democratic Institute, 2021), challenges remain when defining and measuring psychological violence incidents due to a superior investment in quantifying physical violence, which is perceived as more severe (Krook, 2020). According to the IPU, 81.8% of women parliamentarians in the global sample faced some form of psychological violence (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2016). For female European parliamentarians this number rested at 85.2% (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2018). Regarding the latter, 46.9% also admitted having received threats of death, rape or other acts of physical violence, while 58.2% suffered sexist attacks online (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2018).

*Sexual violence* includes a spectrum of unwelcome behaviours with a sexual nature, which ranges from non-consensual physical contact to unwanted verbal comments (Krook & Sanín, 2020). According to the IPU reports on violence against women in parliaments, sexual violence is among the least reported forms of violence: in the global sample, 21.8% of the interviewed MPs admitted having experienced sexual violence (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2016), while the European study reported that 24.7% of female parliamentarians have faced this form of violence (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2018).

*Economic violence* is defined as any form of abuse that aims to deny or control women's access to resources and, consequently, control and intimidate women (Krook & Sanín, 2020). Notwithstanding its severe consequences, this typology remains a highly invisible phenomenon, still, in certain contexts it was found to be one of the most common typologies (National Democratic Institute, 2021). According to the IPU, in the global study, economic violence was the second most common type, with 32.7% of respondents claiming they have suffered some form of abusive action of this nature (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2016). However, the report on European parliaments revealed economic violence to be the least identified form of violence female parliamentarians are subjected to, affecting only 13.5% of MPs (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2018). Regardless of the lower number, actions such as property damage or destruction and denial of resources should not be taken lightly.

Finally, *semiotic violence* refers to the dynamics involving the employment of words, images and body language, which seek to harm and subjugate women for the establishment of a system of hegemonic masculinity. Unlike previous types, semiotic violence strategies are less about attacking a certain woman and more about spreading the message that women are not worthy of politics. In simple terms, despite all typologies of violence against women in politics having the purpose of targeting women as an identity group, while a physical attack on a certain politician might not be felt as an attack on all women in politics, a semiotic attack most likely will be (Krook, 2020).

Unlike the other typologies, due to free speech protections, legally recognising acts of semiotic violence is much more complicated. While acknowledging that freedom of speech is a central and fundamental aspect of any democratic system, Krook and Sanín (2016b) argue that similarly to hate crimes, behaviours that fall under the semiotic category go beyond opinion. Entering the field of violence, actions that fall under this typology intimidate and deny equal rights to certain individuals simply due to their identity. Based on women's experiences in politics, Krook (2020) suggests women can suffer semiotic violence through two forms: "rendering women invisible", where women's political presence and/or contributions are

ignored; and “rendering women incompetent”, in which women’s credibility and merit as political actors are questioned, accusing these women of failing to be good women.

Overall, women are silenced and criticized for their decisions and appearances, they are sexually harassed and assaulted, and, in the worst cases, they are killed (Lamartine and Henriques, 2021). Many women in politics around the world have come forward with their abusive experiences, causing the phenomenon of violence against women to gain more recognition (National Democratic Institute, 2018). Still, violent experiences of women in politics, most of the time, continue to be underrecognized and, instead, interpreted as normal behaviours (Krook & Sanín, 2020; National Democratic Institute, 2021). Constituting a long-overlook phenomenon, the following section will explore the dynamics behind this dismissal.

#### **1.4. Dismissing violence against women in politics**

Krook (2020) developed four major explanations for the lack of attention and importance that is given to the phenomenon of violence against women in politics. Primarily, some women perceive the violence they suffer while navigating the political sphere as a normal consequence of doing politics. Krook (2020) called this the *cognitive gap*. With the belief that gender equality has been achieved in many countries, particularly in Western ones, equality for women is often taken for granted. As Manne (2018) highlights, if people become less sexist that does not mean feminism work is complete; on the contrary, misogyny often manifests itself as a backlash to women’s achievements. Perceiving discrimination against women as a problem of the past, dismissing the ways in which women are abused, thus, enables the existence or even creation of unusual ways of attacking women.

Second, as the *political gap* accounts for, when women do recognise the discrimination they suffer as problematic, they are either too afraid to speak out, fearing they will be accused of being unsuited for their positions, or are pressured to remain quiet to protect their careers (Krook, 2020). Even more, because perpetrators are often members of the same party as the victim – 42% of women reported experiencing threats and coercive behaviours from their party colleagues (National Democratic Institute, 2018, p. 6)<sup>1</sup> – women often feel compelled to be loyal to their party and fellow members by staying silent regarding the prejudice they suffer (Krook, 2020).

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<sup>1</sup> The study can be found in the following link: <https://www.ndi.org/publications/no-party-violence-analyzing-violence-against-women-political-parties>. (Accessed 08/08/2023).



Third, according to the *receptivity gap*, women also fear being accused of overreacting or being blamed for the abuse they suffer – an idea that victims are gaslighted into believing (Krook, 2020). Others also worry about being accused of taking advantage of their position when reporting instances of abuse. Perceived as strategic and calculating by calling out against sexism when they see it, women are sometimes assumed to play the gender card to gain sympathy and, of course, succeed in their careers (Krook, 2020). A very well-known example of these situations happened in the course of the #MeToo movement, where women who came forward about their sexual assault experiences were often seen as non-credible or blamed for the assault (Andreasen, 2021).

With women's stories being dismissed, ignored and challenged, in turn, perpetrators may be exonerated, becoming the victims of false accusations made by ambitious women. As Manne (2018) explains, powerful men often enjoy public sympathy – what the author called *himpathy* – in cases of sexual assault or other misogynistic behaviours. This culture of *himpathy*, thus, can serve as the basis for a backlash against any attempt to change the established culture of violence against women. With one in three women worldwide experiencing physical or sexual violence (UN Women, s.d.), the reality that women are often victims of violent behaviours cannot be denied. Still, even with prominent women, such as in the #MeToo movement, being subjected to scepticism when coming forward with their stories of abuse, it is hard not to read the underlying message: women cannot be trusted (Crockett, 2016).

This dismissal, in turn, perpetuates the denial of violence against women and, consequently, a lack of proper measures to address it. This leads to the fourth reason for the lack of attention given to the phenomenon in question: *the resources gap*. Women in politics do not have access to a safe place to report the vicious actions they suffer (National Democratic Institute, 2018) nor to any strategies for helping them recognise their experiences as violent (Krook, 2020). Social media, in particular, is becoming a venue for the spreading of hateful comments and sexist depictions of women. That being said, the analysis of social media platforms becomes useful for the gain of more profound knowledge and awareness of the phenomenon of violence against women in politics. A theoretical overview of the phenomenon of online violence against women in politics will be developed in the following section.

## **1.5. Gender and politics in the online space**

According to media ecology, social networks present social features that influence how users understand the world (Ott, 2017). Following this theory, modern technologies have provided a

never-seen manner of communication, responsible for enabling the creation and sharing of the latest content that influences as well as validates identities and behaviours. As Citron (2014) explains, the Internet has the capacity to feed both our virtues and vices. With the digital world making it more likely for people to act in a free manner, in turn, that freedom may bring forward harmful practices. Social networks, in particular, enable a new form of borderless communication that has revolutionised social interactions and the exchange of ideas (Alkiviadou, 2019). However, at the same time, these platforms have an immense potential to become the ideal space for spreading hate (KhosraviNik & Esposito, 2018).

Exploring people's situations, characteristics and weaknesses, acts of online violence may involve distinct types of harassment, such as sexual exploitation, direct threats and discrimination against social groups (Crespi & Hellsten, 2022). Online violence, also known as cyberviolence, thus, can be defined as any "online behaviour that constitutes or leads to an attack against the well-being (...) of an individual or group" (Crespi & Hellsten, 2022, p. 392). Often perceived simply as "offline" violence perpetrated in the online space, online violence continues to be a misunderstood and pervasive phenomenon that lacks a universal definition and coherent strategy for its tackling (Crespi & Hellsten, 2022)

The online space presents different unique factors, which the "offline" space does not, that contribute to the increase of hostility. The disinhibition effect that social media provides is one of the most important to develop. As Suler (2004) mentions, because the cyber world permits people to self-disclose or act more passionately than they would in person – what the author called the online disinhibition effect – social media is responsible for the acceleration of violent incidents by enabling individuals to express their anger and hatred viciously without directly facing the targets of said hate (Citron, 2014). Anonymity is a crucial factor in the online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004). By allowing people to not feel accountable for their actions, anonymity causes a diminishing of the social pressures that invoke in us a sense of consciousness and accountability (KhosraviNik & Esposito, 2018). As a result, regardless of believing their actions are wrongful, the status of anonymity will increase the chance of individuals expressing spiteful opinions that they would not in the "offline" space (Citron, 2014).

Still, anonymity itself does not induce hostile behaviour. With some social media users not hiding their identities, it can be certain that anonymity is not always necessary to provoke such actions (Keipi, Näsi, Oksanen, & Räsänen, 2017); just the sense of invisibility is more than enough to amplify the disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004). Even though there is a possibility of being identified, the belief that what is said or done on the internet will not be linked to us is a

widespread one. With individuals being unable to see the targets of their comments, there is a feeling that said lack of recognition goes both ways (Citron, 2014). Following this perspective, the physical separation the internet allows has the power to feed into people's destructive urges since it is easier to offend someone without having to face any kind of physical reaction (Suler, 2004).

Recent technologies can also fuel the creation of online hate groups. Through the removal of physical barriers that once upon a time prevented the dissemination of extremist and hateful speech and, consequently, of extremist groups, the internet has the power to radicalise individuals who will, in turn, become aggressive at the expense of others (Citron, 2014). Worsening this scenario, not only does the internet enable the polarisation of groups, but it also amplifies victims' grievances by producing content, regardless of its factuality, in an information cascade that is incredibly difficult to terminate (Citron, 2014). In this sense, the digital world can be the perfect environment for the magnification of our deepest and obscure tendencies for the spreading of violent, sexualised and distorted content.

Overall, the digitalised world can make aggression easier than in the "offline" space. While the latter involves some kind of physical interaction, causing violent attacks to carry a higher cost, the former does not, which results in the perception of online violence as less harmful (Keipi et al., 2017). Still, online violence should not be underestimated. For one, a low cost for perpetrating hateful actions can amplify their scope (Keipi et al., 2017). Another relevant aspect to point out is the potential the online space has for changing a person's perception of time and self (Suler, 2004). With the internet being able to alter the reality of online interactions, the perpetrator may not feel any kind of responsibility for their committed actions, nor empathy with their target (Crespi & Hellsten, 2022).

Exposure to hateful content online can produce serious negative consequences at both personal and group levels. Responsible for inducing anxiety, insecurity and fear, online violence may affect people's everyday lives, forcing victims to develop defensive attitudes responsible for limiting their choices. In the long term, online hate has the capability to reinforce discrimination against minority groups (Keipi et al., 2017), making the impact of online discourse reach "offline" settings (KhosraviNik & Esposito, 2018).

When acknowledging the extremely harmful potential the online space presents for the dissemination of violent behaviours, the possibility of violence against women in politics deriving from technological advances and the increasing levels of discourteousness in politics may be worth considering (Krook, 2020). Despite violence and harassment against women in politics not being a new phenomenon, advocates of this idea argue that recent changes in

technology are responsible for making politics much more disruptive. That being said, the digital and political spaces reinforce one another, creating the ideal environment for the creation and dissemination of misogynistic content to shame and harm politically active women (National Democratic Institute, 2021).

Reflecting and intensifying previous social divisions, social media can be transformed into a gendered space where women are more prone to suffer violence, hate and sexist abuse, especially, if they are public figures (Esposito & Breeze, 2022). With a tendency to dismiss sexist comments or behaviours, the failure of institutions to properly address this phenomenon disseminates the message that misogynistic abusive actions are acceptable (Dragotto, Giomi, & Melchiorre, 2020). Consequently, the structures of social networks responsible for producing new gendered and abusive dynamics become constantly validated and reproduced, both on- and “offline” (Watson, 2023).

With new technologies enabling more direct access between politicians and the public (Watson, 2023), in turn, the online space may facilitate online abuse against politicians (Keipi et al., 2017). Following the literature on violence against women in politics, despite male politicians suffering online harassment, the gender variable greatly influences the manifestations of abusive behaviours resulting in women in politics being often accused of being unfeminine, sexually immoral or bad mothers (Bardall, 2013). Online violence against women in politics can, then, be understood as a both public and private form of psychological, sexual and semiotic violence (when applying Krook and Sanín’s (2020) framework), where despite an attack having an individualistic nature, its large audience makes its impact reach everyone who identifies with the victim (Erikson et al., 2021).

That being said, the analysis of the incidents of gendered online abuse and its impact is a crucial step in the fight against violence against women in politics. Seeking to contribute to the growing, but still relatively scarce body of literature that accounts for the violent experiences women in politics are forced to endure in the online space, the present dissertation will fill a present gap in academia by performing a social media analysis of Twitter to assess the phenomenon of online violence against women in politics in the Portuguese context. Before advancing with an overview of the Portuguese case it is fundamental to first justify the choice of using Twitter as a research tool.

### **1.5.1. Twitter as a space of violence**

Twitter is the 15th most popular social media platform in the world. With 1.3 billion accounts and around 368 million active users, five hundred million tweets are posted per day (Ahlgren,

2023). Being a microblogging network (Ott, 2017), communication on Twitter occurs in the form of tweets that have no more than 280 characters, allowing users to send and receive short messages, incessantly, that reach countless people from all around the world (Lopez, Muldoon, & McKeown, 2019).

Following media ecology theory, Ott (2017) argues that Twitter has the capacity to shape our behaviour to promote malicious discourse. Due to its communication characteristics, information on Twitter is forcibly simplified and impulsively disseminated without requiring any kind of reflection about its content and possible consequences (Ott, 2017). Being a platform for the use of informal language, when combined with the mentioned lack of physical presence social networks enable, Twitter is an ideal space for the distribution of negative and aggressive discourse (Ott, 2017).

Besides creating an online space for politicians to promote their agendas, with the purpose of having electoral success, and shaping public opinion (Chen, Duan, & Yang, 2022), Twitter is used by many as a platform to discuss politics – a Pew Research Center analysis, for example, found that 33% of United States Twitter users utilized this network for this exact purpose (BestVater, Shah, Rivero, & Smith, 2022). Serving as an intersection of life sciences, politics and policymaking, Twitter has been used for a variety of studies (Chen et al., 2022), serving as an important anthropological source of information for modern society.

That being said, in the area of Political Science, the use of Twitter by political elites, during and outside electoral elections, has often been analysed, along with the investigation of the impact of the more direct relationship between representatives and voters that this platform allows (Jungherr, 2016). Due to its potential for political activity, the dissemination of activism and social movements, such as feminism, has also been an often-studied phenomenon (Karami, Lundy, Webb, & Dwivedi, 2020).

Following similar patterns to other social networks, online abuse against women on Twitter is pervasive. Reflecting cultural aspects of society, women are subjected to online violent and sexualised comments that harm and restrict their rights. However, Twitter cannot properly address violence against women making this platform both emancipatory and punishing (Lopez et al., 2019). That being said, when regarding the pattern of online abuse against women, Twitter not only produces hostility; it produces violence against women in politics. Being a platform of immense value for researchers since it provides the distribution of information, sentiments and behaviours (Chen et al., 2022), when regarding the fact that Twitter appears to have a lack of capacity to tackle gender bias (Citron, 2014; Lopez et al., 2019), this platform becomes a much more relevant space for the analysis of the central phenomenon of this

investigation. For all the presented reasons, Twitter will be used as a data source for the analysis of the phenomenon of online violence against women in politics in the Portuguese context. The following section will be dedicated to an overview of the Portuguese case.

## CHAPTER 2

### **The Portuguese case**

In Portugal, it was only during the Estado Novo regime that women acquired the right to be elected. Still, this change was implemented along with severe restrictions, for example regarding literacy levels (Almeida, 2018). Responsible for making female political participation extremely difficult, these restrictions made political participation impossible for the majority of women to achieve (Almeida, 2018). Between 1934 and 1973, only twenty-one women were elected to Parliament, while only one woman occupied a cabinet position (Almeida, 2018). It is important to highlight two aspects related to the political participation of these women. First, their participation relied heavily on their more privileged background and support for traditional gender norms. Second, their political responsibilities were more symbolic and superficial in comparison to their male colleagues (Lamartine & Henriques, 2021).

With the transition to a democratic system, after the 25 April 1974 revolution, total gender equality was introduced in the Portuguese electoral system, paving the way for the establishment of fundamental political, social and civic rights in the gender equality framework (Almeida, 2018). Coming with great promises, despite fulfilling its goal of legally enabling women to have equal and just access to politics, electoral results were not the expected. Without dismissing the more positive results in comparison with the previous years, changes in legislation did not tackle the gendered dynamics and inequalities that pervaded the political space (Almeida, 2018).

The first legislative elections, on 25 April 1976, elected fifteen women deputies (5.7%) for Parliament. Female political participation lethargically grew during the next years: between 1979 and 1991, on average, eighteen women (around 7%) were elected in each legislature. This framework, however, changed in the 1995 Legislative elections with twenty-eight women (12.2%) being elected. This number continued to grow in the following decade and by 2005 forty-nine (21.3%) women were elected to Parliament (Pordata, 2022a<sup>2</sup>; Pordata, 2022b<sup>3</sup>).

Combined with the demands of feminist movements, the victory of the Socialist Party, with the support of the Left Block, enabled the adoption of the Portuguese Parity Law in 2006

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<sup>2</sup> Data available in the following link: <https://www.pordata.pt/portugal/mandatos+nas+eleicoes+para+a+assembleia+da+republica+deputados+do+sexo+feminino+em+percentagem+do+total++por+partido+politico-2261> (Accessed 19/01/2023).

<sup>3</sup> Data available in the following link: <https://www.pordata.pt/portugal/mandatos+nas+eleicoes+para+a+assembleia+da+republica+deputados+do+sexo+feminino+por+partido+politico-2260-179066> (Accessed 19/01/2023).

(Fernandes, Fonseca, & Won, 2021; Santos & Espírito-Santo, 2017). Nowadays, the Organic Law n°1/2019<sup>4</sup> institutes that each party's electoral list must be composed of a minimum of 40% of each sex<sup>5</sup>, while also prohibiting electoral lists from having three consecutive candidates of the same gender. With its implementation in 2009, the Legislative elections of that year resulted in the election of sixty-three women (27.4%) for Parliament, showing an evident growth in female representation (Pordata, 2022a; Pordata, 2022b).

Following previous positive trends, the 2015 and 2019 Legislative elections proved to be an even better scenario for gender equality, electing seventy-six women (33%) and eighty-nine women (38.7%) to Parliament, respectively. Nowadays, after the anticipated Legislative elections of 2022, the Portuguese Parliament suffered a slight decrease in female representation with the election of eighty-five women (37%) (Pordata, 2022a; Pordata, 2022b).

Overall, it cannot be denied that the Parity Law has caused a beneficial change in the increase of female political participation in Parliament. Still, only sixty women out of 174 politicians (Francisco, 2022) were heads of the list for the 2022 elections. In addition, the highest position to ever be occupied by a woman was back in 1979, when Maria de Lurdes Pintasilgo was appointed (not elected) as the first and only woman Prime-Minister for five months (Almeida, 2015, 2018; Lamartine & Henriques, 2021). Based on these insights, even though almost forty per cent of the Portuguese Assembly is composed of women, the reality is that after more than forty-five years of democracy, the Portuguese Parliament has not yet reached true parity, nor have a majority of female deputies, proving that the Portuguese fight for gender equality in politics has a still a long road ahead.

Gendered norms and stereotypes still pervade Portuguese society. Due to both the late democratisation process and the strong influence of a patriarchal culture, discrimination against women in Portuguese politics remains a harsh reality (Fernandes et al., 2021). The implementation of the Parity Law, despite enabling an increase in women's descriptive political representation, does not immediately translate into equality. Political institutions remain largely gendered in favour of men, perpetuating an unbalanced distribution of power between men and women. In turn, women are portrayed as outsiders who have to endure higher criticism and a continuum of challenges when entering the political field (Espírito-Santo & Sanches, 2020; Santos & Espírito-Santo, 2017).

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<sup>4</sup> See full text here: <https://dre.pt/dre/detalhe/lei-organica/1-2019-121712770>.

<sup>5</sup> According to the Organic Law n°3/2006, initially, electoral lists used to be composed of a minimum of 33% of each sex. See full text here: <https://dre.pt/dre/legislacao-consolidada/lei-organica/2006-34530775>.



In the case of the Portuguese parliament, women are still underrepresented in prominent legislative debates and often experience stigmatisation, having to prove their merit and value before having floor access, for example (Fernandes et al., 2021). Even more, it was also found that gender stereotypes remain influential factors for women's committee appointments with women overrepresenting social issues committees (Espírito-Santo & Sanches, 2020). Perpetuated by the representatives chosen by the Portuguese electorate, these practices can be expected to be the beginning of a wider variety of harmful and unjust experiences women have to endure when performing political activities.

The case of Portugal was chosen for three reasons. First, only one study has been done on the phenomenon of violence against women in politics in Portugal. Focused on analysing public Facebook comments on a post made about Marisa Matias's #vermelhoemBelém campaign, comparing it to the case of Dilma Rousseff, it was concluded that the violence against women in politics phenomenon is a reality in Portugal (Lamartine & Henriques, 2021). Based on this investigation, due to the impactful consequences of this phenomenon on democracy and gender equality (Krook, 2020), more studies on violence against women in politics should be made.

Second, despite implementing the Quota-Parity Law in 2009, more than ten years later, representation challenges remain. Along with the presence of unequal dynamics that benefit men's political success over women's, the study of the Portuguese case becomes important for the identification of the phenomenon of violence against women in politics. Third, because Portugal has still yet to implement policies for tackling the phenomenon of violence against women in politics, more studies are necessary to increase knowledge and raise awareness about the phenomenon. Having developed a justification for the choice of the Portuguese case, the following section will be dedicated to the overview of the more relevant theories and investigations about the phenomenon of violence against women in politics from which theoretical expectations were formulated.



## Theoretical expectations

### 3.1. Manifestations of online violence against women in politics

Relevant academic efforts have been made to explore women's violent experiences in public office. Despite conceptual differences, one group of studies has focused solely on women's experiences, arguing that sexist harassment and abuse against women in politics is a widespread phenomenon (Bardall, 2018; Krook, 2017; Krook & Sanín, 2020). Finding that female politicians' violent experiences may be a form of backlash or consequence of the increasing women's political representation (Matfess, Kishi, & Berry, 2022; Muhammad, Awan, & Hussain, 2020; Sanín, 2020), the reports of gendered violent incidents that seek to punish politically active women and push them outside the political space are not few (Albaine, 2016; Alfonso & Cárdenas, 2021; Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2016; Johnson-Myers, 2021).

Others, on the contrary, have preferred performing gender comparative studies (Bjarnegård, Håkansson, & Zetterberg, 2022; Collignon & Rüdiger, 2021; Herrick & Thomas, 2022), concluding that women in politics are exposed to more abuse and violence than men, particularly, of sexual nature. As Bardall (2013) argues, a possible explanation for the discrepancy between the levels of abuse that women and men suffer comes from women's higher vulnerability to attacks based on morality. By occupying and succeeding in a male-dominated space, women are exposed to sexualised and degrading criticism that questions both their roles as politicians and women, something that men do not face.

Research on women's experiences with online abuse is also gaining increasing attention. Without dismissing that the online space is characterised by concerning levels of hostility for all politicians, regardless of their gender, new technology studies highlight how women in politics are especially targeted by the public and forced to endure a typology of violent behaviours due to their gender (Herrick & Thomas, 2022). Šimonović's 2018 report on the phenomenon of violence against women in politics, focusing on online violence, identified that women in politics were especially threatened and harassed often through misogynistic and sexualised gendered offences (Šimonović, 2018). Adding to this evidence, the Inter-Parliamentary Union<sup>6</sup> found 41.8% of the interviewed women to report social media as a harmful source for the distribution of disrespectful and sexual comments and images (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2016), evidencing, yet again, the severe potential these platforms have

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<sup>6</sup> The study can be found in the following link: <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/issue-briefs/2016-10/sexism-harassment-and-violence-against-women-parliamentarians> (Accessed 06/08/2023).

for reflecting the discrimination women in politics suffer “offline” (Ncube & Yemurai, 2020) and reproducing new abusive practices.

Research into the issue of online discrimination and abuse aimed at female political representatives is still relatively scarce, however, especially in recent years, some relevant studies on online violence against women in politics have been published. Esposito and Breeze (2022) performed a social media analysis on ten politicians, both women and men, from the main parties of the United Kingdom. Employing a mixed-method approach, the qualitative analysis consisted of classifying the collected tweets according to the following categories: 1) body shaming; 2) assertions of moral degradation; 3) direct threatening and abuse; and 4) gender stereotyping/gatekeeping (Esposito & Breeze, 2022, p. 313). It was concluded that women in politics indeed are subjected to gendered online attacks with a focus on their appearance and competence. Along with the identification of tweets containing direct threats and stereotypical comments, Esposito and Breeze’s (2022) study proved how women are treated as invaders of the political space on social media.

Also choosing to perform a gender comparison analysis, Melendres and Barea (2021) analysed the discourse on Twitter used to refer to the candidates of the United Kingdom (UK) general elections of 2019. After employing quantitative and sentiment analyses (positive and negative), tweets classified as negative were later analysed following a Critical Discourse Analysis approach to assess their abusive nature. The authors found that tweets referring to female candidates were often more negative and abusive when compared to their male counterparts. Highlighting how the public continues to adopt misogynistic views of women, Melendres and Barea’s (2021) assessment follows the perspective of similar literature on how women are still seen as unfit for politics.

Atalanta’s (2018) report on the effects of gender on social media discourse presented an analysis of public tweets about three pairs of prominent politicians in three countries – the United Kingdom, South Africa and Chile. Choosing a period where the politicians were performing important political activities, such as campaigning for elections, the selected tweets were, primarily, subjected to a sentiment analysis to be classified as positive, neutral or negative. Posteriorly, those classified as negative were assessed accordingly to five categories of gendered discourse: 1) comments on physical appearance; 2) comments about the relationship or marital status; 3) comments about whether the person has children or not; 4) derogatory language used to describe the person and not their profession; and 5) comments about competence due to the person’s gender (Atalanta, 2018, p. 5). It was concluded that the volume of discourse towards or about women politicians was greater in all five gendered

categories, with women being three times more likely than men to suffer comments with a pejorative nature that allude to their gender.

Harmer and Southern (2021), on the other hand, performed a qualitative thematic analysis of public tweets, considered uncivil in a previous study, referring solely to women MPs in the UK. Establishing a period where the selected 500 MPs were participating in standard Parliamentary business, from the analysis of the tweets four themes were identified: 1) overt online abuse; 2) everyday sexism and othering; 3) dismissing discrimination and victim blaming; and 4) claiming reverse discrimination (Harmer & Southern, 2021, p. 2005). Finding that online abuse often targets multiple aspects of women's identities – such as ethnicity and religion – Harmer and Southern (2021) concluded that female representatives are victims of psychological and semiotic behaviours responsible for harming women in politics and discouraging them from occupying public office positions.

Fuchs and Schäfer (2021) are other authors who have developed an investigation solely focused on women's experiences. Performing a qualitative analysis of public Tweets directed at the four more prevalent female politicians in Japan, the authors also employed a manual sentiment analysis (positive, ambivalent and negative) and context-based interpretation. Fuchs and Schäfer (2021) concluded that female politicians are often exposed to negative sentiments and attitudes on Twitter. Choosing, purposively, a time when no elections were made, Fuchs & Schäfer (2021) investigation gives useful insights into the daily discrimination and abuse female politicians suffer, contributing to the growing body of literature that accounts for women in politics violent and gendered experiences on social media (Jankowicz, et al., 2021; Ncube & Yemurai, 2020; Rheault, Rayment, & Musulan, 2019; Ritacco, 2021; Sant, Fredheim, & Bergmanis-Koräts, 2021; Sobieraj & Merchant, 2021).

That being said, it can be contended that due to its free speech ideals, social media platforms enable the dissemination of sexist comments. In turn, online channels become important tools for the analysis of the more subtle but still abusive practices women in politics experience. As previously mentioned, the typology of violence against women in politics developed by Krook and Sanín (2020) is composed of five categories of gendered-motivated violence: physical, psychological, sexual, economic and semiotic. Drawing inspirations from Krook and Sanín (2020), the present dissertation argues that online violence against women in politics constitutes a form of psychological, sexual and semiotic violence. Excluding the analysis of physical and economic forms of violence (which cannot be observed in the online space), accounting for the gender-motivated incidents of psychological, sexual and semiotic violence that women in politics suffer, overall, it can be expected for *female political candidates for the position of MP*

*in Portuguese politics to experience online gendered criticism and abuse* (first expectation) that seeks to humiliate the candidates while questioning their role in politics.

Regardless of believing that differences in state capacity do not have an impact on the existence of the phenomenon of violence against women in politics, Krook and Sanín (2016b) acknowledge that they might affect the means that are employed to attack women. Simply put, in countries where violence is normalised, it may be easier to resort to sexual and psychological acts of violence due to the impunity that exists. On the contrary, in countries where the former typologies of violence are severely condemned, perpetrators might prefer to resort to semiotic acts of violence, which are harder to legally convict due to freedom of speech rights. Acknowledging the specificities that make the online space unique to the spreading of violent discourse where abusers enjoy freedom from punishment (Ward & McLoughlin, 2020), it is expected for *female political candidates for the position of MP in Portuguese politics to experience higher levels of online semiotic violence in comparison to online psychological and sexual forms of violence* (second expectation).

### **3.2. Triggering factors for online violence against women in politics**

Comparative research has also enabled an investigation of the differences among women's experiences of violence, allowing a better understanding of how intersectionality influences the incidents of violence against women in politics. Without dismissing the role gender plays in violence against women in politics, it is relevant to mention that other aspects, such as ethnicity, age and sexuality interact with gender increasing the chance of women in politics experiencing violence. For example, while the IPU found that women under forty years old are more prone to be targeted on social media than those older than forty (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2016, p. 6)<sup>7</sup>, Amnesty International (2017)<sup>8</sup> identified that women MPs of ethnic minorities groups in the UK received 34% more abusive comments on Twitter than their white counterparts. Without overlooking the importance of exploring these elements of intersectionality, the present dissertation will only analyse two factors that can trigger the level of abuse against female politicians: political visibility and political ideology.

Women's political activities have the potential to worsen levels of abuse. It was found that women who assume higher positions in the political hierarchy, whose increased visibility and

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<sup>7</sup> The study can be found at the following link: <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/issue-briefs/2016-10/sexism-harassment-and-violence-against-women-parliamentarians>.

<sup>8</sup> The study can be found at the following link: <https://decoders.amnesty.org/projects/troll-patrol/findings>.

power are perceived as a serious violation of gender norms, are more prone to suffer abusive scrutiny (Håkansson, 2021; Rheault et al., 2019). Based on these insights, for the Portuguese case, political candidates who previously occupied the position of MP are expected to have superior political visibility in comparison with other candidates who have not been elected for this position. Thus, for the Portuguese case, it can be expected for *female political candidates for the position of MP in Portuguese politics who previously occupied the position of MP to suffer more online criticism and abuse* (third expectation).

It has also been found that women who speak actively in favour of feminist issues endure higher levels of criticism and abuse. For example, it has been reported that women in politics have suffered concerning gendered attacks after proposing bills that support women's or LGBTQIA+ rights (Krook, 2020). Following these trends, because politicians of left-wing parties are known advocates for these issues, in the Portuguese case, it can be expected for *female political candidates for the position of MP in Portuguese politics belonging to parties of the left spectrum to suffer more online criticism and abuse* (fourth expectation).

### **3.3. Impact of online violence against women in politics**

Naming just a few examples, women in politics experience sexual offences (Kenny, 2013); gendered media coverage that objectifies, undermines and criticizes them (Bardall et al., 2019); and are compelled to step down from their positions when working in public office (National Democratic Institute, 2021). When regarding the meaningful influence social media has nowadays on the level of engagement between representatives and the electorate, online violence against women in politics impact becomes even more concerning. Because women do not have much of a choice in continuing to use these spaces, female politicians often end up being forced to endure online abuse and its consequences (Erikson et al., 2021; Harmer & Southern, 2021). Responsible for limiting the dialogue between politicians and voters while hindering their professional success (Ward & McLoughlin, 2020), regrettably, online gendered attacks against female politicians often succeed in their goals.

According to Atalanta (2018), online violence against women in politics delegitimises and depersonalises politically active women, installing fear that either forces them to devote their time to arrange new strategies for dealing with the abuse or, in worse scenarios, compels them to withdraw from the political space. Based on these insights, it can be expected that *female MPs in Portuguese politics are forced to change their behaviours when using social media* (fifth expectation). Besides affecting women who occupy positions in public office, due to its

direct worldwide reach, social media can also function as a serious obstacle to women who wish to enter the political arena, possibly making them think twice before following this career (Harmer & Southern, 2021). Despite its severe consequences, to this day, perpetrators of online abuse against women in politics are rarely punished (Ward & McLoughlin, 2020), which, in turn, contributes to the dismissal of the violent incidents that women in politics experience.



## CHAPTER 4

# Methodology

Social media is a powerful tool for democracies. Establishing an environment for the (re)production and consumption of content in a never-seen manner, the digital space bestows a sense of empowerment based on the principles of free speech. Notwithstanding its benefits, these dynamics have resulted in an ever-growing number of bottom-up discourses which tend to be of a concerning hostile nature (Esposito, 2021). Reflecting the gendered culture of society, as previously mentioned, social media plays a pivotal role in the harassment and abuse of women in politics. Seeking to triangulate gender, politics and violence, the analysis of Twitter content represents a crucial research data source for the understanding of how abusive online communication, particularly subtle microaggressions, undermine women in politics.

Focusing on the phenomenon of online violence against women in politics in the Portuguese case, the following research question was developed: “How does online violence against women in politics manifest itself and impact Portuguese female politicians?”. Analysing the cases of female Portuguese members of Parliament (MP), the present investigation, first, explored the manifestations of the phenomenon of online violence against female political candidates for the position of MP (first goal) through an analysis of Twitter discourse. This component analysed the replies (comments) to the tweets posted by the candidates between 16 January and 28 January 2022 (the official electoral campaigning period previous to the 2022 Legislative Elections<sup>9</sup>). When performing their campaigning responsibilities, an increase in Twitter activity on the politicians’ accounts is expected to occur. Because, nowadays, social media and politics come hand in hand (Harmer & Southern, 2021), a part of political campaigns is performed in the digital space. That being said, this period was chosen due to the increasing visibility of the candidates’ Twitter accounts that can happen during the electoral campaign.

The second component of the analysis sought to understand the impact of online violence against women in politics on female politicians (second goal), where interviews with the elected MPs were made. First, the methodological approach adopted for the analysis of Twitter content will be developed in the following section.

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<sup>9</sup> The calendar for the Legislative elections of 30 January 2022 can be found in the following link: [https://www.cne.pt/sites/default/files/dl/ar2022\\_mapa-calendario-vf.pdf](https://www.cne.pt/sites/default/files/dl/ar2022_mapa-calendario-vf.pdf).

## 4.1. Twitter component

### 4.1.1. Selection of cases

Primarily, only female politicians were included in the investigation. Some academics argue that when studying the role of gender in violence in politics both men and women should be included to ascertain gendered differences (Bardall et al., 2019). Still, equalizing men's and women's experiences can be dangerous, giving rise to false narratives that men and women are equally victims and perpetrators. While women experience two forms of violence in the political sphere – “violence in politics” and “violence against women in politics” – politically active men are not attacked for being men; the attacks are either motivated by their political ideas or done to call out men who do not comply with patriarchal notions of masculinity norms (Krook, 2020). That being said, for the present investigation, only women in politics' experiences with online violence were accounted for.

Second, only female politicians elected to the Portuguese Parliament with a Twitter account were considered (see Table 4.1). When possible, ideally, two MPs for each party were selected. The selection of political candidates was done according to two criteria: 1) the number of followers and 2) the engagement rate<sup>10</sup>. Useful for the evaluation of the influence and popularity of a Twitter account (Mention, s.d.), based on the last ten published tweets, the engagement rate is quantified based on the number of likes, quotes, retweets, replies and followers. Anything higher than 0.037% is a good result, with values above 0.098% being considered excellent.

Table 4.1 – Female MPs with Twitter account for each party (N)

Party	Number of MPs <sup>11</sup>	Number of MPs with Twitter
CH	1	1
IL	3	2
PSD	28	10
PS	46	16
BE	3	3
PAN	1	1
PCP	3	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>35</b>

Sources: Pordata and Twitter

<sup>10</sup> Engagement Rate Calculator: <https://mention.com/en/twitter-engagement-calculator/> (Accessed on 23/03/2023).

<sup>11</sup> See full data here: <https://www.pordata.pt/Portugal/Mandatos+nas+elei%C3%A7%C3%B5es+para+a+Assembleia+da+Rep%C3%ABlica+deputados+do+sexo+feminino+por+partido+pol%C3%ADti+co-2260> (Accessed on 19/01/2023).

It is relevant to mention the reason for using these criteria. When using the engagement rate calculator, it was concluded that the lower the number of followers, the easier would be to achieve a higher engagement rate. That being said, the engagement rate was not considered to be a good enough indicator to alone assess visibility. With the purpose of including the politicians with the highest visibility on Twitter, when possible, the three MPs with the highest number of followers of each party were selected. From those, the two with the highest engagement rate were selected for the analysis.

In the case of Enough (CH) and People-Animals-Nature (PAN) parties, MP Rita Matias (CH) and MP Inês Sousa Real (PAN) were immediately selected. In addition, for the Liberal Initiative (IL) and the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP), because only two MPs had Twitter accounts, again, the selection was immediately done. For the IL, MPs Carla Castro and Joana Cordeiro were selected, while for the PCP the chosen MPs were Alma Rivera and Diana Ferreira. For the remaining political parties, when possible, the three politicians with the highest number of followers on Twitter were selected. This selection was only made for the Socialist Party (PS) and Social Democratic Party (PSD); for the Left Block (BE) the three female members were automatically accounted for. Afterwards, based on the engagement rate, for PS, Minister Ana Catarina Mendes and MP Isabel Alves Moreira were considered to be the most visible on Twitter. In the case of PSD, Catarina Rocha Ferreira and Sofia Matos were the selected MPs. Finally, the choice for the Left Block was the MPs Mariana Mortágua and Joana Mortágua.

For the selected time (16 January to 28 January 2022), Rita Matias (CH), Catarina Rocha Ferreira (PSD), Sofia Matos (PSD) and Diana Ferreira (PCP) did not publish any tweets so, they had to be removed from the analysis. Consequently, the Enough party had to be excluded, resulting in the analysis only including two right-wing parties. Because the Social Democratic Party had more women deputies, Mónica Quintela was included (she was the only deputy from the party to post on Twitter during the selected time frame). The selection of Portuguese politicians to be analysed can be seen in Table 4.2.

The inclusion of MPs Carla Castro and Joana Cordeiro, who at the time of the analysis were the only political candidates who had not yet occupied the positions of MP, allowed the analysis to explore the influence that occupying a higher position in politics has on levels of online criticism and abuse (third expectation). In addition, having a sample of candidates from parties of both left and right-wing permitted the analysis of how political ideology influences the incidence of online criticism and abuse (fourth expectation).

Table 4.2 – Selection of politicians of each political party

Spectrum	Party	MP	@mention	Followers	Engagement rate	Removed or included
<b>Right-wing</b>	CH	Rita Matias	@ritamariamattias	6059	7.111%	removed
	IL	Carla Castro	@carlacaastroPt	12 000	1.019%	
		Joana Cordeiro	@joanarcordeiro	3827	0.515%	
	PSD	Catarina Rocha Ferreira	@catarinarf	3349	1.696%	removed
		Sofia Matos	@sofiahmatos	2251	3.039%	removed
		Mónica Quintela	@monicaquintela3	1507	0.571%	included
<b>Left-wing</b>	PS	Ana Catarina Mendes	@acmendes73	12 800	0.878%	
		Isabel Alves Moreira	@IsabelLMMoreira	13 700	1.155%	
	BE	Joana Mortágua	@JoanaMortagua	57 200	0.803%	
		Mariana Mortágua	@MRMortagua	75 500	0.493%	
	PAN	Inês Sousa Real	@Ines_Sousa_Real	6864	0.402%	
	PCP	Alma Rivera	@almabcrivera	3551	2.884%	
Diana Ferreira		@dianajmferreira	520	8.5%	removed	

Sources: Twitter and Engagement Rate Calculator

#### 4.1.2. Extraction of tweets

Seeking to analyse the discourse produced by “common citizens” on Twitter, the present dissertation constitutes a report of the reactions to tweets published by female political candidates. Using Twitter’s advanced search function, first, all tweets each selected politician published (which will be called “posts”) during the selected period were manually extracted<sup>12</sup>. Afterwards, the direct replies to those tweets, that contained at least one word (regardless of the date they were created), were manually extracted<sup>13</sup>. The content of the replies collected with the second extraction was subjected to a Feminist discourse analysis. When performing the extraction and analysis of Twitter content a database in Excel was created. In total, 2365 replies

<sup>12</sup> Tweets without any comments or published as a direct reply to other accounts were not extracted.

<sup>13</sup> Initially, automatic extraction of tweets was performed. Due to recent Twitter restrictions, the automatic extraction only allowed the analysis of replies that contained @mention of the accounts of the politicians. Due to data insufficiency, it was decided that the extraction of the replies would be more advantageous for the analysis. Being impossible to make an automatic extraction of the replies to the tweets of the politicians, a manual extraction had to be employed. This manual extraction resulted in the alteration of cases, as previously mentioned.

were extracted. The number of posts and replies extracted for each politician can be seen in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3 – Extracted tweets for each politician (N)

<b>Politician</b>	<b>Posts</b>	<b>Replies</b>
Alma Rivera	10	30
Ana Catarina Mendes	4	33
Carla Castro	22	75
Inês Sousa Real	14	137
Isabel Moreira	31	692
Joana Cordeiro	7	44
Joana Mortágua	38	489
Source: own dataset extracted tweets		861
		4
<b>Total</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>2365</b>

#### 4.1.3. Feminist Discourse Analysis

Intending to explore how Twitter discourse influences gender-related constructs, a Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis was employed. There is a variety of approaches to analyse discourse, still, the main purpose of them all is to assess the role of discourse in the reproduction and/or challenge of dominance (Dijk, 1993). Seeking to determine what structures, strategies or other forms of text and talk influence the reproduction of dominance, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) enables the understanding of how abuse of power violates the principles of democracy, equality and justice.

Understood as the “exercise of social power by elites (...) that results in social inequality, including political (...) and gender inequality” (Dijk, 1993, p. 250), dominance, nowadays, is reproduced in such a natural and manipulative manner that seems acceptable. Critical discourse analysis is used for the depiction of how these power relations operate, for instance through legitimisation, denial or concealment (Dijk, 1993). Overall, expressions of dominance are generalised violations directed or about dominated groups, without any justification other than their identity group (Dijk, 1993).

Focusing on the case of gender relations, Feminist Critical Studies argue the system of gender relations to be hegemonic in the sense that it does not appear to be a form of domination; it is so deeply rooted in us that its discursive manifestations and consequent practices are felt as acceptable and natural to most. As a result, despite many societies having implemented

legislation against gender discrimination, even explicit manifestations of power, such as exclusionary social practices and abuse against women, remain a reality (Lazar, 2007).

Attempting to assess how power and dominance are discursively produced and resisted through textual representations of gendered social practices (Lazar, 2007, p. 149), Feminist CDA pays special attention to the discursive aspects of oppression which unite as well as divide groups of women, enabling the identification of both overtly and nuanced gendered assumptions which modern society features (Lazar, 2007). That being said, by acknowledging the pervasive way in which gender operates, the adoption of a Feminist CDA allows the understanding of how discourse can sustain a patriarchal social order responsible for privileging men to the detriment of women as a social group.

Before advancing, it is relevant to mention that misogynistic comments on Twitter and their discourses are not always a clear and direct form of communication. As Dijk (1993) explains, the reproduction of dominance is not always explicit since discourses often conceal their origins and repercussions. Because of that, when performing an analysis of gendered discourse on Twitter directed at female political candidates, following Feminist CDA, these hateful and violent comments were interpreted as societal products resulting from the interrelation of culture and misogyny (Lazar, 2007)

Starting by employing a manual sentiment analysis (Liu, 2015), the extracted replies were classified as “positive”, “neutral” and “negative”. Replies containing compliments or other forms of support were classified as “positive”. For the “negative” category, replies that contained any form of criticism, mocking or degradation, that ranged from more “light” criticism to more abusive messages, were accounted for. Finally, replies were considered “neutral” in two ways. First, those in which the message was too ambiguous, due to lack of explanation or context, were classified as neutral to prevent wrongful classifications. Second, replies that were not related to the politician in question or their party, regardless of their negative connotation, were considered “neutral”.

Posteriorly, in order to distinguish between psychological, sexual and semiotic forms of violence perpetrated against female political candidates on Twitter, all replies that were classified as negative were analysed according to the following categories of gendered criticism created by the author (see Table 4.4): 1) physical appearance; 2) personal life; 3) sexist insults; 4) rendering incompetent; 5) rendering silent; and 6) objectifying and sexualising. Those that did not fall under any of the previous categories were classified as non-gendered. This categorisation allowed the investigation of the first and second expectations related to the manifestations of online violence against women in politics.

Based on previous literature of studies on women in politics' experiences with online abuse, these categories were inspired by Atalanta's report (2018), Esposito and Breeze's (2022) study and Krook's (2020) typology of semiotic violence. Taking the categories "comments on physical appearance" (Atalanta, 2018) and "body shaming" (Esposito and Breeze, 2022), the category "physical appearance" was created for accounting derogatory comments on politicians' physical appearance. Based on Atalanta's (2018) categories "comments about the relationship or marital status" and "comments about whether the person has children or not" the indicator "personal life" was developed to account for comments about their family and any other situation regarding their private life. From the "derogatory language used to describe the person and not their profession" (Atalanta, 2018) and "assertations of moral degradation" (Esposito and Breeze, 2022) categories, the indicator "sexist insults" was created to capture insults, with a more aggressive and sexist nature, used to described the politicians. These three categories were classified as indicators of psychological forms of violence.

For capturing semiotic forms of violence, Krook's (2020) framework was applied. Defending that women in politics often experience semiotic violence by having their contributions ignored or their merit and political work questioned (Krook, 2020), the indicators "rendering silent" and "rendering incompetent" were created. Finally, the indicator "objectifying and sexualising" was created for accounting comments of a sexual nature. Before advancing, it is relevant to highlight that similarly to Krook and Sanín's (2020) typology of violence, despite the differentiation of these indicators, in practice, they can overlay, still, for the purpose of the analysis, this analytical separation will be maintained.

*Table 4.4 – Categories of gendered criticism*

<b>Concept</b>	<b>Dimensions</b>	<b>Indicators</b>
<b>OVAWIP</b>	Psychological	Physical appearance
		Personal life
		Sexist insults
	Semiotic	Rendering incompetent
		Rendering silent
	Sexual	Objectifying and sexualising

Source: author

After performing the extraction of the replies, replies classified as “non-gendered” were grouped according to four additional categories (see Table 4.5): “party criticism”, “reproval”, “mocking” and “offensive language”. Despite not constituting a form of online violence against women in politics, its critical and, sometimes, abusive nature was considered important to include in the analysis.

Table 4.5 – Categories of non-gendered criticism

Dimension	Indicators
Non-gendered	Party criticism
	Reproval
	Mocking
	Offensive language

Source: author

The category “party criticism” included replies that criticised the parties of the candidates. Even though the criticism itself was not directed at the politicians in question, because it was written as a direct response to the posts made by the candidates, its impact will reach the politicians. The category “reproval” included various forms of criticism, directed at the politicians or the content they posted on Twitter, that were not considered violent. It also included replies that expressed disagreement with the candidates. The category “mocking” included sarcastic content that sought to mock the politicians or their actions on Twitter. Finally, the category “offensive language” included replies that contained aggressive language directed at the candidates.

As previously mentioned, the execution of the second goal was made through interviews with female politicians. The methodological approach adopted for the analysis of the interviews will be developed in the following section.

**4.2. Interview component**

The interview component allowed the analysis of female politicians’ reactions to the phenomenon of online violence against women in politics and its impact. Thus, the analysis of the fifth expectation (female MPs in Portuguese politics are forced to change their behaviours when using social media) was done in this component of the dissertation. Even more, by triangulating the discourse analysis of Tweets with interviews with the MPs, an investigation



of all online violence, not just the violence experienced by politicians on Twitter was performed, allowing for more profound research on the manifestations of the phenomenon of online violence against women in politics.

Two individual and semi-structured interviews, with the MPs Isabel Moreira (PS) and Joana Mortágua (BE), were performed. Seeking to interview the two MPs with the highest percentage of extracted gendered tweets, the initial choice was Mariana Mortágua – 31.6% of the gendered conversation was directed at her – and Isabel Moreira, with 29%. Due to the unavailability of Mariana Mortágua for the interview, the third MP with the highest percentage of gendered tweets, Joana Mortágua (26.8%), was selected.

In the first instance, the deputies were contacted via e-mail, where they were questioned about their availability for the interview. They were immediately advised that anonymity would not be possible to guarantee. Being selected for experiencing higher levels of gendered criticism on Twitter, their cases were central to the analysis and so, it would be impossible to maintain anonymity. Both interviews were conducted in July, via cell phone and recorded with the consent of the interviewees<sup>14</sup>.

To carry out the interviews, a semi-structured script was drawn up in advance (the interview script can be found in Annexe B) and developed according to the theoretical framework of the phenomenon of online violence against women in politics. Seeking to, first, explore the MPs' opinions about the advantages and disadvantages of the use of social media, following the created operationalisation of the main concept, the script focused on investigating the manifestations of online violence against women in politics and their impact on the MPs.

#### **4.2.1. Thematic Analysis**

For the analysis of the interviews, a thematic analysis was employed. Allowing an accessible and flexible approach to the analysis of qualitative data, through the answers given at the interviews, this qualitative method is used for recognising, analysing and describing data patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Providing a detailed analysis of the information obtained from the interviews, a thematic analysis proposes six phases (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87): 1) familiarisation of data, where the transcription is made, along with the reading and registering of initial ideas; 2) identification of interesting characteristics and combination of relevant data for each code; 3) asserting codes into potential themes; 4) verify if the themes work concerning

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<sup>14</sup> On 10 July Isabel Moreira was interviewed. The interview had a duration of 19 minutes. The interview with Joana Mortágua was done on July 13 and had a duration of 12 minutes.

the codes and all data, developing a thematic map; 5) clearly define and name the themes; and 6) production of the report, through the selection of examples related to the research question. Having described the methodological approach, the following chapter will focus on the presentation of the obtained results and their analysis.

## Results

### 5.1. Violence against female politicians on Twitter

#### 5.1.1. Sentiment analysis

For the Twitter analysis, a total of 2365 replies were extracted. The first result relevant to highlight refers to the percentage of “negative” replies. When performing the sentiment analysis, 61.4% of replies were considered “negative”. With only 4.2% of replies classified as “positive” and 34.5% as “neutral”, similar to Fuchs and Schäfer’s (2021) sentiment analysis findings, it was possible to ascertain how the majority of Twitter discourse contained some form of criticism, mocking or degradation, that ranged from more “light” criticism to more abusive messages.

Before advancing it is important to note that all presented tweets in this section are anonymised but not censored. In addition, seeking to maintain the tweets as similar as possible to their original form after being translated (see original tweets in Annexe A), they include graphic content as well as grammar mistakes which are to be attributed to their authors. The emphasis in the quoted tweets was made by the author of the dissertation.

Regarding the positive replies, both candidates from the Liberal Initiative party were the ones that received the most positive feedback (for Carla Castro 29.3% of replies were “positive”, while for Joana Cordeiro that percentage rested at 25%)<sup>15</sup>. Followed by Inês Sousa Real (11.7%) and Alma Rivera (10%), the remaining candidates experienced a concerning low percentage of “positive” replies. While for Isabel Moreira that percentage rested at 3.2%, Ana Catarina Mendes, Joana Mortágua and Mariana Mortágua, respectively, had 3%, 2.5% and 1.3% of replies classified as “positive” (see Figure 5.1). Overall, in all cases, these replies contained some form of support for either the politician or her party:

- (1) Few, but **good!!** (@almabcrivera)
- (2) At home we voted 4 on @Partido\_PAN. We plus our human. We **trust you**, @Ines\_Sousa\_Real. (@Ines\_Sousa\_Real)
- (3) Day 30 **electing** @carlacaastroPt, @joanatuits and @runroc will give me a feeling of huge hope (...) I feel very represented by you! **Strength!!!** (@Joanarcordeiro)
- (4) A good commander, of **excellence**. What example can the Portuguese follow? Poor Republic. **Long live the PSD.** (@monicaquintela3)

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<sup>15</sup> For the case of Mónica Quintela 50% of tweets were classified as “positive”, however, because in total only four tweets were extracted this case was not considered relevant.

For the cases of Ana Catarina Mendes (84.8%), Isabel Moreira (60.3%), Joana Mortágua (68.7%) and Mariana Mortágua (64.8%) the percentage of “negative” replies was higher than the other categories<sup>16</sup>, making these politicians those who endured more criticism and abuse. On the contrary, Carla Castro and Joana Cordeiro were the only politicians whose percentage of “positive” replies surpassed the “negative” category. Castro and Cordeiro had 28% and 15.9% of “negative” replies, respectively, being the politicians who received less negative feedback (see Figure 5.1) (also see Table A.1 in the Annexe).

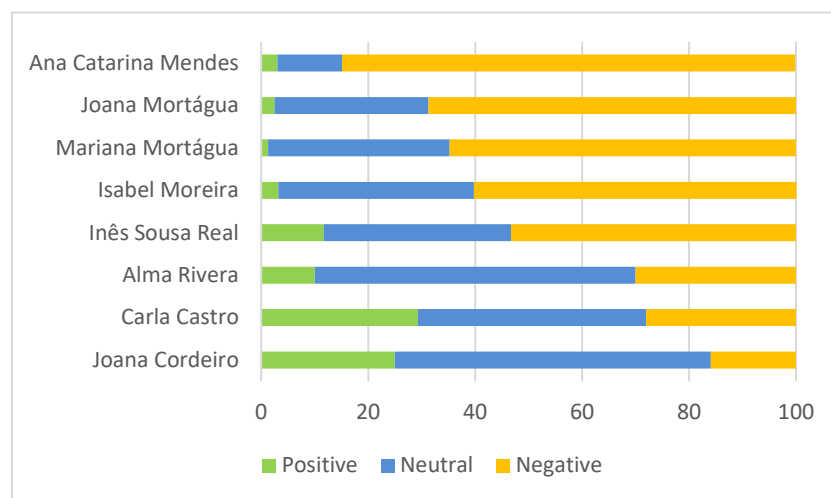


Figure 5.1. Sentiment analysis (%)<sup>17</sup> (source: own dataset extracted replies)

Despite not being considered a form of online violence against women in politics, a significant portion of “negative” replies did not have a gendered nature. Due to the presence of critical and foul language that could impact the well-being of the candidates these messages were considered relevant to mention (see Table 4.5 above). Classified as “non-gendered” (see Table A.5 in the Annexe), the following section will perform a more detailed analysis of these replies.

### 5.1.2. Non-gendered criticism

From the extracted replies classified as “negative”, 81.5% (N = 1182) were classified as “non-gendered” (see Figure 5.2) (see also Tables A.6 and A.7 in the Annexe).

<sup>16</sup> For the case of Mónica Quintela 50% of tweets were classified as “negative”, however, because in total only four tweets were extracted this case was not considered relevant.

<sup>17</sup> The cases of Mónica Quintela is not presented due to data insufficiency (only four replies were extracted).

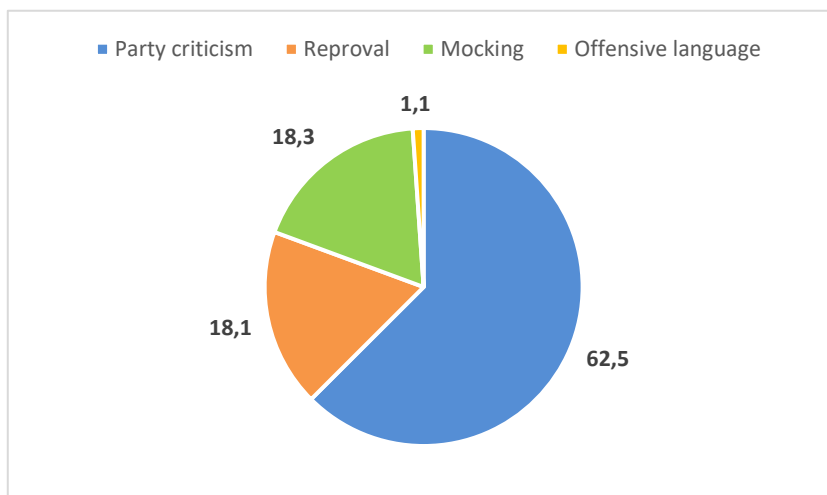


Figure 5.2. Non-gendered criticism (%) (source: own dataset extracted non-gendered replies)

Among “non-gendered” replies, 62.5% (N = 739) were considered a form of “party criticism”. Constituting the majority of the non-gendered replies, the candidates often received comments critiquing the activities and ideals of their parties. For the candidates belonging to the Socialist Party, the Left Block and the Portuguese Communist Party, in particular, these replies also included negative discourse which blamed their parties for the current major problems in the political, economic and social framework in Portugal.

- (5) **Stupidity** is your brand image (@acmendes73)
- (6) Liberals are **hypocrites** and **demagogues** (@carlacaastroPt)
- (7) And the PS represents the **terrible** present! What a scare! Socialism is a virus... (@IsabelLMMoreira)
- (8) But is it not absolutely ridiculous how the left instead of discussing its proposals, discusses the (alleged) proposals of the right? (...) **Fucking idiots!!** (@JoanaMortagua)
- (9) The BE had six years to approve budgets and did nothing but **shit**. The PCP is the same. You talk like you haven't supported the government for 6 years, you're **ridiculous**. (@MRMortagua)

Among the “non-gendered” criticism, 18.1% (N = 214) was classified as “repeval”. Subjected to replies that disagreed, in a condemnatory manner, with the opinions the candidates expressed, this category also detected a variety of criticism directed at the politicians. Despite not being violent in its nature, how this criticism was expressed was far from constructive. Repetitively considering the interventions of the candidates on Twitter as wrongful, unnecessary or lies, the politicians often experienced condescending comments.

- (10) Anyway this comment from Rui Rio and **sad** is talk about civism. **Behave** (@Ines\_Sousa\_Real)
- (11) This tweet is an **abomination** (@IsabelLMMoreira)
- (12) You took the week to criticize the program of the other parties. **Wouldn't it be more productive** and **logical** to talk about yours? (@JoanaMortagua)
- (13) Look what you're **inventing** (@MRMortagua)

In addition, 18.3% (N = 216) of “non-gendered” discourse was classified as a form of “mocking”. With the candidates being forced to endure a series of sarcastic comments, this typology was interpreted as a manner of mocking the interventions of the politicians on Twitter and, consequently, undermining their political success. For example, the candidates were mocked for being desperate, accused of not being able to perform elementary functions and, overall, portrayed as some kind of joke.

- (14) **Do you know how to read charts?** see this if you don't know ask for help so you don't make any more mistakes (@acmendes73)
- (15) You can be **worse** than Rio doing jokes..lol. (@Ines\_Sousa\_Real)
- (16) I'm a cook and I know, do you want me to **explain it to you?** I think you **should understand** a little bit more (@IsabelLMMoreira)
- (17) Translation: You're **shit-scared** with IL. **Desperation** is starting to be felt... 😊 (@JoanaMortagua)

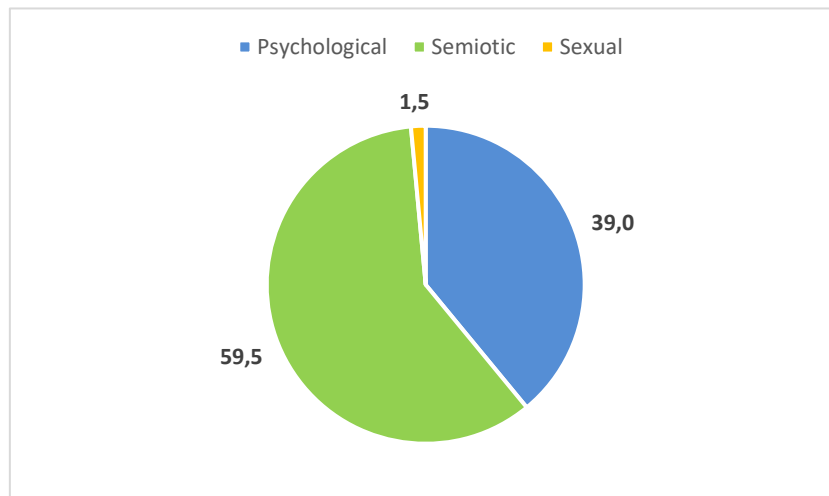
Finally, 13 replies (1.1% of “non-gendered” criticism) were classified under “offensive language”. Despite its lower number, its more aggressive nature should not be dismissed but, instead, interpreted as the beginning of a much bigger corpus of offensive discourse on Twitter. Described through foul adjectives, the candidates also suffered abusive criticism or were targets of crude interventions:

- (18) isabel put the **red lines on...** what we want is the country to move forward (@IsabelLMMoreira)
- (19) Tax oppression? You oppressed? You have no idea what's that **stupid** (@Joanarcordeiro)
- (20) And you **dirty pig** (@JoanaMortagua)
- (21) Go **fuck yourself** (@MRMortagua)

### 5.1.3. Gendered criticism

From the extracted “negative” replies, 18.5% (N = 269) constituted a form of “gendered” criticism. With the majority of “gendered” replies constituting a form of semiotic violence

(59.5%), forms of psychological and sexual violence were present in 39% and 1.5% of the sample, respectively (see Figure 5.3) (see also Table A.4 in the Annexe).



*Figure 5.3.* Online violence against women in Portuguese politics on Twitter (%)  
(source: own dataset extracted gendered replies)

“Rendering incompetent” was the most common category (57.6%), followed by “personal life” (25.3%), and “sexist insults” (10.4%). For the remaining categories, comments on “physical appearance” were present in 3.3% of categorised replies, while “rendering silent” and “objectifying and sexualising” made up 1.9% and 1.5% of the sample of gendered discourse, respectively (see Figure 5.4).

For the candidates Alma Rivera, Joana Cordeiro and Mónica Quintela none of the extracted replies were considered a form of “gendered” criticism. Of the total gendered conversation, 31.6% was directed at Mariana Mortágua. Followed by Isabel Moreira (29%), Joana Mortágua (26.8%) and Inês Sousa Real (10.4%), only 1.5% and 0.7% of the gendered discourse was directed at Ana Catarina Mendes and Carla Castro, respectively (see Figure 5.5) (see also Tables A.2 and A.3 in Annexe). It is important to note, however, that a higher percentage does not translate into higher diversity since only the case of Isabel Moreira allowed the identification of all six categories of gendered conversation. Due to both quantitative and qualitative differences, individual analyses for each case, except for Mónica Quintela (PSD), are available in Annexe A. The individual analysis for Quintela was not performed due to data insufficiency.

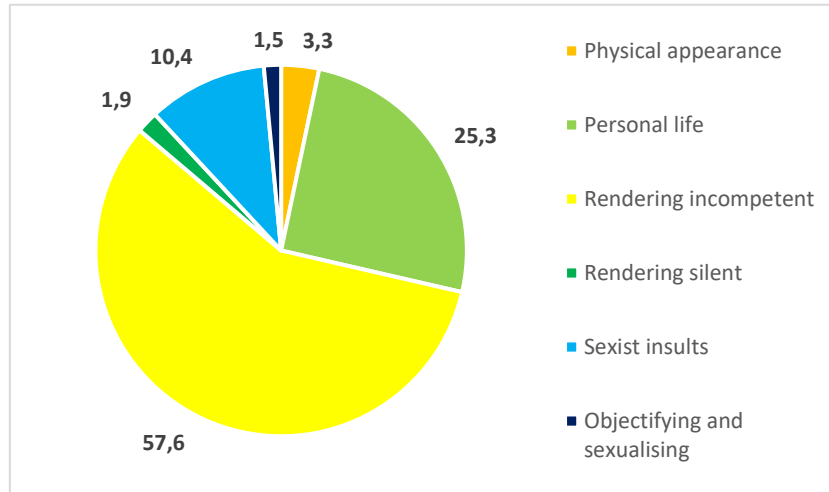


Figure 5.4. Categories of gendered criticism (%) (source: own dataset extracted gendered replies)

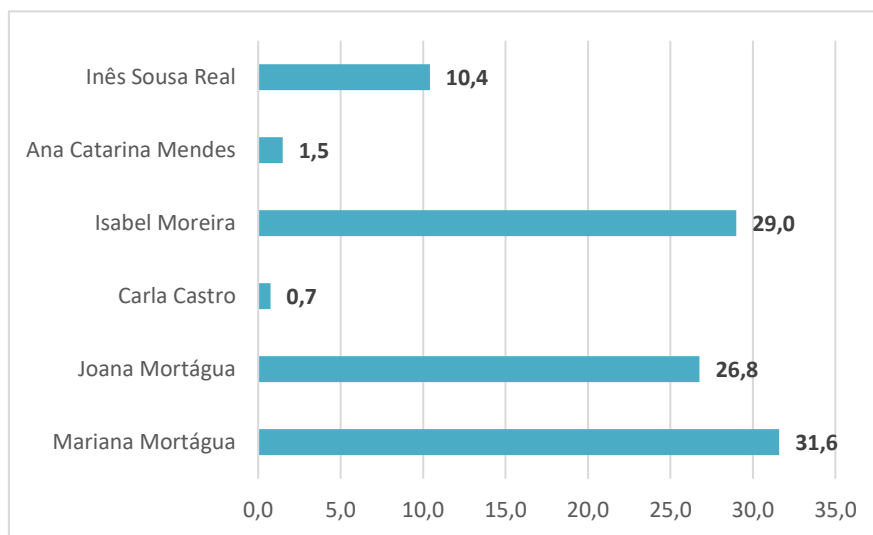


Figure 5.5. Gendered criticism per politician (%) (source: own dataset extracted gendered replies)

Regarding the “rendering incompetent” category, it was possible to identify numerous attempts to disqualify the politicians. Portraying the candidates as “ignorant” and “liars”, Twitter discourse brought into question the intelligence of the politicians, along with their capacity to perform their political functions. Going to the extreme of explicitly calling the politicians “dumb” or “stupid” the message that the candidates were not competent enough for politics was widespread and, sometimes, expressed in an abusive manner.

- (22) Every time you publish something mainly about economics, the more you bury yourself, you **don’t understand anything or try to** (@acmendes73)



- (23) This **girl** in the assembly would be a **pain in the ass**... Associating IL with gangsters... Stupid “people have the power” too, unfortunately Carla (@carlacaastroPt)
- (24) Another **nonsense**. How it is possible you are a deputy!! (@IsabelLMMoreira)
- (25) How is it possible to have deputies like you in the assembly, you are so **weak** and **idiotic**?? (@JoanaMortagua)
- (26) I’m always in doubt if you are **dumb** or if you pretend to be dumb. (@MRMortagua)

When expressing the opinion that the candidates were incompetent in politics, the discourse was often accompanied by a paternalizing tone. In particular, politicians were referred to as “girl”, “babe”, or “chick”, proving how the femininity of the politicians can be used to criticise them. Characterising their womanness as a disadvantageous feature, entering the category “sexist insults”, offensive and misogynistic adjectives were used to describe the politicians. It is also relevant to highlight the evoking of the public/private divide. With one comment explicitly telling Mariana Mortágua to go home and take care of her father, it was prompted how traditional norms, which consider a woman’s place to be at home (not in politics), still pervade the online space. Overall, called “hysterical”, “little girl”, and “whore”, among others, sexist insults on Twitter attempted to delegitimise influential political women.

- (27) Oh **crying little girl** what’s good for you is that you are in an eligible place if not you would work for Paulinho casapiano (@acmendes73)
- (28) Mikas told me that you are a **hypocrite**, who did not make the new lithium mines in Gerês a red line to support a PS Government. All **chicks** have a price, isn't it right @lnes\_Sousa\_Real? (...) (@lnes\_Sousa\_Real)
- (29) Shut up corrupt sold s\*\*\* **whore**! BE is the true left! PS is sold (@IsabelLMMoreira)
- (30) Doubtful? These **hysterics** who have never worked in their lives are ridiculous (@MRMortagua)
- (31) Stop playing the **offended virgin**. (@IsabelLMMoreira)
- (32) **Rameira** (@MRMortagua)

Wielded as a strategy to deviate attention from the candidates' profession to their gender, sexist insults served as a serious reminder of how women in politics experience attacks based on morality that vilify their role as both politicians and women. Worsening the scenario, the candidates were often victims of discourse that allured their personal lives. Showing how women in politics are more vulnerable to attacks that blur the boundaries between public and private life, it was found how mentions of the politicians’ families or personal lives were employed as a way of diminishing their competence and rightness for politics.

It is relevant to remark how one comment, directed at Mariana Mortágua, commented on her lack of children. Bringing into light the question of motherhood (also found in Atalanta's (2018) study to be a way of criticising women in politics), the comment explicitly told her they would give her a child or two. Overall, the candidates were often reduced to their private life occurrences, deviating attention from their political accomplishments.

- (33) So you apply chemical products to your plantations... Which is terribly harmful to the environment...**farm-snob**. (@Ines\_Sousa\_Real)
- (34) Go ask your father, for **lessons in terrorism** (@JoanaMortagua)
- (35) And Mariana really cares (...) Like me, I believe she also goes to the **private** for reasons that we know well. Gain judgment (@MRMortagua)
- (36) The **shame** your **father** must be feeling right now! (@IsabelLMMoreira)
- (37) You're sick! And **daughter of criminals**! Only fascist troglodytes fall into your sick and fascist ideas! (@MRMortagua)

Even though the category “physical appearance” only constitutes a small portion of the extracted corpus, its presence should not be overlooked. Ranging from observations of the politicians' bodies to comments about their clothing, comments on their appearance proved how women's political initiatives can be easily ignored in the name of futile and offensive descriptions:

- (38) I would put an end to all **fatties**, they are unbearable! (@Ines\_Sousa\_Real)
- (39) Oh **scrawny-looking** for a constitutional review to take place it needs the support of PS (@IsabelLMMoreira)
- (40) Hmm, this **little body** doesn't feed on plants (@Ines\_Sousa\_Real)
- (41) Are you convinced that you are really **beautiful**? 🙄🙄🙄🙄🙄🙄 (@IsabelLMMoreira)

Finally, despite its rarity, discourse that directly attempted to silence the opinions of the candidates, along with the presence of “objectifying and sexualising” criticism is important to mention. Explicitly told to be “quiet”, showing attempts to silence women's opinions, some candidates were also subjected to comments responsible for highlighting their dating life or sexuality.

- (42) Be **silent**, it is best, my **dear**! (@acmendes73)
- (43) **Shut up LIAR** (@IsabelLMMoreira)
- (44) Better to be **quiet** (@JoanaMortagua)
- (45) **Shut up**, don't say anything foolish!! (@MRMortagua)

- (46) **Babe** are we going to dinner soon? I know the best vegan restaurant in the country (@Ines\_Sousa\_Real)
- (47) Belinha, **tinder** is your social network not twitter (@IsabelLMMoreira)
- (48) You want to go for a **coffee**? ;) (@JoanaMortagua)
- (49) **Wet dreams** (@MRMortagua)

#### 5.1.4. Overview: Which expectations were confirmed?

Taking these results into account, it can be ascertained that women in Portuguese politics are exposed to negative criticism. Supporting Esposito and Breeze (2022) and Fuchs and Schäfer (2021) findings of gendered discourse directed at female politicians on Twitter, with 18.5% of extracted replies having a gendered nature, it was possible to confirm how female political candidates for the position of MP in Portuguese politics experience online gendered criticism and abuse (first expectation).

Despite supporting the previous statement that online violence against women in politics in Portugal manifests itself through forms of psychological, semiotic and sexual violence, it is important to regard that only 1.5% of all gendered discourse had a sexual nature. Thus, despite arguing that its existence should not be dismissed but, instead, interpreted as the beginning of a much larger corpus of abusive and sexual discourse, the lower percentage of replies does not allow the present Twitter analysis to reach well-grounded conclusions regarding this particular dimension of violence.

With 39% of gendered discourse fitting into the dimension of psychological violence, the large majority of online violence against women in politics was semiotic (59.4%). That being said, it was possible to confirm the expectation that female political candidates for the position of MP in Portuguese politics experience higher levels of online semiotic violence in comparison to online psychological and sexual forms of violence (second expectation).

In addition, it was also confirmed how political candidates who had previously occupied the position of MP suffered more online criticism and abuse (third expectation). While Ana Catarina Mendes, Isabel Moreira, Joana and Mariana Mortágua, who had previously served more mandates, were the candidates who suffered more negative replies, Carla Castro and Joana Cordeiro (the only candidates who had not yet occupied the position of MP) were the ones with the lowest percentage of negative replies.

Finally, the expectation that political candidates belonging to parties of the left spectrum may suffer more criticism and abuse was also confirmed (fourth expectation). It was found that

political candidates of left-wing parties experienced more “negative” discourse, along with more online “gendered” criticism, in comparison to their right-wing counterparts.

Overall, through the analysis of Twitter discourse directed at women in Portuguese politics, it was possible to ascertain the tendency to question the competence of female political candidates for politics, as well as the existence of abusive forms of gendered criticism and harassment that insults them both as politicians and women. Concluding the analysis of the Twitter component, the following section will be dedicated to the analysis of the second component, the interviews.

**5.2. Online violence against female politicians: Interviews with MPs**

The thematic analysis allowed the identification of three themes in the discourse of the two interviewees (see Figure 5.6), names as follows: 1) experiences with social media; 2) targeting women; and 3) impact of online violence against women in politics.

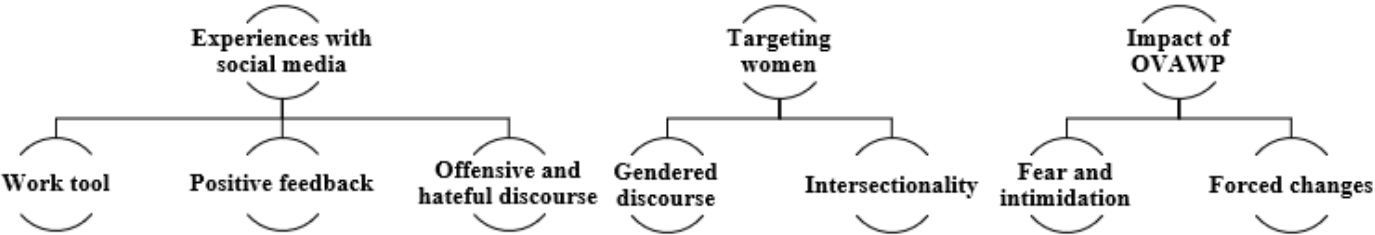


Figure 5.6. Thematic map, showing themes and subthemes (source: own interview data)

**5.2.1. Experiences with social media**

Active on multiple social networks, both MPs considered social media to be useful for their work in politics. Used as a search tool to find news and articles, for example, social media was described as an important mechanism for the searching of information, sharing of political initiatives, as well as the exchange of opinions and experiences.

I use it as a working tool, for example, to search for news (...) it is very useful to find information sources, to look for articles. (...) I use it for the dissemination of information (...) So, they are a good tool for sharing, for searching for information, for exchanging experiences. (Isabel Moreira)

Twitter is good in terms of information and political opinion, isn't it? Because most of the journalists are there. Facebook and Instagram are especially good for content promotion. (Joana Mortágua)

Despite its advantages, social media is not free of complications. Beyond its tendency to easily spread fake news and the algorithm control over the sharing of information, social media was reported for dangerously increasing the exposition of offensive opinions (as Moreira said, “it is very normal to have a lot of negative comments”). As a result, while acknowledging the existence of positive discourse, social networks, in particular Facebook and Twitter, were described as violent spaces full of trolls that frequently post negative content about the interviewees. While positive feedback is usually shown through the acts of liking, sharing or following, hateful criticism is often employed by extreme right-wing groups (as Mortágua said “most of these comments when they have this kind of prejudiced characteristics come from the right or the extreme right”) and mostly made in public comments for intimidation purposes.

The downside of social media is exposure, isn't it? Social networks shorten the distance between everyone and, therefore, there is greater exposure. (...) The offensive content is very much done in open comments because it's something that it wants to be exposed and intimidating. (Joana Mortágua)

Those who agree tend to simply like or share (...) or follow (...) Those who hate a lot are more militant, right? (...) Therefore, it is very normal to have a lot of very negative comments (...). (Isabel Moreira)

### **5.2.2. Targeting women**

Similar to the analysis of conversations on Twitter, it was possible to identify that the politicians consider they were often subjected to psychological, semiotic and sexual forms of violence. Claiming they received comments focused on their physical appearance and personal life, the use of sexist insults or sexual comments to criticise them was also disclosed. In addition, being victims of discourse that dismissed their opinions and questioned their merit for politics, reports of violence from the interviewees supported previous findings from the social media analysis. Worsening this scenario, it was possible to ascertain that social media is sometimes also used as a channel for threatening both the interviewees and their families.

Considering that women in politics are often victims of online violence with a gendered nature, reflecting societal and cultural misogynistic practices, the online space was described

as a space where women are easily disqualified through the questioning of their intelligence, physical appearance, and sexuality, among many others.

It's much harder for a woman politician than it is for a man. If you do a Twitter search about a male politician you will not find what you find about me or about Catarina Martins or about the PAN MP. (Isabel Moreira)

The most common thing on social networks, when you want to disagree with a woman, is to disqualify her from the point of view of intelligence, physical appearance, sexual orientation, telling her to go to the kitchen, saying that she needs a man, sexual comments... very, very common. (Joana Mortágua)

Additionally, various characteristics were identified as being crucial for triggering this violent and gendered discourse. Besides the mention of how women from minority groups are often targeted, showing how greatly intersectionality matters, both the interviewees highlighted how their experiences as women of the left-wing influence the incidence of criticism and harassment their experience on social media. Supporters of themes related to feminism and the LGBTQIA+ community, it was discussed the reality that their experiences with social media would probably be more positive if they dedicated their political activities to less “controversial” issues.

I think there are characteristics that spark this aggression, namely being women of the left (...). (...) and I think younger women too. Just not to mention if they are black or assumed, etc. (Joana Mortágua)

(...) I have always been involved in topics that many people consider to be controversial (...). Issues such as same-sex marriage, adoption, medically assisted reproduction, self-determination and beyond (...) I think that if I had been a Member of the Committee on Agriculture, I would not have had the problems I had. (Isabel Moreira)

### **5.2.3. The impact of online violence against women in politics**

Despite stating that the violent and gendered discourse they suffer on social media does not affect their daily lives and political activities, it is worth noting the fear and intimidation intentions behind these hateful actions, particularly, when more serious threats are made. Defending the need for continuing to freely talk and uphold the ideas they believe in, Mortágua, however, mentioned how, sometimes, she prefers not to discuss certain topics. Giving the example of how her father's past usually results in an aggressive discourse, Mortágua's

reluctance to share information or discuss certain topics was not shown by Moreira. This tendency to depersonalisation, nevertheless, was not considered enough to delegitimise the MP as an active political individual.

Overall, both interviewees agreed that so far violent discourse on social media has not been able to affect their success in politics nor push them to quit their positions. This, however, does not mean serious consequences do not exist. The resistance the MPs showed to the harassing and gendered commentaries they endure on a daily basis requires changes in their behaviours. With Moreira claiming she lives as if sexism and hate did not exist, intentionally underrating the patriarchal practices she lives through as a form of coping mechanism, Mortágua claimed she had to learn how to ignore hateful messages.

Confirming the fifth expectation, it was possible to ascertain how the MPs are forced to adopt careful postures when using social media. Either by imposing restrictive settings on their accounts, ignoring comments, not replying to hateful users or blocking them, in worst cases, when fearing for their physical well-being or of their families, they have to resort to the police.

I usually say that I live as if sexism did not exist, persecution did not exist, hatred did not exist. (...). What paralyzed me most to this day was when they came to my house and so the threat ceased to be words, but became acts. (Isabel Moreira)

Much later I ended up using a tool that makes Facebook open, but only friends can comment, put likes and so this greatly mitigated the impact of violence (...). I have a very atypical posture on Twitter (...). I don't engage in dialogue with anyone. (Isabel Moreira)

If they are serious, as at the time of police violence in the Jamaican neighbourhood, when we detected that some of these threats and aggressive comments threatening assault came from police officers, we filed a complaint. Otherwise, I ignore and block. (Joana Mortágua)

To conclude, one thing was clear: in order to deal with online violence and succeed in politics, resilience is crucial. Repetitively considered to lack competence in politics due to their gender, female politicians on social media face harmful forms of violent and gendered discourse that can have a serious toll on their emotional well-being. Having no other choice except to ignore the hate and put their safety on the line, it should not be overlooked how women in politics pay a considerable price for participating in public office.





## Conclusion

How does online violence against women in politics manifest itself and impact Portuguese female politicians? And what does this say about the phenomenon of violence against women in politics more broadly? This final section attempts to answer these questions through the review of the analysis and discussion of wider implications. Considered a valuable work tool for politics, social media was described by the interviewees as a fundamental channel of information and propagation of political initiatives. Going in line with Citron's (2014) and Alkiviadou's (2019) contributions about the benefits of social networks for the sharing of information, the MPs highlighted the importance of these spaces for positive feedback and constructive criticism along with the exchange of experiences. Still, it is of extreme relevance to acknowledge how these dynamics vary according to social networks and the way each individual uses them.

With Twitter and Facebook, in particular, depicted as platforms with high levels of exposure to offensive and hateful content, positive feedback is usually transmitted in non-verbal forms of communication that these social media networks enable. Full of trolls that, for intimidation purposes, openly criticise and harass their targets, it was possible to ascertain how discourse on Twitter often has a negative connotation. Attacking the politicians for their political ideas and activities, the majority of extracted Twitter discourse had a negative tone (61.4%). When combined with the results from the interviews, it was found that social media platforms, in general, disseminate damaging messages. Containing some form of criticism, mocking words or aggressive language, in worst cases, discourse takes the form of serious threats to the well-being of the politicians and their families. Supporting Citron's (2014) and KhosraviNik and Esposito's (2018) contributions, it can be concluded that the online space inspires harmful practices and disseminates hateful opinions.

Reflecting and reproducing structural, cultural and symbolic forms of violence against women, both components of the analysis showed how women in politics are targets of online violence with a gendered nature. Regarding the Twitter results, 18.5% of negative discourse had a gendered nature. Falling in line with Atalanta's (2018) findings, Portuguese political candidates for the position of MP were found to be subjected to comments with a focus on their physical appearance and personal life (3.3% and 25.3%, respectively). Similar to Esposito and Breeze's (2022) study, it was also found that the candidates are forced to endure sexist and sexual insults to degrade them as politicians and women (10.4% and 1.5%, respectively).

Even more, repetitively disqualified based on their intelligence, integrity and capacity for politics (57.6% of replies rendered the candidates as incompetent for politics), discourse directed at the candidates dismissed and corrected their opinions condescendingly (1.9% of replies attempted to silence the opinions of the candidates), sustaining Kook's (2020) typology of semiotic violence. Confirming how female political candidates in Portuguese politics experience online gendered criticism on social media (first expectation), the second expectation was also corroborated since semiotic acts of violence were the most common.

Still, the recognition that not all women in politics experience online abuse in the same manner must be made. It was possible to identify two forms of intersectionality that strongly influenced the outcome of violence on social media: political visibility and political ideology. While knowing that differences in Twitter activity would cause different results (accounts with a higher number of followers were expected to result in a higher number of extracted tweets), based on the results of the Twitter analysis, political visibility was also considered an influential factor to the level of online abuse. On one hand, Ana Catarina Mendes, Isabel Moreira, Joana and Mariana Mortágua were, simultaneously, the candidates who had previously served more mandates and those who experienced more negative discourse. On the other, Carla Castro and Joana Cordeiro, who at the time of the electoral campaign were the only political candidates who had not yet occupied the position of MP, were the ones with the lowest percentage of negative discourse.

Supporting Håkansson's (2021) and Rheault, Rayment and Musulan's (2019) findings that a superior position in the political hierarchy and, consequent, superior visibility increases the incidence of violence against female politicians, it can be concluded that female candidates with superior political visibility, due to having previously occupied position of MP, are prone to suffer online more criticism and abuse (third expectation). This leads to the second form of intersectionality, political ideology.

As expected, female candidates belonging to parties of the left spectrum were found to suffer more online criticism and abuse (fourth expectation). When triangulating Twitter results with data extracted from the interviews, it can be concluded, with better clarity, how political ideology influences the incidents of online abuse. On one hand, women of left-wing parties were found to suffer more criticism and abuse on Twitter, especially, with a gendered nature. On the other, through the interviews, it was possible to ascertain how the ideas the politicians uphold, along with the political activities they dedicate to greatly result in higher levels of online abuse. In line with Krook (2020), both interviewees revealed how their support for left-wing questions, such as feminist issues and LGBTQIA+ rights, are triggering factors for the

harassment they endure. Going against fundamental questions of extreme-right groups, it was mentioned how offensive and hateful discourse on social media is frequently employed by groups of this ideology, which perceive left-wing politicians as serious obstacles to their mission.

Overall, through the analysis of the Portuguese case, it was detected how women in politics are often victims of online violence with a gendered nature, perpetrated by “common citizens”. Knowing how online violence against women in politics manifests itself, a second question emerges: what impact does online violence have on female politicians? Exposure to offensive and hateful discourse in social media can cause serious consequences for the well-being of female politicians. Often employed in public channels of communication, despite also appearing in the form of private messages, the motivation behind these attacks is to humiliate and intimidate its targets. Still, being accessible to anyone makes the reach of these comments go beyond the victim; their friends, family or anyone who relates to them has the potential to also be hurt.

Despite claiming, during the interviews, to not feel their political activities and success be affected by the online abuse they suffer daily, it is worth acknowledging the many changes the MPs had to make to reach that level of resistance. With Mortágua revealing how she has to control how much of her personal life she discloses, this depersonalising tendency supports Atalanta’s (2018) results. In addition, going in line with Erikson, Håkansson and Josefsson’s (2021) findings, both politicians admitted to having to learn how to navigate social media in a self-protective manner, adapting their decisions to the level of abuse and harassment they suffer.

Forced to ignore, not engage, go to the police and even pretend the hate and sexism experienced do not exist, it was found that women in politics have to develop defensive attitudes on social media that limit their choices, corroborating the fifth expectation. Still, these forced changes do not prevent feelings of fear, anxiety and insecurity from appearing, especially, when threats to the physical integrity are made. Subjected to harmful forms of violent and gendered discourse, women in politics must develop a resilient attitude to being able to accomplish their political work, both, in on- and “offline” spaces.

Before concluding this final section, it is important to mention the shortcomings of the dissertation. First, it should be expected that the collected data to underreport the levels of abusive tweets since Twitter usually removes hateful content. Second, due to the lack of Twitter activity on their part, it was only possible to extract Twitter comments about right-wing politicians in three cases, which was still quite inferior in comparison to the Twitter activity of left politicians. Existing an imbalance between the number of left and right-wing

representatives, despite carrying out interviews to obtain a more profound knowledge, ideally, more politicians of right-wing parties would have been included in the analysis (future research where a more profound comparison between the experiences of Portuguese right- and left-wing female politicians with social media would be interesting). Finally, as previously mentioned, it was not possible to interview Mariana Mortágua, who was the MP who experienced the highest level of gendered discourse. Still, the performed analysis and the obtained results remain with significant meaning for the broader context of the phenomenon of violence against women in politics.

Perpetuating societal misogynistic practices, social media can be transformed into a gendered space where women in politics are more prone to suffer criticism, hate and sexist abuse that comments on their intelligence and physical appearance, among many others, as a way of questioning their merit for public office. Having no alternative except to ignore the abuse they endure and risk their safety, women in politics must grow *thick skins* to continue navigating the political game. Despite its serious impact, women in politics' violent experiences, both on- and “offline”, have often been overlooked by society (Krook, 2020). Forcing women to pay a considerable cost for pursuing a political career, the dismissal of the harmful practices that seek to push them out of the political space, especially when employed on social media, in turn, results in the reproduction of the discriminatory actions that are behind the phenomenon of violence against women in politics.

When women chase their political ambitions, the cost should not be their security and dignity. Serving as a testimony of how female politicians experience, on social media, psychological, semiotic and sexual forms of violence that seek to harm and degrade women in politics, the analysis of the Portuguese case contributes to former academic and activist initiatives that alert to women's abusive experiences in politics. Constituting a small sample of the reality of online abuse female politicians experience, remains clear the importance of continuing to perform analysis about the phenomenon of violence against women.

In Portugal, in particular, apart from the relevance of continuing social media studies for a better understanding of these dynamics, an investigation of female politicians' experiences outside of the online space, which is yet to be executed, is of great significance. To conclude, seeking to warn how the phenomenon of violence against women in politics poses a serious threat to gender equality, human rights and democracy, the present dissertation highlights the cruciality of continuing to listen to women's reports of violence and taking action against all its forms and contexts.

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## Annexe

### Annexe A

#### Twitter Statistics

Table A.1 – Sentiment analysis (N and %)

Politician	Positive		Neutral		Negative		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Alma Rivera	3	10	18	60	9	30	30	1.3
Ana Catarina Mendes	1	3	4	12.1	28	84.8	33	1.4
Carla Castro	22	29.3	32	42.7	21	28	75	3.2
Inês Sousa Real	16	11.7	48	35	73	53.3	137	5.8
Isabel Moreira	22	3.2	253	36.6	417	60.3	692	29.3
Joana Cordeiro	11	25	26	59.1	7	15.9	44	1.9
Joana Mortágua	12	2.5	141	28.8	336	68.7	489	20.7
Mariana Mortágua	11	1.3	292	33.9	558	64.8	861	36.4
Mónica Quintela	1	25	1	25	2	50	4	0.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>4.2</b>	<b>815</b>	<b>34.5</b>	<b>1451</b>	<b>61.4</b>	<b>2365</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: own dataset extracted replies

Table A.2 – Categories of gendered criticism (N)

Politician	Physical appearance	Personal life	Sexist insults	Rendering incompetent	Rendering silent	Objectifying and sexualising	Total
Alma Rivera	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ana Catarina Mendes	0	0	1	2	1	0	4
Carla Castro	0	0	0	2	0	0	2
Inês Sousa Real	6	9	1	11	0	1	28
Isabel Moreira	3	11	20	41	2	1	78
Joana Cordeiro	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Joana Mortágua	0	14	2	54	1	1	72
Mariana Mortágua	0	34	4	45	1	1	85
Mónica Quintela	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

<b>Total</b>	9	68	28	155	5	4	269
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Source: own dataset extracted gendered replies

*Table A.3 – Categories of gendered criticism (%)*

<b>Politician</b>	<b>Physical appearance</b>	<b>Personal life</b>	<b>Sexist insults</b>	<b>Rendering incompetent</b>	<b>Rendering silent</b>	<b>Objectifying and sexualising</b>	<b>Total</b>
Alma Rivera	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ana Catarina Mendes	0	0	25	50	25	0	1.5
Carla Castro	0	0	0	100	0	0	0.7
Inês Sousa Real	21.4	32.1	3.6	39.3	0	3.6	10.4
Isabel Moreira	3.8	14.1	25.6	52.6	2.6	1.3	29
Joana Cordeiro	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Joana Mortágua	0	19.4	2.8	75	1.4	1.4	26.8
Mariana Mortágua	0	40	4.7	52.9	1.2	1.2	31.6
Mónica Quintela	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	3.3	25.3	10.4	57.6	1.9	1.5	100

Source: own dataset extracted gendered replies

*Table A.4 – Dimensions of online violence against women (N)*

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Psychological	105	39
Semiotic	160	59.5
Sexual	4	1.5

Source: own dataset extracted gendered replies

Table A.5 – Categorisation of negative tweets (N and %)

Politician	Gendered		Non-gendered	
	N	%	N	%
Alma Rivera	0	0	9	100
Ana Catarina Mendes	4	14.3	24	85.7
Carla Castro	2	9.5	19	90.5
Inês Sousa Real	28	38.4	45	61.6
Isabel Moreira	78	18.7	339	81.3
Joana Cordeiro	0	0	7	100
Joana Mortágua	72	21.4	264	78.6
Mariana Mortágua	85	15.2	473	84.8
Mónica Quintela	0	0	2	100
<b>Total</b>	<b>269</b>	<b>18.5</b>	<b>1182</b>	<b>81.5</b>

Source: own dataset extracted negative replies

Table A.6 – Categorisation of non-gendered criticism (N)

Politician	Party criticism	Reproval	Mocking	Offensive language	Total
Alma Rivera	5	2	2	0	9
Ana Catarina Mendes	14	2	8	0	24
Carla Castro	18	0	1	0	19
Inês Sousa Real	13	14	18	0	45
Isabel Moreira	220	54	58	7	339
Joana Cordeiro	3	0	3	1	7
Joana Mortágua	177	37	49	1	264
Mariana Mortágua	288	105	76	4	473
Mónica Quintela	1	0	1	0	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>739</b>	<b>214</b>	<b>216</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>1182</b>

Source: own dataset extracted non-gendered replies

Table A.7 – Categorisation of non-gendered criticism (%)

Politician	Party criticism	Reproval	Mocking	Offensive language	Total
Alma Rivera	55.6	22.2	22.2	0	0.8
Ana Catarina Mendes	58.3	8.3	33.3	0	2
Carla Castro	94.7	0	5.3	0	1.6
Inês Sousa Real	28.9	31.1	40	0	3.8
Isabel Moreira	64.9	15.9	17.1	2.1	28.7
Joana Cordeiro	42.9	0	42.9	14.3	0.6
Joana Mortágua	67	14	18.6	0.4	22.3
Mariana Mortágua	60.9	22.2	16.1	0.8	40
Mónica Quintela	50	0	50	0	0.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>62.5</b>	<b>18.1</b>	<b>18.3</b>	<b>1.1</b>	<b>81.5</b>

Source: own dataset extracted non-gendered replies

### Original tweets

- (1) Poucos, mas **bons!!** (@almabcrivera)
- (2) Cá em casa votamos 4 no @Partido\_PAN. Nós mais a nossa humana. **Confiamos em vocês**, @Ines\_Sousa\_Real. (@Ines\_Sousa\_Real)
- (3) Dia 30 **eleger** a @carlacaastroPt, a @joanatuits e o @runroc vai me dar um sentimento de esperança enorme (...) sinto me muito representada por vocês! **força!!!** (@Joanarcordeiro)
- (4) Uma boa comandita, de **excelência**. Que exemplo podem os portugueses seguir? Pobre República. **Viva o PSD**. (@monicaquintela3)
- (5) A **estupidez** é a vossa imagem de marca (@acmendes73)
- (6) Os liberais são **hipócritas** e **demagogos** (@carlacaastroPt)
- (7) E o PS representa o **terrível** presente ! Que medo ! Socialismo é vírus... (@IsabelLMMoreira)
- (8) Mas não é absolutamente ridículo como a esquerda em vez de discutir as suas propostas, discute as (alegadas) propostas da direita? (...) **Burros do caralho!!** (@JoanaMortagua)



- (9) O BE teve 6 anos a aprovar orçamentos e só fez **merda**. O PCP o mesmo. Falam como se não tivessem apoiado o governo durante 6 anos, vocês são **ridículos** (@MRMortagua)
- (10) Enfim este comentário de Rui Rio e **triste** e falar de civismo. **Trate se** (@Ines\_Sousa\_Real)
- (11) Este tweet é uma **aberração** (@IsabelLMMoreira)
- (12) Tirou a semana para criticar o programa dos outros partidos. **Não seria mais produtivo e lógico** falar do seu? (@JoanaMortagua)
- (13) Olhe que está a **inventar** (@MRMortagua)
- (14) **Sabe ler gráficos?** veja este se não sabe peça ajuda para não meter mais calinadas (@acmendes73)
- (15) Consegues ser **pior** que o Rio a fazer piadolas ..lol.. (@Ines\_Sousa\_Real)
- (16) Eu sou cozinheiro e sei , queres que te **explique** ? Acho que **devias perceber** mais um bocadinho (@IsabelLMMoreira)
- (17) Tradução: estás toda **borrada** com a IL. O **desespero** começa a sentir-se... 😂 (@JoanaMortagua)
- (18) o isabel mete as **linhas vermelhas no ....** queremos é o país avançar para a frente (@IsabelLMMoreira)
- (19) Opressão fiscal ? Tu oprimida? Tu fazes la ideia o que è isso **tosca** (@Joanarcordeiro)
- (20) E tu **porcalhona** (@JoanaMortagua)
- (21) Vai **apanhar no cu** (@MRMortagua)
- (22) Cada vez que publica alguma coisa sobre principalmente economia mais se enterra, **não percebe nada nem tenta** (@acmendes73)
- (23) Esta **menina** na assembleia iria ser um **fartote**... Associar a IL a gangsters... Stupid "people have the power" too, unfortunately (@carlacaastroPt)
- (24) Mais um **disparate**. Como é possível ser deputada!(@IsabelLMMoreira)
- (25) Como é que é possível ter deputados como tu na assembleia, de tão **fraquinhos e idiotas??** (@JoanaMortagua)
- (26) Fico sempre na dúvida se és **burra** ou se te fazes de burra. (@MRMortagua)
- (27) Oh **pita churona** o que te vale é que estás em logar elegível se nao ainda ias trabalhar para o Paulinho casapiano (@acmendes73)
- (28) O Mikas disse-me que és uma **hipócrita**, que não fez das novas minas de lítio no Gerês uma linha vermelha para apoiar um Governo PS. Toda a **gaja** tem um preço, não é @Ines\_Sousa\_Real? (...) (@Ines\_Sousa\_Real)

- (29) Cala a boca corrupta vendida **meretriz** de **m\*\*\*\*!** BE é esquerda de verdade! PS é vendido (@IsabelLMMoreira)
- (30) Duvidoso? É ridículo estas **histéricas** que nunca trabalharam na vida (@MRMortagua)
- (31) Pare de se armar em **virgem ofendida**. (@IsabelLMMoreira)
- (32) **Rameira** (@MRMortagua)
- (33) Então aplica produtos químicos nas suas plantações... Que faz terrivelmente mal ao ambiente... **Agro-beta** de algibeira. (@Ines\_Sousa\_Real)
- (34) Vai pedir ao teu pai, **lições de terrorismo**. (@JoanaMortagua)
- (35) E a Mariana importa-se mesmo (...) Tal como eu, acredito que também vá ao **privado** pelas razões que bem sabemos. Ganhe juízo (@MRMortagua)
- (36) A **vergonha** que o senhor seu **pai** deve estar a sentir agora! (@IsabelLMMoreira)
- (37) Tu és doente! E **filha de criminosos!** Apenas trogloditas fascistas caem nas tuas ideias doentes e fascistas! (@MRMortagua)
- (38) Eu acabava era com as **gordas**, são insuportáveis! (@Ines\_Sousa\_Real)
- (39) Oh **trinca espinhas** para haver revisão da constituição tem de ser com apoio do PS (@IsabelLMMoreira)
- (40) Hmmm, este **corpinho** não se alimenta a plantas (@Ines\_Sousa\_Real)
- (41) Está convencida de que é, mesmo, **bela?** 🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔 (@IsabelLMMoreira)
- (42) Esteja **calada**, só lhe fica bem, minha **querida!** (@acmendes73)
- (43) **Cala-te MENTIROSA** (@IsabelLMMoreira)
- (44) Melhor seria estar **calada** (@JoanaMortagua)
- (45) **Calada**, não dizias dislates!! (@MRMortagua)
- (46) **Babe** vamos jantar logo? Conheço o melhor restaurante vegan do país (@Ines\_Sousa\_Real)
- (47) Belinha, **tinder** is your social network not twitter (@IsabelLMMoreira)
- (48) Olá Amiga, queres ir **tomar** um **cafezinho** ? ;) (@JoanaMortagua)
- (49) **Sonhos molhadinhos** (@MRMortagua)

## **Individual Twitter analysis**

### **Alma Rivera (PCP)**

For Alma Rivera, a total of 30 tweets were extracted. The lower number of extracted tweets could be a result of the lower activity and visibility of Rivera on Twitter. From the extracted tweets, 60% were classified as neutral, 30% as negative and only 10% were categorised as positive. None of the negative tweets fell under the categories of gendered conversation since the criticism the candidate received was more directed at the work of her party and the socialist ideology it upholds. Despite that, Rivera's case can serve as an example of how social media platforms are more easily used for the spreading of hateful content instead of positive ones.

### **Ana Catarina Mendes (PS)**

For Ana Catarina Mendes, a total of 33 replies were extracted. Again, the lower number of extracted tweets could be a result of the lower activity and visibility of Mendes on Twitter. From the extracted tweets, 12.1% were classified as neutral, 84.8% as negative and only 3% were categorised as positive. Despite the large majority of the negative tweets constituting criticism of the Socialist Party, Mendes was still subjected to criticism specifically towards her that should not be dismissed.

Four tweets (14.3% of the "negative" tweets) were categorised as forms of gendered conversation. Two tweets fell under the category "rendering incompetent" with Mendes accused of being a dishonest individual who does not "understand anything and does not even try to". This accusation of lack of competence was accompanied by the presence of a condescending tone with one tweet going to the point of telling her to be quiet ("be silent (...) my dear"). Classified as "rendering silent", this tweet could be interpreted as an attempt to diminish Mendes's presence as a woman in a position of power. Regarding "sexist insults", only one tweet was classified under this category where Mendes was called a "crying little girl" portraying her as a helpless and whining woman.

For the categories "physical appearance", "personal life" and "objectifying and sexualising" no tweets were extracted. Overall, despite the tweets categorised as a form of gendered conversation being far from constituting a major segment of the extracted corpus, their significance should not be ignored. Presumed to be part of a much larger sample of gendered conversation, these four tweets could be the beginning of how discourse on Twitter considers Mendes unfit for governance.

### **Carla Castro (IL)**

From a total of 75 replies, directed at Carla Castro, that were extracted, 29.3% were classified as “positive”, 42.7% as “neutral” and 28% as “negative”. With the large majority of the negative tweets constituting criticism directed at the work of the Liberal Initiative party, Castro was one of the politicians who received the most positive feedback for both herself and her party’s work. Of the “negative” tweets, only two tweets (9.5%) were considered forms of gendered conversation. Both under the category “rendering incompetent”, Castro was accused of stating a “dishonest” and “idiotic” opinion, while someone claimed her presence in Parliament would be wrongful (“this girl in the assembly would be tedious”).

Overall, Castro’s political work seems to be positively viewed, still, being a less visible political actor (Carla Castro was elected for the first time in the 2022 Legislative Elections being, at the time of the political campaign, only a political candidate), the lack of negative and gendered discourse on Twitter could be a result of this inferior visibility in politics.

### **Inês Sousa Real (PAN)**

For Inês Sousa Real a total of 137 tweets were extracted. With 35% of tweets classified as neutral, the disparity between the percentage of positive (11.7%) and negative tweets (53.3%) is of extreme concern. Following similar trends to the previous cases, part of the criticism was directed at Real’s party, still, with 38.4% of “negative” tweets (28 tweets) classified as a form of gendered conversation, in which five categories were identified, this is where the resemblances end.

The analysis of conversations about Real revealed that the category “rendering incompetent”, with eleven tweets, was the most represented (39.3%). Portrayed as ill-informed and dumb, negative Twitter discourse about Real, despite being, sometimes, in an indirect manner, depicted her as unfit for Parliament. Told she would not be succeeding in politics, Real’s interventions on Twitter were often scorned and considered as “ridiculous” with one comment stating she was the “queen of hypocrisy”.

Concerning the category “personal life”, nine tweets were identified, making it the second most common (32.1%). Criticised for a polemic situation related to greenhouses belonging to her family, which supposedly practised intensive exploitation<sup>18</sup>, Real was also subjected to negative commentaries for some of her companies allegedly seeking to utilise synthetical

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.publico.pt/2021/11/17/politica/noticia/causa-polemica-estufas-ines-sousa-real-1985298>.

pesticides and freeing a subspecies of threatening bees to the ecosystem<sup>19</sup>. Going against PAN's political agenda, these personal polemics were used to weaken both her political and personal integrity. In addition, the community funds that one of her companies benefited from between 2013 and 2015 were also condemned<sup>20</sup>, contributing, yet again, to the questioning of her presence in politics.

Concerning the category "sexist insults", only one tweet was identified (3.6%), where the candidate was referred to as a "chick" who sold herself by supporting the Socialist party. Real was also called "babe" and asked out on a dinner date (this tweet was also classified under the "objectifying and sexualising" category, which concerns 3.6% of gendered conversation). Alluring to her feminine gender, Real's womanness was portrayed negatively, highlighting, consequently, her gender over her profession.

Finally, comments on Real's physical appearance were made in six tweets (21.4%). With most of these commentaries insulting her weight, considering it excessive, one tweet went as far as affirming that she couldn't be vegetarian and have that body. In addition, besides one comment focusing on her nail polish, Real was mocked for using rain boots in one of the photos she published.

Overall, despite not all gendered categories of conversation being identified, online discourse directed at Real follows previous literature with the politician being often a victim of condescending and gendered tweets that put a focus on her physical appearance and personal life and, as a consequence, question her merit for belonging in politics.

### **Isabel Moreira (PS)**

For Isabel Moreira a total of 692 tweets were extracted. With 60.3% of the replies being categorised as "negative", only 3.2% of the tweets directed at her were considered to be "positive" (the remaining 36.6% of the extracted replies were classified as "neutral"). Similar to her party colleague (Ana Catarina Mendes), a significant portion of the "negative" tweets were dedicated to criticising the Socialist Party, which at the time had been undergoing severe disapproval. Nevertheless, she endured serious disapproval directed specifically at her, with 18.7% (78) of "negative" tweets identified as being some form of gendered discourse.

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<sup>19</sup><https://www.dn.pt/politica/nova-polemica-ambiental-com-a-lider-do-pan-pesticida-e-abelhas-perigosos-em-exploracoes-agricolas-14523651.html>.

<sup>20</sup>[https://www.cmjornal.pt/politica/detalhe/ines-de-sousa-real-recebe-subsidio-de-171-mil-euros?ref=HP\\_PrimeirosDestaques](https://www.cmjornal.pt/politica/detalhe/ines-de-sousa-real-recebe-subsidio-de-171-mil-euros?ref=HP_PrimeirosDestaques).

The analysis of conversations about Moreira revealed, again, that the category “rendering incompetent” was the most represented (52.6%; N = 41), still, in this case, the category “sexist insults” (25.6%; N = 20) also constitutes a relevant section of the categorised tweets. Portrayed as “ignorant”, “dumb” and a “liar”, Moreira was also described as a “parasite” and “creature” implying the idea that she is an invader of the political space. With one comment overtly wondering how could she be a deputy, the message that Moreira lacked the qualities to succeed in politics was widespread. Regarding the “rendering silent” category (2.6%), despite its scarcity, the two tweets categorised as such should not be ignored since Moreira was explicitly told to be quiet in a belligerent manner.

Besides being considered an “imbecile” and “clueless”, Moreira was subjected to several insults that sought to use her femininity to undermine her political success. Referred to, condescendingly, as “girl” and “little deputy” (“deputadazinha”), Moreira was also accused, several times, of being afraid. Supporting these gendered trends, during the chosen period, Moreira was heavily criticised for painting her nails in Parliament. Regardless of the rightness of this action, the misogynistic nature behind the attacks that Moreira suffered because of it must be taken into account. Perceived as severely incompetent for politics because she was painting her nails – which is a traditional feminine activity – Moreira faced serious backlash with one commentary calling her the “the girl of acrylic nails”.

Comments related to Moreira’s “personal life” (14.1%; N = 11) were also extracted. Conversation on Twitter used Moreira’s father’s political success to criticise his daughter, supposed, lack of. Seen as a disgrace, some comments claimed that Moreira’s father must feel shame for having her as a daughter. Called the “ugly duckling” of the family, on one hand, Moreira’s success was considered to depend entirely on her father’s fame while, on the other, the candidate suffered criticism for the role her father had in the Portuguese fascist regime.

Discourse on Twitter focused on commenting on Moreira’s “physical appearance” appeared in three tweets (3.8%), with one comment making a remark on her skin tone, which was considered too tanned, and the others describing her as scrawny looking (“trinca-espigas”) and questioning her beauty. Finally, only one tweet (1.3%) fell under the category “objectifying and sexualising” when Tinder was referred to as the proper social network for Moreira, consequently, implying that the politician should stop using Twitter as a political instrument and, instead, focus on using a dating app.

Going to the extreme lengths of explicitly calling Moreira an “offended virgin” and a “shit harlot”, overall, Twitter comments directed at Isabel Moreira were deeply gendered (with all

six categories being recognised), characterising her as a hypocritical woman that is not suitable for politics.

### **Joana Cordeiro (IL)**

For Joana Cordeiro, a total of 44 replies were extracted. From those, 25% were classified as “positive”, 59.1% as “neutral” and 15.9% as “negative”. Similar to her party colleague (Carla Castro), the large majority of the negative tweets condemned the work of the Liberal Initiative party, hence, no extracted replies were considered to be a form of gendered conversation.

Following trends observed in the analysis of the other Liberal party candidate, Cordeiro often received positive feedback for both herself and her party work, still, it is important to not forget that, at the time of the political campaign, Cordeiro was only a political candidate. Taking this into account, the lack of negative and gendered discourse on Twitter directed at Cordeiro could be a result of her inferior visibility in politics, making the case of both Liberal Initiative party candidates a potentially valuable support to the theory that visibility influences the level of abuse women in politics experience.

### **Joana Mortágua (BE)**

For Joana Mortágua a total of 489 replies were extracted. With 68.7% of the tweets having a negative connotation, 28.8% were classified as “neutral”, while only 2.5% were found to be “positive”. Tweets classified as negative included criticism of her party (the Left Block), disapproval of her political activities and ideas as well as forms of gendered conversation (21.4%; N = 72 of “negative” tweets were classified according to the categories of gendered discourse).

The analysis of conversations about Mortágua revealed that comments questioning her competence (75%; N = 54) represented the largest category by far as the candidate was often portrayed as a “liar” and “ignorant”, especially when compared to her sister Mariana Mortágua. Explicitly told she was too “dishonest for a deputy”, Mortágua was repetitively questioned for her supposed lack of work during her last two mandates (e.g., “still searching for your purpose for Portugal”; “how is it possible to have deputies like you in the assembly, you are so weak and idiotic”). With some comments going to the length of calling her a “tool” (“otária”) and telling her she only “talks shit”, the message that Mortágua was a fraud and too clueless for politics was widespread.

Regarding the “sexist insults” category, two tweets were found (2.8%). For one, Mortágua was denoted as hysterical, crudely exaggerating her reaction and, consequently, implying a

certain lack of rationality on her part. On the other, through a tweet commenting on her beauty that contained an image of goats wearing makeup, Mortágua's femininity was mocked in a misogynistic manner. In addition, despite not directly fitting into the category of "sexist insults", it is important to highlight that, following trends of previously analysed cases, Twitter discourse frequently had a condescending tone when referring to Mortágua. Using the term "girl", highlighting her gender, or her name, for example, with a paternalizing and negative connotation, comments with the intent of correcting her were extensive. Along with the perception that she was too scared and desperate, similar to Moreira's case, Mortágua was portrayed as lacking proper reasoning and being too weak.

Considered as not competent enough for politics, the accusation of lack of competence went beyond the public space entering the private one (19.4%; N = 14 of tweets were classified as "personal life"). Associated and criticised for her family's actions, her father was repetitively mentioned as a way of questioning both her role in politics and her integrity as a person (e.g., she was told she came from a family of terrorists, fascists and robbers).

For both the categories "rendering silent" and "objectifying and sexualising" only one tweet (1.4%), for each, was identified, still, their meaning should not be overlooked. Told she would be better off if she just stayed quiet, Mortágua was also asked out on a date, retelling how a woman's opinion, to a serious matter, can be easily dismissed through both mocking and sexism. Finally, under the category "physical appearance" no tweets were found. Overall, depicting Joana Mortágua as a hypocrite who lacks competence in politics, yet again, her case served as a serious reminder of the abusive and gendered discourse women in politics endure on social media.

### **Mariana Mortágua (BE)**

For Mariana Mortágua published a total of 861 replies were extracted. From those, only 1.3% were classified as "positive", 33.9% as "neutral" and 64.8%, the large majority, as "negative". Similar to her party colleague (Joana Mortágua), negative discourse directed at Mortágua included criticism towards the Left Block party – considered the "chicks party" – and her political activities, nevertheless, gendered forms of conversation were present (15.2%; N = 85 of "negative" tweets were classified accordingly to at least one of the developed categories for detecting gendered forms of discourse).

The analysis of conversations about Mortágua revealed, again, that the category "rendering incompetent" (52.9%; N = 45) was the most represented. Recurrently described as an "idiot", "dishonest" and "ignorant", Mortágua was often told that she should be ashamed of herself.



When also taking into account that, on occasion, the politician was overtly called “useless” and “garbage”, it can be presumed that comments directed at Mortágua put into question her ability to perform politics. Regarding the category “rendering silent” (1.2%), only one tweet explicitly told her to be silent, still, once more, it was possible to detect a strong presence of condescending in Twitter discourse. Referred to as chick, girl, babe and by her name in a paternalizing manner, Mortágua was often corrected, disseminating the message that her opinions were gravely wrong and should be dismissed.

Besides being advised to “go study”, Mortágua’s competence was put into question through occurrences of her private life (34 replies – 40% – were categorised as “personal life”). For one, she was deeply criticised for her access, as a public administrator, to the Institute for Protection and Assistance in Illness (ADSE). As a response to Mortágua’s disapproval of the Liberal Initiative party, the candidate received serious backlash for perpetuating the poor management of public healthcare since she has the privilege of affording private care (e.g., “Mariana goes to private care, it does not bother her that people have to wait forever for a consult in public healthcare”).

On the other, similar to her sister, she was often attacked for the actions of her father. Called the “daughter of criminals”, Mortágua was portrayed as not suitable for politics, simply based on the accusations her father is facing. Worsening the situation, a comment went as far as telling her to go “take care of her father” recalling the traditional role of women as caretakers. In addition, it is relevant that one comment called attention to her lack of children, saying they could give her one or two kids.

Entering the category “sexist insults” (4.7%; N = 4), Mortágua was described as hysterical and a “whore” highlighting how misogynistic insults remain used as a strategy to deviate attention from her profession to her gender. Accused of frequently manipulating the narrative in her favour, Mortágua was also considered to be desperate when criticising the Liberal Initiative party with one comment (containing an image) claiming she must have “wet dreams” with them (this comment was the only classified under the “objectifying and sexualising” category, which made up 1.2% of gendered conversation towards Mortágua).

Finally, for the category “physical appearance” no tweets were extracted. Overall, deemed the “dishonesty in person”, a “parasite” and a “fucking cynic”, discourse directed at Mortágua sought to delegitimise her, in an abusive manner, as an influential political woman.



## **Annexe B**

### **Interview Script**

Bom dia. No âmbito da minha Dissertação de Mestrado procuro analisar o tipo de mensagens que as políticas/os costumam receber nas redes sociais e entender o impacto das mesmas nos/as próprios/as. Por motivos de transcrição, gostaria de perguntar se concorda com a gravação da entrevista. A gravação será exclusivamente para fins de transcrição.

- 1) Em primeiro lugar gostaria de lhe perguntar que redes sociais é que usa? Sei que usa o Twitter, usa outras?
- 2) Como descreveria a sua experiência, enquanto política, com as redes sociais?
  - a. As redes sociais são úteis para o seu trabalho?
  - b. Quais as vantagens e desvantagens das redes sociais?
- 3) Como é que caracteriza as mensagens que costuma receber através das redes sociais? (discurso é mais positivo ou negativo?)
  - a. Considera que já foi alvo de violência através de alguma mensagem das redes sociais? Pode exemplificar?
- 4) Tenho aqui uma lista de tipos de mensagens que políticas/os por vezes recebem através das redes sociais. Se não se importar, para cada um deles, gostaria que me dissesse se costuma receber comentários/mensagens deste tipo. Se se sentir confortável pode dar exemplos.
  - a. Comentários focados na sua aparência física?
  - b. Comentários focados na sua vida familiar/pessoal?
  - c. Comentários que procuram silenciar as suas opiniões?
  - d. Comentários que a questionam a sua competência para a política? (ex: que digam que devia de se demitir ou que a considerem ignorante)
  - e. Comentários mais agressivos e genderizados/sexistas que procuram afetar a sua imagem?
  - f. Comentários de carácter sexual?
  - g. Ameaças ao seu bem-estar físico ou da sua família?
- 5) Considera que estas mensagens constituem uma forma de violência?
- 6) Que estratégias/mecanismos adota para lidar com este tipo de mensagens online?
- 7) Qual o impacto que estes comentários/mensagens têm em si?

- a.** Como afetam o seu dia-a-dia e a forma como trabalha? (deixa de publicar ou discutir sobre determinados temas por medo do seu bem-estar físico e psicológico? Sente que deixa de poder ser quem é verdadeiramente?)
  - b.** Como afetam o seu sucesso político? (sente que as mensagens afetam a sua reputação?)
  - c.** Alguma vez considerou mudar de carreira/posição devido ao escrutínio que sofre nas redes sociais?
- 8)** Finalmente, considera que as mulheres na política são alvo preferencial de violência online?
  - a.** Se sim, de que tipo de violência? (discurso sexista e sexual?)
  - b.** É transversal às mulheres deputadas ativas nas redes sociais ou considera que existem características que espoletam mais agressividade? (Ex: feminismo ou sexualidade)