Women’s representativeness and gender representations in the Italian media: the case of Turin local election (Marinella Belluati University of Turin)

Abstract

Starting from the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, the interest towards gender and media has found a new vitality in the public debate and it represents a good signal for the defence of institutional pluralism and the improving of internal cohesion in the public space.

In Europe, there are different institutional and cultural approaches, the European institutions have adopted these suggestions, and they are trying to promote best gender practices within the public and political dimensions, using formal recommendations. Unfortunately, though, there is a main obstacle, which is the persistence of a man-centred culture, difficult to get rid of, and, paradoxically, gender discourses are used against women.

The main researches on gender and media are following two paths. On the one side, the gender studies are focused in the media representation and in the struggle against gender stereotypes (e.g. the “Global Media Monitoring Project”). On the other, it looks at the women representative opportunities and the disharmonies within media organisations (e.g. the “Gender-Sensitive Indicators for Media” project). In the communication field, old and new media are producing a cultural hybridization. The web seems to offer new opportunities to gender and a higher visibility of women leaders is changing gender representations.

Starting from this idea, the aim of this paper is to analyse media gender representations of the women’s representative in the Italian public debate. From a prosumer perspective, the study will analyse some models of representation and self-representation of women in the media. Once identified the models, it will consider as traditional media to social media. The implication of this paper is to discuss how far gender opportunities in media strategies are actually changing.

Key words: gender representation, women’s representative, social media, traditional media, political communication.

Gender, media and new thecnologies

For a long time the core of the debate on gender has wrongly focused only on the biological differences between men and women. For some years, this inappropriate overlap of sex and gender, has been criticised. The current debate, on the contrary, argues that gender should be defined as cultural expectancy related to roles (male and female) and refer to cultural, social and psychological differences in the sexuality of male and female individuals. This recent idea of gender is more and more linked to socially constructed notions of masculinity and femininity.

The different analytical gender perspectives can be summarized in different ideas, many of these have now become anachronistic, even if their influence in the debate has never
disappeared. First, the idea of **biological determinism**, which goes back to the theory of evolutionism, sees gender roles as biologically determined and therefore fixed and immutable. Strongly supported by conservative political movements (Wilson 1975), this view is based on the cliché that men are genetically prone to be dominant and promiscuous whereas women are genetically more inclined to be dependent on and faithful to the partner.

Another theory supported by the common feeling and connected with the theory of biological determinism is **natural difference**, which sees male supremacy as an innate fact. The typical examples used to support this theory are that historically, in most of cultures the main role of the men was hunting and war. However, anthropological studies have shown that in each culture, the gender role was a necessary functional specialization of social organization but this is not ever a male domain.

Another very different but increasingly adopted theoretical approach, is that of **gender socialization**, which sees gender differences as a social construction. Indeed, human beings, from a very early stage, when following the paths of socialization internalize norms and social expectancies about gender (Giddens 2008). Led by positive sanctions, or, conversely, as negative mechanisms of repression towards specific behaviour seen as deviant.

All these positions have met several critics especially from **radical feminist movements**. The feminist psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow (1978) starts to the important role covered by social organization and division of work: for the man best placed out of family and for women usually in the family contest. This has produced hegemonic think that reproducing male dominance.

On this point, Nancy Fraser (2013) underlines the struggle in the gender movements between affirmation of economic and social resource redistribution, recognition of status and social representation. In her opinion, feminist and rights movements to affirm themselves must controlled all these three dimensions. Her **theory of gender justice** considers three-dimensional axis: the political representation, the economic redistribution and the gender cultural affirmation.

The issue of gender is very important for Cultural Studies approach that consider this aspect as a part of dominant discourses. Dominant ideology defines male and female roles and correct behaviors for men and women (Goffman 1976; Hermes 2007) and media contributes to spread its. To change hegemonic culture and to reach gender equality it must be affirmed powerful counter discourses.

The **feminist media studies** explains that media representations are sex oriented, and the audience studies (Hobson 1982, Seiter 2013) have focused the relationship between gender, media and culture (Van Zoonen 1994, Capecchi 2006, Tota 2008). There is a gap difficult to remove as confirm every five years the GMMP even if recent studies (McRobbie 2000) have recognized that media could have also produced positive effects proposing also forward-thinking gender identity models. The media could also develop a new feminism image especially for the younger generation of women. (De Blasio 2011).
It is affirmed the idea that media highlight social differentiations, targeting the audience for cultural experiences of "consumption", this study will try to use these categories for gender politics field. Gender media studies, until now, are mainly related to television. In the era of new technologies the prospective is changed, because the active use of social media could offer new opportunities for women's movements.

The relationship between gender and technological know-how has been looked at by gender studies in different ways. The starting point has been the criticism of the determinist paradigm which saw technology as the affirmation of the male domain in the widespread conviction that women were better suited to humanist subjects. Liberal feminism considered technology to be a neutral system and, for a while, this idea fed the conviction that all women had to do was promote their presence within scientific subjects in order to improve the general situation (Wajcman 2007, Comunello 2015). This interpretation is argued by radical feminism, which insists that technological knowledge is masculinised and strengthens inequality of access, preventing women from helping change the paradigm. The analytical effort of this position lay in identifying the mechanisms which exclude women from technological knowledge and ways in which the value of their presence is belittled.

Another perspective, of a structural-cognitive nature, tried to overcome this vision, insisting that the approach to science is different between men and women, the former being more rationally logical and focused on the linear solution, and the latter being more creative and capable of grasping the logical aspects and fitting them into a context (Turkle and Seymour 1992). Thanks to these stances (Van Zoonen 2008, 167), the conviction that technology applied to new media is closer “to the essentially female qualities” has been spread.

The Cyberfeminist approach in the Nineties (Haraway 2000) emphasised the fact that the Internet could offer more opportunities for the affirmation of gender-based culture. The structure of the web and its configuration can offer new opportunities and activate forms of political counter-power related to the male cultural hegemony. Women on the web have a greater tendency to create social networks, and this offers them more opportunities to become part of the public sphere and to change it (Harcourt, 1999; Desai, 2009).

In her study of online masculinity, Lori Kendall agrees that there is a new sphere of communication which offers opportunities and spaces of freedom to women without precedent. At the same time, she points out that the web also tends to strengthen existing relationships and, in the case of women’s movements, to build self-referential enclaves. On the web it is also possible to create a spiral of silence which shadows movements away from the dominant thought (Kendall, 2002).

The excessively optimistic view that invited women’s movements to make extensive use of the Internet, glimpsing new liberating potential, after the early Nineties characterised by technological euphoria has been downsized by recent studies which acknowledge that the situation within the web is becoming “normalised” and a “male” shape of the web is taking hold (van Zoonen 2010). If this is the mainstream, it does not mean that forms of
gender “occupation” are ceasing to exist. This is why a theory that explains the Internet phenomenon in its entirety is becoming less and less useful, while analyses of the practices of use of more specific digital environments are more interesting. (Baym 2010)

This is the field of web gender politics which shows how new practices of gender oriented political participation are gaining ground. The Internet increasingly interconnects experiences of female and transgender activism. There are particularly rich and popular websites which bring minority experiences together. These are, usually, environments in which networking and microblogging relationships strengthen undercurrent identity-related aspects with respect to broader public debates. The structure of the web confirms a greater adaptability to the gender-related approach, in which private and everyday matters bring aspects linked more to the public sphere and matters of a general nature together. This female networking activity fully exploits the potential of the web and social environments to talk also about politics, but it has a limit, that of remaining isolated and being unable to influence the public debate online which, despite everything, continues to be a space dominated by a male culture.

**Gender politics**

The aforementioned contraposition between private and public spheres has concerned the political representation of gender close up. This distinction (previously identified by Mary Wollstonecraft) is the same one that legitimised the exclusion of women from politics and from power for so long. The recent entrance of women into active politics, however, re-proposes the same separation: men continue to dominate hard politics (economy, defence, finance), while soft politics (welfare, education, health and equal opportunities) is left to women.

The study of the relationship between politics and gender representations is a quite recent field of research which combines the tradition of gender studies with that of political communication.

The relationship between gender and politics has been covered by literature through various political stances. The first important reference is to liberal feminism, which supports the need of the critical mass according to which gender equality is achieved thanks to the equal division of the public functions. According to this vision, the expansion of the female presence in social positions of importance would be able to correct the gender imbalance and condition the political agenda. The criticism aimed at it is that, when there was a significant increase in the number of women in power, the form of management of power did not change. In this sense, several studies have demonstrated that an increase in the number of women in parliament did not correspond to a turnaround in a “gender oriented” sense (Childs and Kcrok 2008, Towns 2003).

Another approach contraposed to the first is that of substantive representation, which can be defined as the pressure placed by the women elected on the needs of the women who elect them in terms of policy and affirmation of equal opportunities. In effect, these two positions do not contrast with each other, and in some cases, if united, they can also be a virtuous element.
The analysis of the behaviour of women in politics also highlights a negative aspect. Not only do they have to work harder to affirm their position, they also have to constantly demonstrate their abilities. Kathleen Jamieson (1995) has defined this as **double bind effect**, on the basis of which women have to prove that they are aggressive to avoid being labelled as weak, and therefore incapable; but if they act with too much decision, they risk being considered as wrong in some way (Campus 2010: 35).

In structural and organisational terms, the process to remove obstacles to access by women to strategic roles has to regain the courage lost over the years in sustaining laws and forms of transferral. As regards identity, the construction of the female public sphere has to clarify the conflict between public and private dimension, which is often unresolved in gender-related identity. Nancy Fraser (2013) sustained that, when gender-related identity began to arise in politics, the result was public acknowledgement of the dimension of the private sphere (laws for the defence of women’s jobs and health, abortion, parenthood, family aid, childcare) and led, for a certain length of time, women to take on public commitment as a social obligation. The affirmation of the private sphere as subject to regulation, however, made it transversal with respect to other identity-related movements (such as the sexual freedom movement). In the mid-Eighties, the reformist thrust of the feminine movements lost its innovative force by affirming its own topics. Paradoxically, reaching these goals in terms of gender policies, generated a civic disengagement and a distancing of women from politics, leaving the defence of their interests to others, men.

The economic crisis has increased the visibility of discrimination against women when it comes to access to economic and social resources and their return to the private sector, but the phenomenon is not recent dating back some years. In Italy, the crisis of gender in politics has also been accompanied by a long political season linked to the central-right-wing, which sees women in politics as a decorative element; while the more progressive left-wing culture, which is experiencing a full-scale identity crisis, has ended up neglecting the matter of gender opportunities. In this situation, forms of feminine movements have been reactivated (the Italian experience of “Se non ora Quando”, the “rete delle donne”, the “Giulia” journalists’ network, and the “Orlando” association are some examples), which, however, maintain more or a watchdog function than a capacity to influence gender disparity. And above all, they have no success in engaging the new generations.

In this scenario, however, the crisis in society generated by forms of aggressive neoliberalism is creating difficulties for the more traditional pillars of social organisation (the middle class, the educational system, production systems) and questioning certain strong social identities. In this context, post feminism and gender-related issues could return to occupy central position in redefining their relationship with politics (Fraser 2013).

Starting from an investigation into the situation of gender in Italian politics and in the social media sphere, this work analyses the Italian case with the aim of proving that gender in politics is taking on new forms. This scenario analysis has also been considered in the ethnographic observation of the recent local elections in Turin, to prove that the matter of gender in politics is livening up again.
Italian Gender politics

Despite the fact that our Constitution mentions the principle of gender equality several times, and legislation has intervened on more than one occasion, the Italian situation is not good. The Openpolis data for 2015 confirm this. Since 1948 (the year women were allowed to vote for the first time), the so-called critical mass of women in politics has struggled to take hold. The first woman Minister was not elected until 1976 and, until today, there have only been three women elected as Presidents of the Chamber of Deputies (the third position in the State).

The current parliament is that with the highest number of women (30%) and the government currently in office has the highest number of female ministers. The disparity between men and women, however, continues to be very strong, especially if we look at the most important offices. In parliament, for example, there are very few female president of the commission: 1 in 14 at the Chamber and 2 in 14 at the Senate.

The current government figures are far from satisfactory. When it was sworn in, 50% of the ministers were women, but if you look at the ministers with portfolio, the percentage falls to 30% and down to 27% if we also consider the deputy-ministers and undersecretaries. If we look at the area of jurisdiction, we can also see that most female offices are concentrated in the health and welfare sector, in line with the widespread idea that women in institutions can deal with marginal matters which regulate the private sphere.

With respect to the European context, the Openpolis (2015) data say that Italy is not one of the worst countries, ranking 13th state in terms of the presence of women in parliament and fifth for the percentage of female ministers. The situation is much better in Northern European countries, but women are disadvantaged more or less everywhere and in all the main public sectors.

Global gender gap performance, 2015

1.00 = equality

Research into the propagation of the gender stereotype inside and outside politics is very extensive (Buonanno 2015) and the efforts to contrast it are still insufficient. The network, as already mentioned, can be a good place for observing new gender-relating policies, because it allows the hybridisation of new and old forms of communication. Despite there still being a gender digital divide, the figures on use of the web say that women use social media as much as men (Bracciale 2010). This is why studying the web is helpful to verify the new directions being taken by the discussion on gender, also in politics.

A simple indicator on the use of media by Italian politicians shows that, with respect to social media, female members of the Italian parliament have more communication tools on the web. 41% of the women elected have at least three social media profiles (Facebook, Twitter, website, e-mail or other social profile), compared to 36% of the men. These are particularly younger members of parliament belonging to more recent political formations (Movimento 5 Stelle) or with a tendency closer to the left (Partito Democratico), confirming that the generational figure and the political cultural field influence the digital divide. (Data source: own elaboration of the profiles of parliament).

On the quality and practices of use of the web in politics, there is still a lack of information, but there is a discursive environment in which women’s productions are creating critical mass. This is the blog sphere, which offers women an area of communication, which is less permeated by a more masculine hegemonic cultural approach (Demaria Violi 2008).

One of our studies on female activism in the blog sphere which stems from the analysis of the website “Rete delle reti al femminile” (an important Italian networking site) presents an interesting picture of the way in which women use blogs. The Italian website groups together a series of women’s discussion and informative opportunities aimed at connecting different female experiences on the web. The mapping of the discussions managed and animated by women (the contents of the 192 blogs present in December 2015 were examined) allow reflection on the production of gender counter-debates. First of all, by the profile of the blogger: there is an extensive presence of information professionals who use the web as a tool to analyse gender-related matters and interact with individual bloggers who propose personal opinions on a whole range of topics.
The more in-depth analysis of the political debate on the only 110 blogs that explicitly treat this aspect shows a particular way of discussing gender-related issues. The narrative key unites a style to information with more introspective. Considerable importance is given to the legislative aspects that regulate the life of women, to the problem of gender-related violence, and women’s job opportunities, without underestimating individual experiences. The paradox is that this female debate does not break through the confines of the networks within which it takes place. This type of environment seems to be a protected area “a room of one’s own”, which not everyone is allowed to enter, where public and private dimension produce a female meta-debate which horizontally hybridises different skills and know-how. Despite being a place for discussion that is potentially useful to represent a gender debate, it cannot (or will not) break through its boundaries. There are few professional political bloggers allowed in and this does not help the affirmation of other forms of political debate.

Women, politics and territory. The case of the electoral campaign in Turin for the 2016 local elections

With law 23 November 2012, the vote for local elections in Italy rebalanced gender representation in the councils and committees of the local authorities. For the election of the municipal councils, with populations in excess of 5,000, the law envisages a double measure: 1) the list must be made up of not more than two thirds of either of the two sexes, with the application of sanctions if this rule is not observed; 2) the introduction of the double gender preference, which allows voters to express two candidates as long as they are of different sexes. If this rule is not respected, the second preference is cancelled.

The recent local elections, the results are still provisional, show that, on a general level, in the big cities, the number of female candidates for the office of mayor was quite small. Naples is the city that presented the highest number of female candidates (3 out of 9), while Bologna presented the fewest. Two candidates were presented in Rome, Milan and Turin, chosen from a varying number of competitors (Rome 13 candidates, Milan 9 and Turin 17). Only the three candidates for Rome, Turin and Bologna went to the second ballot of voting, the first and the second belonging to the
Movimento 5 Stelle and the third belonging to center right. From the point of view of gender politics this is an important signal.

The election in Turin, studied more closely through the semiotic analysis of the campaign materials and programmes, as well as the ethnographic analysis with direct observation, reveals a significant opening towards female candidates. Examination of the lists connected to the first six candidates revealed a rather high percentage of women in all the lists. Even Osvaldo Napoli’s centre-right wing list and Giorgio Airaudo’s left wing list presented over 50% of women, although the reasons for this decision were quite different, more a matter of appearances in the first case and more a matter of substance in the second.

**Tab Candidatures**

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<th>Total candidacies</th>
<th>% women</th>
<th>Political careers gender oriented</th>
<th>% on candidacies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Piero Fassino (M)</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chiara Appendino (F)</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alberto Morano (M)</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Osvaldo Napoli (M)</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Roberto Rosso (M)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Giorgio Airaudo (M)</td>
<td>40</td>
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<td><strong>467</strong></td>
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Orientation towards the issue of gender, obtained from the analysis of the candidate’s curricula and the observation of their campaigning, offers a variegated picture. The list with most female candidates is that in which there is practically no stance on gender issues. The whole centre-right area confirmed a political vision of male supremacy, while the (obliged) female presence did not correspond to an effective electoral campaign aimed at gender issues. The most significant case is that of Osvaldo Napoli (centre-right), proposing a higher percentage of women, concentrated mainly in just one of his lists, where the gender oriented campaign actions and profile are practically irrelevant. The centre-left area was more coherent and open with respect to gender issues. Fassino and Airaudo included active women with a clear stance in the lists, opening up opportunities also for LGBT matters. In Piero Fassino’s coalition, the number of qualified gender oriented profiles (the overall figure also takes into account the expression of gender by male candidates) is higher, especially with regard to the Partito Democratico, but it is penalised overall in by the presence in the supporting lists. The best figure of all is that of the Movimento 5 Stelle. Not just because it candidates a woman for the office of mayor, but also because its single list includes well-known people who are committed to gender issues.

The ethnographic analysis of the electoral campaign carried out by taking part in electoral meetings and examining the production of information on the candidates has enabled a first and preliminary typological reconstruction of the gender politics linked to the electoral campaign in Turin. Typology of gender politics in the election campaign has considered three axis of analysis: Curriculum gender oriented; 2) presence of gender issues in the election campaign; 3) social media tools.

**I am gender.** This is the case of the only candidate for the office of mayor. The very fact that she is a young female candidate gives Chiara Appendino a gender plus. Issues on gender and rights linked to sexual orientation are not central to her programme but they are well expressed. During the electoral campaign, she has handled the relationship with gender in a hybrid way. She has recently had a baby, and maternity has featured throughout the campaign, making her profile very
feminine. Her participation in the electoral “football match” also features masculinity. Her hypothetical governing team is made up of various women, but they have been chosen without emphasising their gender. Lastly, her femininity is clearly visible, she is objectively a beautiful women, with a lovely smile and a dress code which alternates between elegant and casual. Appendino shows that she is capable of using the new tools of social communication, which she easily combines with more direct forms of communication.

**Institutional gender.** The female profiles that fall within this category are mainly in the centre-left lists, which feature important names in the field of equal opportunities, both in the public and private sectors (leading female politicians, representatives of women’s associations, businesswomen, professionals and journalists). In this category we have a better representation of the variegated universe of gender made up of more traditional female associationism, but also of new expressions of gender identity, which better express (not without contradictions and conflict) social innovation. The mix, while present, always takes a slightly secondary position with respect to the candidate’s organic project. Piero Fassino is open to the matter of gender, declaring that he wants a governing team which is 50% female and 50% young, but his strong campaign issues are others. Giorgio Airaudo announced that he wanted to share the office of mayor with a woman, reiterating an interesting idea, which, however, emphasises the gap between the two levels. The relationship with social media is mixed, there are those who are good at using them, those who manage and those who don’t even try, preferring other public visibility tools.

**Post gender** This is a candidacy profile which embodies the change in the social mix which has characterised the affirmation of freedom of sexual orientation in recent years and the relative demanding of rights. For years, the LGBT associations have been active in the organisation of events in Turin (such as the TGLFF – Torino Gay & Lesbian Film Festival or Torino Pride), so much so that the tourist guides refer to it as a gay friendly city. In the city’s institutions too, LGBT representation is real. The programmes of the centre-left and M5S have included this aspect and there have been explicit candidacies and endorsements without any form of ostentation. In the last few months, the approval of the Cirinnà law on the regulation of civil partnerships for same-sex couples, but also several episodes of explicit sexual discrimination in the city, have drawn attention to post gender issues, in relation to which parties and institutions have taken a stance. This also represents a factor of social innovation. It is undoubtedly the most social media oriented category, which uses these tools differently and easily.

**Gender as an obligation and as an optional** This approach to gender politics is more evident in the centre-right, remaining slightly under current in all the other parties. Due to a gradual exit by women from public life, some parties have complained of the difficulty in presenting female candidates to fulfil legal obligations. The figure is much more important in the lists of the centre-right, in which, starting with the profiles, it is clear that female candidates are much more marginal than their male counterparts. This is evident in the electoral posters, where the women are positioned behind the men. Moreover, in the centre-right there are no major female profiles and no surprise affirmations. The use of social communication techniques is very poor.

**Gender as tradition** Fortunately, this is a marginal category, between the female candidates and the subject on campaign, which goes so far as to take stances against a kind of gender emancipation. Mainly in the centre-right parties, the defence of traditional family values and support of women in caregiving professions is claimed openly. The role of women as mothers, highlighted with the celebration of Mother’s Day, and criticism of symbolic policies against gender-related violence (with criticism of the red benches installed all over the city and calls for strong repressive actions to protect women and against prostitution) are the gender-related aspects
registered. The political field too is full of gender stigma, especially the offering of flowers to women at the polling stations. “What’re communication?”

Conclusion

On the matter of gender politics, our country is quite backward, although it is not alone in this. There is still no real gender-based political culture and this is partly the fault of women who, when they do not move completely away from political activity, prefer to close themselves off into self-referential groups that are unable to permeate the male hegemonic culture. The advent of the web has reactivated potential of reaction, but certain obstacles have to be removed: firstly, the open challenge to the structure and dominant narrations. The electoral analysis is proving that the critical mass, even when sustained by the law, is an important condition, but it isn’t enough to affirm the real presence of gender in politics, and the double bind effect is weighing more than ever before on women’s careers. Nevertheless, there are innovative types of trans gender movements, interconnected thanks to new technologies, which we need to take an interest in, without forgetting the original structure of the gender movements.

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