The Praise for a 'Caretaker' Leader

Gendered Press Coverage of Prime Minister Sophie Wilmès in a COVID-19 Context

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Abstract

Studies on media coverage of women politicians have underlined how the media contribute to the association of the figure of the political leader with masculinity. Yet, the social construction of leadership seems to evolve towards a more 'femininity-inclusive' definition. Research on the 'glass cliff' phenomenon suggests that stereotypical feminine attributes might be expected from political leaders in a time of crisis. We investigated the gendered construction of political leadership in the press in a COVID-19 context through the case of former Belgian Prime minister Sophie Wilmès. In line with the 'think crisis-think female' association, our discourse analysis shows an appreciation of traditionally feminine traits, and particularly care-related qualities, in the evaluation of what a 'good' leader should be in pandemic times, although some characteristics traditionally associated with masculinity are still considered valuable assets in the journalistic portrayal of Wilmès' leadership.

Keywords: political leadership, crisis, care, Belgium, gendered media coverage.

1 Introduction

The persistent underrepresentation of women in politics has been the object of constant concern in the public debate and the academic sphere. Research has investigated the multiple factors restraining women's participation in public life, as well as examined the relative influence they have gained in democratic institutions in the last two decades. In general, scholars in gender and politics have approached the political representation of women through Pitkin's conceptualisation (1967) and the three dimensions of representation: descriptive, substantive and symbolic. *Descriptive representation* refers to the extent to which the representatives' characteristics reflect the social composition of the represented group and is therefore understood as the number of women in political institutions such as parliaments, governments and political parties, while *substantive representation* has to do with the extent to which representatives, and particularly women

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politicians, are likely to 'act for' women in their political activities (Wängnerud, 2009). The third aspect is *symbolic representation*, defined by Pitkin as the emotions and attitudes developed by the represented group towards the representatives, implying "that the people accept or believe that the political leaders represent them" (1967: 102). As stressed by Lombardo and Meier, the notion remains "at the same time broad and understudied by scholars in gender and politics, and in politics more broadly speaking" (2014: 3). Gender and politics research has engaged with the notion of symbolic representation in various ways, but in general, existing literature discusses the social significance of women's presence in politics, the perception of their role and the way their performances are assessed in this masculine bastion.

In this context, mediatic discourse has been considered a privileged ground to study gender construction in the sense that if media suggest frames to guide citizens in their interpretation of events (Gamson, 1992; Goffman, 1974), they can convey a certain conception of women's and men's role in society. As a result, an important literature, both in political science and communication studies, is devoted to the analysis of how female politicians are represented in the media, often in comparison to their male counterparts (Van der Pas & Aaldering, 2020), and more broadly to "the manner in which the mediated presentation of politics is gendered" (Sreberny-Mohammadi & Ross, 1996: 112). Most of the analyses have focused on election candidates to legislative office or incumbent parliamentarians and to a lesser extent to candidates to executive functions (Murray, 2010). The coverage of women at the head of a government or a political party have been less studied, certainly because their presence at this level remains marginal in most countries (Inter-Parliamentary Union & UN Women, 2020). In addition, few studies have considered gendered media coverage in terms of political leadership (Aaldering & Van der Pas, 2020: 914), and an important part of the existing work consists of quantitative content analysis, leaving less room for a qualitative approach to the analysis of gender in press coverage (Adcock, 2010).

Building a theoretical framework based on literature on mediatised political leadership and the gendered construction of the concept, we intend to study the gendered construction of political leadership in the press in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, through the case of former Belgian Prime minister Sophie Wilmès. Indeed, we consider that this crisis constitutes an opportunity to test the 'think crisis-think female' theory (Ryan, Haslam, Hersby & Bongiorno, 2011), understood as the idea that stereotypically feminine traits are expected from leaders in a time of crisis since Sophie Wilmès had to face two crises during her mandate. She was appointed Prime minister at the head of a minority *caretaker* government in the context of a long political crisis in October 2019 and had to manage the COVID-19 pandemic a few months later.

We conducted a discourse analysis based on a selection of articles published in the Belgian French-language press during Wilmès' mandate, to investigate the potential influence of the COVID-19 crisis context on the gendered construction of political leadership. In line with the 'think crisis-think female' association (Ryan et al., 2011), we found an appreciation of traditionally feminine traits, and particularly *care*-related qualities, in the evaluation of what a 'good' leader should

be in pandemic times, although some characteristics traditionally associated with masculinity are still considered valuable assets in the journalistic portrayal of Wilmès' leadership.

The paper will proceed as follows. We will begin by reviewing the literature on political leadership, gender and the media, to build our hypotheses. Next, we will present the Belgian case and explain the method employed to construct a selection of relevant press articles and analyse them in-depth. We will conclude with suggestions for further research.

2 Talking Political Leadership in the Media

2.1 The Personalisation of Leadership

What is political leadership? The answer to this question is not obvious. Indeed, when studying political leadership, one will be faced at the same time with the difficulty to define an "indefinable" and "essentially contested concept" (Elgie, 1995: 2), and the flexibility to fill the concept with the meaning that is the most appropriate for the research. In this regard, one of the approaches adopted has been to identify leadership character dimensions, understood as the definition of characteristics leaders possess or should possess in the eyes of voters. There have been various theorisations of political leaders' characteristics (Funk, 1999; Kinder, 1986), but Aaldering and Vliegenthart (2016) tried to find a common ground among existing literature and conceptualised six leadership traits: political craftsmanship, vigorousness, integrity, responsiveness, communicative performances and consistency. Their conceptualisation is particularly interesting for two reasons. Firstly, the consideration of political leadership through personality traits appears very relevant in contemporary politics, since leaders and their personality have gained increasing significance in the eyes of voters (Costa Lobo & Curtice, 2014), a phenomenon Blondel and Thiébault (2009) labelled "the personalisation of leadership." Secondly, Aaldering and Vliegenthart's framework (2016) was established to allow for the conduct of empirical analyses of the construction of leadership images in media content. In this perspective, political communication, including mass media, has proved to be influential in the personalisation of leadership (Garzia, 2011).

2.2 Gender Effect on Leadership Images in the Media

The personalisation of political leadership, as well as its mediatisation, is not without implications regarding gender. Indeed, studies on leadership gender stereotypes have stressed the association of leadership with masculinity. Men are perceived as agentic (assertive, competitive, decisive), while women are seen as communal (kind, warm, compassionate); and the former characteristics are considered the most suitable for a leader, so that "conceptions of leadership hardly ever strayed into feminine territory" (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell & Ristikari, 2011). Consequently, women politicians, and women leaders in other traditionally male-powered domains, have often faced a "femininity/competence double bind" (Jamieson, 1995: 120). On the one hand, when they perform stereotypical mascu-

line traits to try to conform to the behaviour expected from them as politicians, they take the risk of being accused of betraying societal expectations of femininity. On the other hand, the performance of stereotypically feminine traits by women politicians can be regarded as a failure to conform to a male-driven normative environment and raise doubts about their competence and credibility. This congruence between political leadership and traditional male characteristics seems to be even stronger when it comes to executive political leadership so that the constraint of being perceived as 'too masculine' or 'too feminine' might particularly affect women candidates to executive office (Murray, 2010). Furthermore, Lakoff (1975) identified a double bind in language affecting women speakers: taking distance from the so-called 'women's language' might be labelled as a 'not feminine enough' attitude, while women embracing it might face difficulties to be taken seriously. One of the most important consequences of these double binds for women politicians is a permanent conscious or subconscious adaptation of their communicative attitudes and gender-marked discursive strategies to the circumstances, for example, by avoiding an emotional style to not be targeted as 'too sensitive' to handle public affairs or by privileging more stereotypical feminine references when they try to appeal to a feminine electorate (Charteris-Black, 2009; Mukhortov & Malyavina, 2019).

Media have contributed to the gendered conception of political leadership, by using certain gender frames in their coverage of politicians. Media discourses have focused more on women politicians' gender, family lives and appearance than on the ones of their male colleagues, suggesting a 'gendered mediation' of politics (Gidengil & Everitt, 1999). In their analysis of gender bias in Dutch newspapers reporting, Aaldering and Van der Pas (2020) found that female politicians were less discussed in terms of leadership traits than their male colleagues and that the attributions of these characteristics followed gender stereotypes, with men receiving much more media coverage in terms of political craftsmanship and vigorousness. While Ross claimed that "little has actually changed since the early days of researching the relationship between women, politics and media in the 1990s" (2017: 56), other scholars argued that persistent stereotyping has in fact stood alongside praises on the breakthrough embodied by female leaders or denunciation of sexism (Garcia-Blanco & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012; Trimble, 2018). Recent contributions have stressed that coverage remains gendered but include reports of a more positive tone in the evaluations of women politicians (Thomas, Harell, Rijkhoff & Gosselin, 2020) and less stereotyping through time, showing "the power of symbolic representation to increasingly normalise women's presence in powerful political positions" (Trimble et al., 2021: 166).

3   Women as Suitable Crisis Managers?

Although political leadership has been traditionally associated with masculinity, the evolution towards a leadership style that includes more stereotypical feminine attributes has been suggested by scholars. The general complexification of society has allowed for a more *transformational* leadership (Bass, 1985), a form of

Clémence Deswert

leadership based on a consensual and empowering relationship between leaders and followers (Campus, 2013: 19). Since it requires more 'communal' qualities, this type of leadership has been associated with women leaders (Stempel et al., 2015), and presented as a "tool for closing the leadership gender gap" (Campus, 2013: 20).

Scholars working on leadership gender stereotypes have also called for context to be taken into consideration, by suggesting an "extension of this line of research into specific organisational settings in which the influence of contextual effects can be examined" (Powell, Butterfield & Parent, 2002: 190). Among other examples, a perspective has focused on crisis contexts as opportunities for a renewal in the gendered construction of the concept and a challenge of the so-called 'think manager-think male' association (Schein, 1975). Studies have provided evidence that stereotypically feminine traits could be expected from leaders in a time of crisis (Bruckmüller & Branscombe, 2010). Ryan et al. (2011) referred to this association as the 'think crisis-think female' relation, while Gartzia, Ryan, Balluerka and Aritzeta (2012) also evoked a "'think crisis–think in a stereotypically feminine way of leading' relationship" (604). This possibility was investigated for the first time in organisational psychology by Ryan and Haslam (2005; 2007) in their study of a phenomenon they called "glass cliff," defined as the idea that women are nominated at leadership positions when organisations face difficult times, and the risk of failure is higher. In a second step, Ryan, Haslam and Kulich (2010) tried to verify this hypothesis in politics, by showing that women candidates were preferred to contest hard-to-win seats in the 2005 UK general election. Several contributions also suggested that some nominations or elections of women at high political positions in the last decades might have reflected the 'glass cliff' phenomenon, such as the appointments of Joan Kirner and Carmen Lawrence, first women to become State Premiers in Australia and appointed "after their party had been exposed to humiliating scandals" (Haslam & Ryan, 2005: 88), or Angela Merkel, who became CDU's first female leader in 2000 after the party's financial scandal debacle (Petitfils, 2013: 389). More recently, the case of Theresa May, nominated as United Kingdom Prime minister following the Brexit referendum, has been raised (Kulich & Ryan, 2017), as well as the appointment in 2020 of Dominique Anglade, first woman at the head of Quebec Liberal Party and first black woman at the head of a political party in Quebec, in the pandemic context and following an important loss of the Liberals at the 2018 Quebec general election (Lalancette & Pilote, 2020). This latter example is especially interesting considering that the 'glass cliff' might also affect ethnic minorities (Kulich, Ryan & Haslam, 2014).

Lastly, the identification of crises as opportunities for the evolution towards a femininity-inclusive leadership has been discussed in contributions dealing with the idea that women leaders could have been more 'successful' in the COVID-19 crisis management (Garikipati & Kambhampati, 2021; Johnson & Williams, 2020). Although the project of determining whether women heads of State or government managed the crisis better is subject to caution, it is interesting to note that these texts considered the performance of "a clear, empathetic, interpersonal, and decisive communication style" (Garikipati & Kambhampati, 2021:

415), as well as the "motherly feelings of caring, empathy and compassion" (Johnson & Williams, 2020: 945) of women leaders to be a possible factor for the enthusiasm their leadership has brought. In particular, Johnson and Williams (2020) state that the COVID-19 crisis "has opened up particular opportunities for perceived everyday feminine traits in the private sphere to be valued in women leaders, including by the media" (944) and that "there is a clear need for further analyses, including into the question of whether problematic gender stereotypes have been reinforced during the pandemic or whether conceptions of good leadership are now more inclusive of traditionally feminine traits" (948). This paper intends to contribute to the discussion of these issues by examining how political leadership was constructed in the press in the context of the COVID-19 crisis.

4 Research Question and Hypotheses

To investigate the 'think crisis-think female' theory (Ryan et al., 2011) in media coverage of political leadership in the context of COVID-19, the question raised in this article is whether stereotypical feminine traits have been considered characteristics that a 'good' leader should possess during this crisis. We examine this question by studying the construction of political leadership in the portrayal of former Belgian Prime minister Sophie Wilmès in the Belgian French-language daily press. Sophie Wilmès was appointed Prime minister in October 2019, when political parties were struggling to form a regular federal government, then had to manage the COVID-19 pandemic until a regular government was formed in October 2020. Both her nomination as Prime minister and the way her government handled the COVID-19 crisis were particularly well documented in the media, including in the daily press. We believe that this intense media scrutiny, together with the fact that media are important actors in the personalisation of political leadership and its gendered construction, makes the one-year mandate of Wilmès an interesting opportunity to examine the influence of a crisis context in leadership style evaluations.

In line with the 'think crisis-think female' theory (Ryan et al., 2011), which suggests that stereotypical feminine characteristics might be expected from leaders in a time of crisis, we expect Wilmès' performance of traditionally feminine attributes to be presented in the journalistic discourse as fundamental elements to be a 'good leader' in the context of the COVID-19 crisis.

5 Belgian Case

Belgium sets an example in the adoption of legislative measures aimed at increasing the presence of women in politics. Laws and decrees, such as the 2002 legislation requiring gender parity on electoral lists, resulted in a rise in the number of women in the different parliaments of the country. Yet, the initiatives taken to promote the presence of women at the executive level were less ambitious. The number of women ministers or secretaries of state certainly increased, but mostly in a smaller proportion than the number of female parliamentarians.

Clémence Deswert

Nonetheless, the federal government has recently showed an important evolution: while it reached only 22.2% of women in 2014, the team that took office in October 2020 became the first egalitarian Belgian federal government in terms of gender parity, and the first government in the European Union to include a transgender person.

Even though Belgium stands out as a pioneer in terms of gender quotas, the country is not as successful when it comes to the appointment of women at the highest positions. Fourteen women have obtained the presidency of a major political party, and only three women have been appointed heads of governments of federated entities. Even more paradoxically, the country waited until 2019 to appoint its first woman Prime Minister, the French-speaking liberal Sophie Wilmès.

Wilmès, who worked as Minister for Budget in the previous government, was appointed Prime Minister on the 27th of October 2019 when the former Prime Minister Charles Michel left for the presidency of the European Council. Her nomination occurred in what could be seen as a 'glass cliff' position since she had to deal with two successive crises. Firstly, in a context of long political crisis, she became head of a minority – since the departure of the Flemish nationalist party N-VA from the coalition government in December 2018 – and *caretaker* – since the legislative elections in May 2019 – government. Her position – well-known in Belgium's recent history (Dandoy & Terrière, 2020) – was therefore seen as temporary, while waiting for a regular government to be constituted. Secondly, four months after her appointment, Sophie Wilmès had to face more unexpected events, with the Covid-19 crisis hitting Belgium in late February 2020. Sophie Wilmès remained Prime Minister until the 1st of October 2020, when a regular government led by the Dutch-speaking liberal Alexander De Croo was formed. Indeed, the minority position of the Flemish political parties in the federal coalition – the two Flemish parties which scored the highest in the 2019 legislative elections, the Flemish nationalist party N-VA and the nationalist far-right party Vlaams Belang, were not included – and the fact that the last three Prime Ministers were French-speaking, made it politically almost impossible to appoint a French-speaking Prime Minister once again. Wilmès has continued to exercise executive functions in this newly formed government, by becoming Belgium's first woman Minister of Foreign Affairs.

6   Research Design and Method

To conduct this research, we selected the six Belgian French-language newspapers with the highest circulation, namely the different press publications from the Sudpresse group (*La Capitale, La Meuse, La Nouvelle Gazette, Nord Éclair, La Province*), *Metro, Le Soir, L'Avenir, La DH/Les Sports+* and *La Libre Belgique* (CIM, 2016). The press titles of the Sudpresse group, whose core content relies on local news items, were gathered since the national news items, and therefore the articles, which are most likely to include information on the Prime minister, are the same in all the titles of the group. This selection of newspapers allows for a bal-

Table 1   *Definition of Aaldering and Vliegenthart's political leadership dimensions (2016)*

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Political craftsmanship	Whether the leader knows the norms, rules and power structures related to the political world, has political experience and intelligence
Vigorousness	Whether the leader is decisive, assertive, able to incarnate power and 'leadership' in the strict common-sense definition of the term ('strong leadership' or 'weak leadership')
Integrity	Whether the leader shows concern for the general interest rather than its own personal achievements, acts on an altruist and selfless basis
Responsiveness	Whether the leader is aware of the population's expectations and able to listen to its concerns
Communicative performances	Whether the leader is able to be empathic, kind, to inspire citizens and to communicate clearly to the public, including through the media
Consistency	Whether the leader is reliable and shows continuity or regularity in its viewpoints and actions

ance between 'qualitative' and more 'popular' editorial policies, which we consider one of the most relevant divisions in Belgian media system. Indeed, when it comes to the relationships between political parties and editorial lines, Belgian media have largely taken distance from their old partisan affiliation (Soontjens, 2019). Besides, the selection considers almost all daily newspapers available in the francophone market. To generate a corpus of articles, we used the database Europresse to gather all the articles mentioning the word 'Wilmès' in these newspapers from the 27th of October 2019 (beginning of Wilmès' mandate) to the 1st of October 2020 (end of Wilmès' mandate). Even though we focus on Wilmès' political leadership evaluation in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, we consider discussion on political leadership throughout all her mandate to put our results on the COVID-19 crisis in perspective with the way Wilmès' leadership style was discussed before the outbreak of the pandemic and pinpoint potential specificities of her COVID-19 leadership coverage in terms of gendered leadership traits evaluation. This research led to 2.406 results. We browsed all the articles to have an idea of their content, and only kept the articles directly related to Sophie Wilmès. Indeed, lots of articles mentioned the name of the Prime Minister only once to cover subjects, which were not related to her person or behaviour.

Moreover, to extract the articles contributing to the construction of leadership images, we used the mediatised political leadership dimensions identified by Aaldering and Vliegenthart (2016) and their definitions. In Table 1, we provide brief definitions of what these political leadership aspects cover.

The articles could discuss these dimensions both in a positive or a negative way. For instance, when an article described Wilmès as being able to relate to people and communicate with them with empathy, the article was included in the sample because it was linked to the dimension of 'communicative performances'.

Clémence Deswert
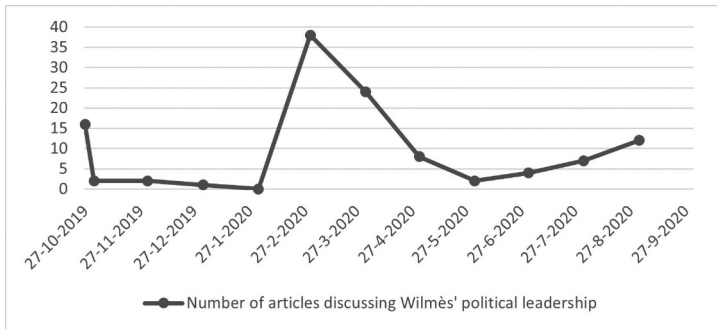
Figure 1 *Evolution of the number of articles discussing Wilmès' political leadership during her mandate*

If an article stated that she lacked experience at the federal level, we included it too because it was related to the leadership dimension 'political craftsmanship'.

This identification of discussion on Sophie Wilmès and political leadership in newspapers led to the isolation of 112 articles. National newspaper *Le Soir* is the most important provider, with 40 articles, followed by the *L'Avenir* (21), Sud-presse newspapers (20), *La DH/Les Sports+* (19) and *La Libre Belgique* (14). Only two articles are from *Metro*, which might be explained by the fact that *Metro* is a free newspaper opting for short factual articles rather than extensive reports. There is variation in the amount of newspapers coverage of Wilmès' political leadership style throughout her mandate. Her appointment is a moment of intense media coverage, as well as the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis in March. Then, the number of articles decreases but there are still lots of them as Wilmès appears regularly in the media to speak to the population and conducts weekly press conferences held by the Belgian National Security Council (Figure 1).

To study the gendered construction of political leadership, we decided to analyse how stereotypical feminine attributes, as well as stereotypical masculine attributes, associated with Wilmès' leadership style were considered by journalists through her mandate, and particularly in the context of her management of the COVID-19 crisis. To do so, we first had to clarify what a 'stereotypical feminine attribute' and a 'stereotypical masculine attribute' are. Drawing on earlier studies to define a clear line between perceived femininity and masculinity in the news was not straightforward, given that studies on media coverage of politicians can sometimes have slightly different definition of what a traditionally 'feminine' or a traditionally 'masculine' trait is. We decided to refer to the meta-analysis conducted by Van der Pas and Aaldering (2020) because it has the advantage to include general conclusions based on the analysis of various studies on gendered media coverage in terms of characteristics. In Table 2, we resume which traits are perceived as traditionally 'female' and which are perceived as traditionally 'male' in Van der Pas and Aaldering's meta-analysis.

Once we had identified articles involving discussion on Sophie Wilmès' political leadership, and determined the gendered character of political leadership traits, we could analyse their content in-depth to study the gendered construction

Table 2 *Gendered perception of traits in studies on gendered media coverage of politicians*

Stereotypical feminine traits	Stereotypical masculine traits
Communal qualities	Agentic qualities
Passive, dependent, noncompetitive, gentle, weak leader, emotional, compassionate, affectionate, kind, honest, warm, attractive, honest, altruistic, unintelligent, uninformed, friendly, helpful, nurturant, sensitive	Tough, independent, competitive, ambitious, objective, unemotional, dominant, aggressive, strong leader, assertive, knowledgeable, effective, untrustworthy, dishonest, decisive, self-confident, intelligent

Note: The characteristics which do not belong to one of the two above categories are considered gender-neutral in our analysis.

of political leadership. In line with research using discourse analysis to study gender mediation in media coverage (Garcia-Blanco & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012; Wright & Holland, 2014), we consider journalistic discourse as a social and cultural construct reflecting power structures in society, and the discourse on politics as a social construction involving three discursive actors: journalists themselves, politicians and public opinion (Neveu, 1997: 27). As we intend to examine the influence of the COVID-19 crisis context on political leadership construction, we paid particular attention to consider not only the texts themselves but the links between the articles, to properly connect a certain conception of political leadership – which emerges from these articles – with its social and political context.

7 Results

7.1 The Beginning of the Crisis and the Mother of the Nation

We identified three main stages in the construction of Wilmès' leadership style in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. The first period covers what can be considered the first weeks of the Covid-19 crisis in Belgium. Indeed, on the 1st of March, a second coronavirus case is identified in the country. Throughout March, the number of cases kept increasing and on the 12th of March, the federal government announced, through its Prime Minister Sophie Wilmès, the closure of schools, restaurants, cafés and the prohibition of a range of public and private activities. Five days later, lockdown is finally announced. From that moment, the National Security Council organised almost every week a press conference to inform Belgians on measures taken to deal with the pandemic. The leaders of federated entities – the Ministers-Presidents of Regions and Communities – were invited to participate in the meetings of the National Security Council and to the press conference but the Prime minister remained the main speaker, announcing the outlines of the agenda related to the crisis management. A first consequence of this large visibility in the media was the focus on a particular leadership dimension in the press during this period: Wilmès' communicative performances.

Our analysis of the discussion on Wilmès' leadership style during this first stage of the pandemic management showed that characteristics socially associated with femininity, such as her empathy, emotion, humility, humanity, kind-

Clémence Deswert

ness, sincerity, altruism and nurturance, were presented as particularly valuable and appreciated assets to deal with the pandemic. For instance, *La Meuse* (18 March 2020) indicated that she spoke to the population with "a lot of calm, emotion and empathy." *Le Soir* editorial writer in chief (16 March 2020) considered that "the serious and empathetic tone as well as the great humility displayed by the Prime minister aroused respect and trust" and added that "it is time to show modesty, to put the testosterone on ice."

Moreover, some articles referred to motherhood or parenthood when covering Wilmès' communicative skills, describing her as "a Mother of the nation," and praising her "maternal tone, rigorous but benevolent" (*La DH/Les Sports+*, 29 March 2020). Surprisingly, some of the traits underlined by journalists to question Wilmès' leadership at the time of her appointment as Prime Minister were framed in a positive manner at the first stage of her COVID-19 crisis management. For instance, while her perceived lack of experience and discretion raised concern when she was nominated at the head of the federal government – some newsmakers writing that she might be perceived 'too discreet' and that she has to "convince, particularly in Flanders, that she has what it takes for the job" (*Le Soir*, 28 October 2019) –, these same inexperience and discretion seem to participate to the perception of Wilmès as a 'good leader' in the context of the pandemic. The editor-in-chief of *La Meuse* (18 March 2020) considered the announcement of lockdown by Wilmès to be "a 'made in Belgium' pragmatic, benevolent, discreet and human compromise." *Le Soir* (14 March 2020) referred to "the touch of inexperience that made her human, her right tone," and its editorial writer in chief (19 March 2020) stated that "She's too weak for the job? Someone else – a man of course, more experienced, with more electoral legitimacy – would have done better? This is a real lie and a very macho denial of the reality." This positive appreciation of inexperience contrasts with the scepticism of the press regarding her lack of experience at the federal level at the time of her appointment and appears intriguing, given that political experience is normally considered an important trait in 'good leadership' images, as suggested by Aaldering and Vliegenthart (2016). Moreover, the experience prerequisite sometimes affects women politicians in particular. For example, experience has been identified as a key requirement for women running for executive offices to succeed, so that "a woman without sufficient experience is unlikely to be credible" (Murray, 2010: 244).

Although stereotypical feminine traits were particularly highlighted and appreciated in the discussion on Wilmès' leadership, we also noted that some of stereotypical masculine attributes, her determination and firmness, were presented as important dimensions in her success to lead the country in the first stage of the pandemic. In fact, Belgian French-language newspapers seemed to argue that Wilmès exercised a new type of leadership, "a Wilmès style, a way of exercising power" (*La Libre*, 21 March 2020), based on the performance of both traditionally masculine traits and traditionally feminine traits. She was perceived as "a soft power-enthusiast," and a journalist explains that "her authority is filled with empathy" (*La Libre*, 21 March 2020). Newspapers agreed that Wilmès' performance during those first weeks of the COVID-19 crisis management was what

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made her a strong leader and "end her process of transformation to become a true stateswoman and woman of power" (*La Meuse*, 28 March 2020). Wilmès was considered "to have won her spurs as a Prime minister" (*Le Soir*, 16 March 2020) after taking "a super-accelerated stateswoman class" (*La Meuse*, 18 March 2020). A journalist argued that "the discreet Prime minister of a caretaker government has evolved, in a few days, into a reassuring and charismatic leader" (*La DH/ Les Sports+*, 19 March 2020), while other editors stated that "the transformation of the discreet Prime minister into the leader against the bad coronavirus wasn't easy" (*Le Soir*, 21 March 2020).

This combination of both stereotypical feminine and stereotypical masculine attitudes in a female political leaders' behaviour could reflect the "strategic stereotype theory" (15) conceptualised by Fridkin and Kenney (2014): women politicians might perform a more agentic leadership style to challenge gender stereotypes, while at the same time capitalise on their perceived role as primary caregiver to convince voters. This "balancing act" (Murray, 2010: 225) can be understood as a way for women officeholders to negotiate the "femininity/competence double bind" (Jamieson, 1995: 120) constraining their participation in politics: playing both the agentic and the communal leadership cards allows them to conform to the masculinity of the political arena – and therefore avoid illegitimacy claims – and to ensure the performance of stereotypical feminine qualities traditionally expected from them as women.

Yet, a new insight we wish to highlight is the important focus put by journalists on 'caring' qualities when discussing Wilmès' leadership in the context of the pandemic. Indeed, among the stereotypical feminine characteristics used by journalists to describe Wilmès' leadership style, lots of them are related to the idea of taking *care* of others, by showing compassion, nurturance and other 'caring' attitudes that have traditionally been associated with women's qualities in the private sphere. Gender studies have provided a particularly interesting basis for the analysis of the association of women with 'caring' behaviour through the concept of *care*, which encompasses the idea that women have been primarily socialised with values stressing the importance of taking care of others. This notion, which originated from Gilligan (1982), has known considerable development, including its definition as a socially and historically situated practice unequally distributed between women and men (Tronto, 1993). In politics, Mackay (2001) has suggested that *care* should be considered not only as a burden, which constrains women's participation in politics but also as a "strategic resource" (Mackay, 2001: 5) in political practices, in order "to humanise politics by positioning care as a central political value and promoting associated attributes such as attentiveness, responsibility, connectedness, reciprocity and respect for diversity" (Mackay, 2001: 130).

From the analysis of journalistic discourse during the first weeks of the COVID-19 crisis in Belgium, we can draw that stereotypical feminine characteristics, and particularly *care*-related attributes, are associated with the figure of a 'good leader'. The issue to be addressed now is whether this specific gendered construction of political leadership continues to be reflected by the daily press discourse on Wilmès' leadership style until the end of her mandate.

Clémence Deswert

7.2 The Shift to a More Agentic Style

Firstly, and as a general remark on the evaluation of Wilmès' political leadership by the press, an attentive reading of the article makes clear that the enthusiasm for her communication style is not continuous throughout the COVID-19 crisis. Indeed, while in March, her communicative performances received unanimous appreciation, during what we can consider the 'second stage of lockdown', in April, the tone is more nuanced and sometimes negative.

On the 5th of April, Sophie Wilmès spoke to the population through a Facebook video, asking Belgians to keep on following the government's guidelines to limit the spread of the virus. In their coverage of this speech, French-language newspapers seemed to acknowledge a change in communication style, with a more "solemn" (*L'Avenir*, 6 April 2020; *La Meuse*, 7 April 2020) and "presidential style" (*L'Avenir*, 6 April 2020; *Le Soir*, 9 April 2020) embodied by the Prime minister. The 15th of April marks a turning point in the evaluation of Wilmès' political leadership. Stereotypically feminine traits were not used anymore to characterise her leadership style, and her ability to properly meet the expectations of the population was called into question. Criticisms focused on the decision to allow visits in nursing homes and the lack of clarity of her communication, the "first decisional and communicational failure of the Prime minister" (*La Meuse*, 17 April 2020). The National Security Council press conference hold the 24th of April at 10 pm and involved the display of an unclear PowerPoint presentation, which also led to criticisms of Wilmès' communication performances. Besides, articles added that Wilmès is perceived to "lack of charisma" (*L'Avenir*, 18 April 2020; *Le Soir*, 24 April 2020) or "lack or leadership" (*Le Soir*, 16 April 2020; *La Libre*, 17 April 2020; *Le Soir*, 24 April 2020; *La DH/Les Sports+*, 28 April 2020) in the Flemish-speaking part of the country.

7.3 The Mother of the Nation Has Returned

Lastly, a third period, corresponding to the initiation of the end of lockdown, is the opportunity of a 'reviving enthusiasm' for Wilmès' communication performance. From May 2020 approximatively, the analysis of the press discourse on her political leadership reveals that journalists appreciate that her communication style remained similar to what she had shown during the first weeks of the crisis management in March. Personality traits traditionally associated with femininity, such as her empathy and humility, were particularly welcomed and compared to the previous change in her communication style. *Le Soir* (7 May 2020) explained that she "could get back the right tone between a real compassion and her role as representative of the public authority" in comparison to the previous press conferences and speeches when "she had forgotten the human aspect which has forged her particularity" and that further measures would be followed by Belgian citizens "without the irritation caused by a botch communication and the wound of a lack of empathy." For *La DH/Les Sports+* (8 May 2020), the Prime Minister "neglected the human aspect" in her last speeches but "wants to avoid making the same mistakes" by "focusing more on the emotional aspect." One could wonder whether the relational and 'human life-centred' aspect of the crisis, particularly when the focus was put on human losses during the first phases of the pandemic,

has not allowed more room for Wilmès' emotion display to be considered positively. The particular nature of the crisis could have prevented her from being labelled as too 'emotional', a characteristic that has often been put forward to exclude women from the management of public affairs (Falk, 2008; Harp et al., 2016). Furthermore, research showed that men politicians are usually more likely to benefit from the performance of emotion than their female colleagues (Johnson, 2013; Ross, 2017).

Lastly, despite the fact that Wilmès embraced her empathetic side again was positively welcomed by the press, some articles stressed that her political leadership still triggered interrogations in Flanders. On the contrary, French-language newspapers deployed a 'soft' approach to what they considered to be Wilmès' past mistakes, arguing that it would be "too easy" (*L'Avenir*, 26 September 2020) to criticise her. From their perspective, the Prime minister was not the only one to blame and her humility was underlined by journalists, who agreed on the fact that "she could listen to the criticism, fix the guidelines and even apologise" (*Le Soir*, 20 June 2020) and that "at least she never pretended that she was all-knowing" (*L'Avenir*, 26 September 2020). *Le Soir* also stressed that she had to deal with the complexity of the measures "which didn't help" (7 May 2020), that this complexity was even higher given that "she was so alone to deal with it" (24 September 2020), and explicitly defended the Prime minister: "But was it really the Prime minister's fault that measures were muddled? No" (25 September 2020).

8   Conclusion and Further Research

This article aimed to study the gendered construction of political leadership in the press with a contextual perspective and through the case of former Belgian Prime minister Sophie Wilmès. The expectation was to find an association between stereotypical feminine attributes and the conception of what a 'good leader' is in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, in line with the 'think crisis-think female' relationship (Ryan et al., 2011). Drawing from the discourse analysis we conducted, we can conclude that this hypothesis is generally verified. The analysis revealed an important focus on stereotypical feminine attributes in the evaluation of Wilmès' leadership in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. The analysis showed that attributes traditionally considered feminine were considered to play an important part in the figure of a 'good leader' in pandemic times. Indeed, at the end of February and through March, these stereotypical feminine characteristics were intensively used by journalists to discuss Wilmès' leadership and her leadership style is praised while in April, the stereotypical feminine characteristics progressively disappeared, and her leadership was called into question. From May, traditionally feminine traits were mentioned again and Wilmès was considered to embody the appropriate leadership style to deal with the crisis. Moreover, these characteristics were mainly related to 'caring' behaviours, a phenomenon that might be explained by the fact that the idea of taking care of others has been particularly underlined during COVD-19 lockdowns. Despite this important focus on femininity and *care*-related traits, it is important to note that the performance

Clémence Deswert

of some stereotypical masculine characteristics, such as determination and decisiveness, were also identified as requirements to deal with the COVID-19 crisis.

Our analysis could set the stage for further research. In terms of empirical scope and as mentioned in the literature part, other women heads of government's leadership performance have known an important media coverage in the context of COVID-19. In this respect, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has often been presented as the ideal type of what a new and more 'femininity-sensitive' political leadership could or should be. Research involving other case studies would thus be useful to better understand the evolution of the gendered construction of political leadership in media coverage of politicians. These case studies could involve both women and men leaders to study the impact of gender identity on the gendered construction of political leadership. Moreover, studies on the aftermaths of the pandemic have certainly addressed the issue of its influence on trust and support for government and political leaders, for example by questioning the 'rally-round-the-flag effect' in the context of the pandemic (Devine, Gaskell, Jennings & Stoker, 2020) but have much less explored to what extent this crisis could (re)shape the conception of political leadership itself. While this article adopted a clear gender perspective to study the construction of political leadership in media discourses in a COVID-19 context, further research could involve the examination of other aspects.

Lastly, we argue that the promotion of *care*-related qualities in media coverage raises perspectives on the construction of what could represent a specific way to perform as a leader, especially in the context of COVID-19. This idea of political leadership is constructed by the media, but women politicians are not passive recipients of their coverage and research has stressed their *agency* in the construction of their own image in the media (Wagner & Everitt, 2019). In this regard, women politicians' communication strategies on social media have been analysed with a gender perspective (McGregor, Lawrence & Cardona, 2017). Therefore, our analysis of the press could be completed with an examination of Sophie Wilmès' political communication, to determine to which extent and how she managed to construct a certain image of herself beyond media mediation. This approach might also help to determine whether such strategies present risks of reinforcing gender stereotypes or to the contrary have potential to improve the symbolic representation of women in politics. Building a complementary analysis of both mediatic discourse and social media strategies could help us understand how, while Wilmès' nomination as Prime minister made her head of a *caretaker* government, the COVID-19 crisis was an opportunity to present her as a 'caretaker' leader in the gendered sense of the term.

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Clémence Deswert

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Clémence Deswert

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