

“THE F-WORD IN CONGRESS: NEWS MEDIA AND A PORTUGUESE FEMINIST EVENT”¹

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Abstract

In June 2008 the 3rd Portuguese feminist congress was held, commemorating the last similar event that took place 80 years. The feminist movement has a relatively short and invisible history in Portugal. The previous political regime, anti-democratic, made sure that women were kept under a strict ideological control. Throughout the last 34 democratic years, the Portuguese feminisms mostly faced indifference by the media public sphere and were marked by preconceptions such as the memory of an event that actually never took place and unsure meanings of the word “feminist”. If invisibility was one of the major features of the public sphere on the Portuguese women’s struggles, how much changed 80 years after? The event held in June makes an exceptional case to research a range of issues: What coverage did it get, what issues captured the media’s imagination, how was the words “feminism” and “feminist” used and framed? Did plurality surface the media public sphere, or did the essentialist Woman still dominate the news on the congress? Focusing on the role of the media for a democratic politics, our paper pursues a better understanding of the local democratic and inclusive public sphere.

Keywords

Media, Gender, Feminist Movement.

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The feminist movement has a relatively short and invisible history in Portugal. For some, we cannot actually speak of a historical Portuguese feminist movement. The long-lasting dictatorship that ruled the country for most of the twentieth century (1928-1974) ensured that women were kept under a strict ideological control. Throughout the last 34 democratic years, after the 25th April 1974, Portuguese feminisms mostly faced indifference by the media public sphere and were marked by preconceptions such as the memory of an event that actually never took place² and wavering meanings of the word “feminist”³.

The first feminist congress was promoted by the National Council of Portuguese Women (CNMP) in 1924. Four years later, the event had its second edition. According to the historical news that portray these events, both congresses held a wide range of communications related to feminism and education, supported by feminists and public political and intellectual personalities. In June 2008, 80 years afterwards, the women’s organization UMAR (União de Mulheres Alternativa e Resposta) organized the 3rd Feminist Congress, which brought together over 500 participants to discuss a broad range of issues.

The Congress’ goals extended beyond the event itself: they depended on its ability to engage the Portuguese society in a discussion which, in turn, depended on the coming together of different actors, arguments and claims within the public sphere.

The event held in June 2008 stands out as an exceptional research case. Presupposing a normative perspective concerning a democratic and inclusive public sphere conception we broadly question how identity of feminism and feminists were produced in public discourse.

We address specific questions to this single event:

- Did the 3rd Feminist Congress managed to break the invisibility of Portuguese women’s struggles, bringing feminist claims and concerns to media agenda?
- What amount and type of coverage did it get, what issues captured the media’s imagination, how was the word “feminist” used and framed?
- Did diversity surface or an essentialistic view of women dominate the news on the congress?
- Who had voice in public sphere and what picture of both feminist and feminism did this coverage built?

2. We refer to the famous “burning of bras” that actually never happened.

3. On the fight against discrimination and prejudice in the early democracy of the 70’s see Maria José Magalhães (1998).

Our paper sets out to perform the identification of the broad narratives of the Portuguese Feminist Congress as well as its associated ideologies by news media.

Methodological note

We put together a *corpus* of media articles⁴ which included all existing national newspaper texts that contained a relevant discussion of the Congress, leaving us with a sample of 77 articles between August 2007 and July 2008.

In order to gain historical insight we established comparisons and contrasts with the coverage of both previous editions of the Congress (1924 and 1928) by *Diário de Notícias*.

The corpus was analyzed in **three stages**, which make up the basis for our study herein presented.

The first stage consists of an extensive and systematic content analysis, encoding each article of the 77 articles selected in 51 categories⁵.

The second stage was based on an ideological analysis of narratives and voices in articles.

The third stage was accomplished by a linguistic analysis of what was said about feminism and feminists.

For the **second and third stages** we focused on a more restricted *corpus*, composed by 26 selected pieces, mainly opinion articles, which have in common the exercise of free speech, criticism and judgement, therefore, which contrast with “neutrality” that most news strive for, presenting a more “opinionated tone”. The analysis of such articles allows us to trace the broad ideological threads underlying media representation of feminism. The concept of ideology is herein understood in its discursive sense, as social representations or the “the socially shared values, norms, attitudes, opinions and knowledge on the one hand, and personal and contextual models (experiences, intensions, plans, etc.) on the other hand” (Van Dijk, 1998: 23).

4. Sourced from the clipping database supported by the Portuguese governmental gender institute (CIG).

5. The statistic package for the social sciences (SPSS) was the program used for this content analysis.

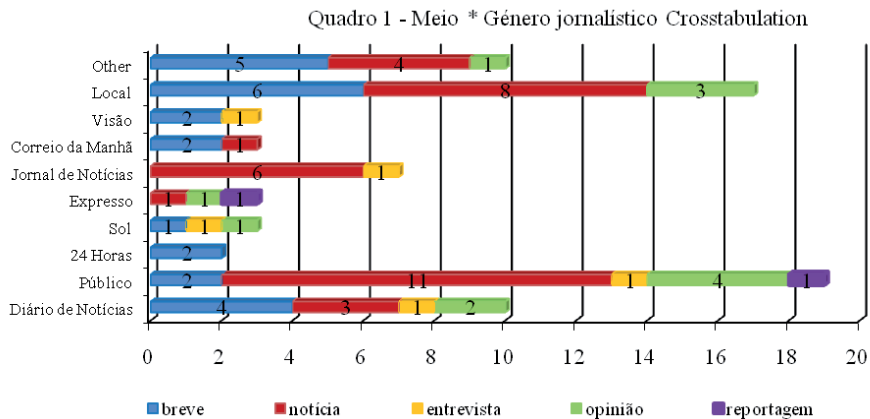
Results

Systematic analysis of the journalistic coverage

A considerable part of the Congress’s media coverage emerges from national quality newspaper *Público* (25%). The journalist São José de Almeida signed 12 pieces and Sofia Branco 4. It should be noted that both these journalists often cover for *Público* women’s situation in Portugal, and both embrace a public commitment towards feminist cause.

Also relevant is the coverage performed by daily quality newspaper *Diário de Notícias* with 10 pieces (3 of which signed by Patrícia Jesus) and the daily “popular quality” *Jornal de Notícias*, with 7 pieces (3 of the 6 news signed by Alexandra Marques).

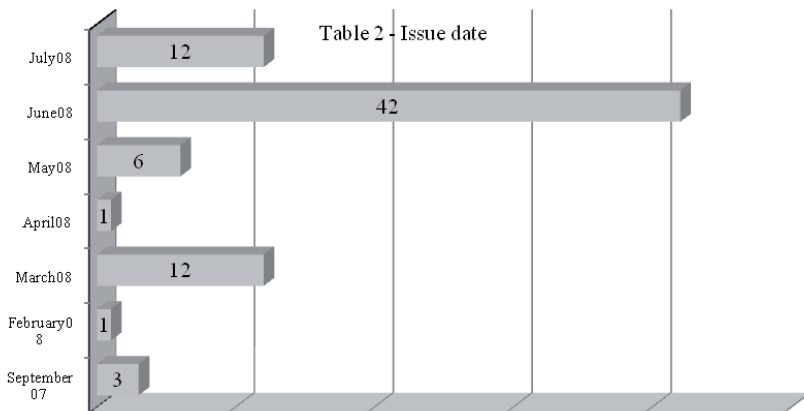
Another relevant feature is the attention given to the event by local newspapers, amounting to 17 pieces. One of the main focus pointed out was “Rota dos Feminismos” (Path of Feminisms), an itinerary initiative that took place between the 7th and the 9th March and aimed to discuss the feminist movement and to promote the conference. This topic was able to attract media attention (11 articles).



It should also be noted that only 8 authors are male, while the remaining 36 pieces with identified authors are signed by women (47%)⁶.

6. Out of the 77 pieces, 33 lack an identified author.

Most of the articles were published in June and also March, traditionally related to the promotion of equal opportunities between men and women and to reports on the situation of women in Portugal and abroad.



The coverage focuses on some particular conference panels, such as the one dedicated to “feminism and political power”, which included several female MPs, or the final conference, where the Secretary of State Jorge Lacão intervened. Parallel events were also mentioned in 10% of the articles.

The conference offered an opportunity to discuss feminism and women’s rights, which were the main issue (23%). The congress provided an opportunity to bring up the history of feminist movement in Portugal and to remember some of its most prominent personalities. Also, several pieces remembered the past and current struggles on for full and real gender equality in different fields.

Activists had a leading role in this public discussion (43%). The only male activist with voice was Javier Robles Andrades, from Spanish AHIGE – Asociación de Hom- bres por la Igualdad de Género. Members of parliament also had an active voice in Portuguese media (22%). As for male political actors, Jorge Lacão was the only man with an active voice.

The academia also had an important role both in the congress and in the media (15%).

As already noticed, women were dominant actors, both as the authors ant the voices of the analyzed articles (87%).

Ideological analysis of the journalistic coverage

Such analysis is based on a purposive sampling of 26 items related to the 3rd Feminist Congress. The *subcorpus* combines opinion with informative journalistic discourses, selected for containing external opinions and statements on ideas of feminism.

Throughout all the pieces feminism was broadly approached from two perspectives: from a general point of view, focusing on equality matters and their repercussion in different sectors of public and private life; and from a more thematically circumscribed view, focusing on more specific aspects, such as religion and work, or questioning models of masculinity.

This discursive analysis allowed us to consider two sets of issues:

a) To understand the broad consensus on the “values” that guide journalistic activity, essentially to verify the degree of distancing / proximity between the promoters of the event and its symbolic producers. This analysis focuses especially on the discursive structure of news stories.

b) To unveil the ideological dominant ideas of feminism that run across news stories, which may be closer to liberal or radical feminism.

We argue, on one hand, that the 3rd Feminist Congress included, in its preparation stage, communication strategies aimed towards attracting media projection and this basic mediation stood out as a fundamental piece to fulfil the goals of the organizers: to give visibility to the feminist movement, to reintroduce the discussion on its relevance in the Portuguese society at its current stage, to pull it out of its marginalized and *ghettoed* state. On the other hand, we argue that journalists reproduce the ideological framings of the promoters of the event, which in fact are reinforced in opinion articles.

It is the identity of feminism that is revisited 80 years after the 2nd Feminist Congress. For this purpose, feminists and feminism are given an historical depth, deconstructed or corrected in their distortions, based on crude stereotypes that make up public perceptions. This is accomplished by forging a narrative continuity to feminist movement between the first years of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, consolidating it through historical legitimacy. This symbolic formation is complemented by personalization devices, evoking some of its key-figures in different historical moments (Elina Guimarães in the decade of 20, Maria Lamas in the decade of 40, Madalena Barbosa after the 25th of April 1974, among many others). On the other side, there are small micro-narratives of feminism which are more isolated and less domi-

nant as key representations, even though they might express important issues within feminism.

To promote the Congress is “*almost a historical duty*”, as Luísa Meireles writes in *Expresso* (31-05-08), quoting the organization. “*Feminism comes out of the closet after 80 years*” is the title of a special report on the event that *Diário de Notícias* publishes on the 26th of June. It is the historical perspective that underlines the opening paragraph of this set of articles: “*Eight decades since the last Congress, the movement wants to show that it is in good shape*”; the activists’ refuse to “*throw away the historical struggle of their predecessors*”. *Diário de Notícias* evokes photographically the first and the second Feminist Congresses, and its captions locate them in the “*Golden Age of feminism*”.

Despite the incomparability of their contexts, a continuous timeline is drawn between congresses, as if these had proceeded from the same thrush. The origins of Portuguese feminist movement go back to the republican period and this diachronic history is legitimized by the authoritative and specialized voices of historians. The organizers rescue and demand this inheritance, even though the root of the feminist conscience was made up by other issues, which essentially identified the first wave of feminism. In spite of the fact that in the first years of the twentieth century feminism was openly discussed in the republican press, the pioneers of the movement, this “*elite of women*”, experience the first phase of its decline.

After all, “*where did the feminists go during the last 80 years*”, a question raised by weekly newsmagazine *Visão* on the 3rd of July, in an interview to the president of UMAR, Elisabete Brazil. The answer was: “*They were around. Actually there was never an organization to move the congress forward. And there was a loss of historical memory largely due to the dictatorship (...). The first associations of women only appeared after April 25th*” (*Visão*, 3rd July 2008).

Evoking the Feminist Congresses - or its “*revival*” (according to *Diário de Notícias*, 26th June 2008) makes sense, not as a mere reconstruction of historical memory, but to assert the social role of feminist thought and action. João Gomes Esteves recognizes what “*today it is very difficult to discuss feminism in Portugal because it is associated to minorities and marginal groups*” (quoted in *Público* 26th June 2008).

The opportunity of the Congress is thus grasped to re-situate feminism in its present and future time. In *Expresso* (31st May 2008), Luísa Meireles states: “*No! This time, women will not burn bras. Not all of them are ugly and much less Lesbians*” (*Expresso*).

The feminist movement wants “to reintroduce *the discussion of the issue in the Portuguese society*” (DN, 26th of June). *Público* also emphasizes this opening framework: the Feminist Congress calls upon “*a large pool of people*”, “*people of several origins and ideologies*”, who accepted to debate the issue “*far from stereotypes and prejudices on what feminism is*” (*Público*, 26-06-08).

Eight decades later, why does feminism still makes sense? And what paths must it follow? According to *Público* (26-06-08), “*today the causes and issues of feminism are multiple*”. The weekly *Expresso* (31-05-08) summarizes the current feminism agenda evoking domestic violence, equality in work positions and salaries, poverty, prostitution, leadership and sexual orientation.

In a comparative analysis, in the plan of construction of the news items, *Diário de Notícias*, *Jornal de Notícias* and *Público* (26-06-08) adopt a common scheme: the gathering of testimonies and opinions by “activists”, “women” and other protagonists (of both sexes, but especially feminine ones) on these questions. Consensus comes across these declarations - and this consensus is reflected upon informative speech itself (the “voice” of journalists). JN is the only newspaper which, in this panoply of testimonies, inserts a “*dissonant voice*”, framing it as such. While it introduces this alternative point of view it shows a certain surprise for this exception in the ritual of celebration of consensus. “*There is still a long way to go, say the women heard by JN, with the exception of an ex-minister*” (JN, 26-06-08).

The remaining opinions point towards a single direction: feminism is urgent and a necessity, the past is yet to be fulfilled. Equality is the key concept of the 3rd Feminist Congress, following a diagnosis of the persistence of inequalities of rights. “*Feminism is to fight for all equalities*”, is the title of JN (26-06-08), which notes that the Feminist Congress will evoke “*existing discriminations in school, in work and in sexuality*”. The flag of the equality is also chosen by *Público* (26-06-08): “*there are many feminisms but rights are not questionable*”, the diary says: feminist movement makes sense in the preservation of the rights conquered by women.

Other micro-narratives of a more secondary nature are associated to news coverage of the Feminist Congress.

Political identity of feminism: the idea that feminism is politically left-bound largely prevails, although other political lines of thought have also attempted some degree of association.

Feminism as a plural movement: feminism claims to hold a plural identity but the representation of feminism that prevails is nonetheless still a rather non-pluralistic

one. One can detect a certain lack of ability of media and society as a whole to deal with the new topics of feminism. In the mentioned interview to *Visão*, Elisabete Vilar answers the question on what did come out of this congress by claiming that it stood as “[a] briefing of what we have been doing throughout all this time. And also a path, which arises from our interpretation of how 2nd and 3^d wave feminisms come together” (*Visão*, 3rd July). The magazine reporter insists: “What does that mean?”.

The consolidation of the identity of feminism depends on the dismissal of the view of feminism as a merely politically correct line of speech, which in a certain way damages its efficiency. But from our analysis we may conclude that, apart from some isolated cases, the media did not focus on the current micro-narratives of the third generation of feminist. The 3rd feminist congress has not been deemed the right moment to publicly reflect on the new identities of the feminist subject. The media public sphere on the 3rd Portuguese Congress did not confirm the visibility of some of the major theoretical dilemmas of contemporary feminism as explained above.

The voices of the protagonists external to the source of enunciation keep on denouncing a certain elitism (they come mainly from writers, journalists, investigators and MPs) and certain isolation from ideological and gender diversity (near complete absence of male voices). *Público* was the only newspaper to create a news-piece exclusively based on testimonials by male protagonists, within the dossier that anticipated the news coverage of the event. In result of the typical labelling of the feminist struggle as a women’s issue, the involvement of men in the cause seems to be symbolically valued as evidence of the relevance of such topics to both genders. Also in 1924 the later-President Bernardino Machado, presenting himself as a “as teacher, politician and minister”, declared to be “an old soldier of Feminism, quoting his own work in favour of it at the time of the monarchy and the new regime” (*Diário de Notícias*, 05-05-1924). However, no sign of controversy or even the faintest hint of discussion can be spotted amidst the actors with a “voice” throughout the texts.

About the journalists’ voice, the “tone” of news coverage clearly favours the feminist cause and even a certain ideological view on how it should be interpreted, thus denouncing a certain degree of involvement and even commitment of the authors (or rather the female authors) of the articles. The discursive features evidence narrators’ subjectivity and lack of distance and criticism. The views of the protagonists of news pieces are easily converted into facts and informational frames. The analysis reveals an overlap of ‘news interest’ of the event and the communication strategy of its organizers. This proximity is, in fact, also found in the coverage of the first feminist con-

gress: the press was mentioned by the journalist as a relevant actor, being worthy of “a vibrant applause” at the start of the closing session (*Diário de Notícias*, 10-05-24).

Discursive analysis – Linguistic threads

In what follows, we focus on particular pieces of texts and their components in order to gain a deeper insight into how this was done:

The **titles** of the pieces feature different qualities but can be grouped in broad sets that point to particular ideological stands.

One group of titles recovers textual statements: “*Enough of paternalistic speeches*” (signed by Ana Drago, *Sol*, 07th June 2008) or “*Feminism is one of the most potentially revolutionary movements*” (Sofia Branco, *Público*, 28th June 2008).

Echoing the voice of others in titles enables authorial distance: the journalist distances him/herself from what is said (someone else said it) and yet he/she chooses to underline it through this sort of projection of particular arguments.

A second group of titles is located at the edge of the expectable in relation to the covered issues. From the link of the congress with a historical past emerges an understanding of feminism as a process in time, in line with the macro-narratives identified for news items.

Metaphors serve this purpose well. Thus feminism is portrayed as a process through orientation, travel and battle metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980): “*Women step forward in the conquest of rights*”, “*Feminism is to fight for all equalities*” (respectively Sandra da Silva Gonçalves, *Diário Cidade*, 03-07-08 and Alexandra Marques, *JN*, 26-06-08). The verb ellipsis also serves this strategy, linking it to the above mentioned distancing: “*Feminists, 80 years later*” (*Visão*, 03-07-08). In 1924 Bernardino Machado also used combat images to encourage action in some claims that remain present in the Portuguese society: “Women will not misuse the right to vote and must fight in all fields for their benefits” (*Diário de Notícias*, 10-05-24).

The prejudice and mythical dimension of the past is also recalled in the engagement of the self-image of feminism with prejudice and derogation of their unspecified opponents: “*Feminists will not burn bras*”, (Luísa Meireles, *Expresso*, 31-05-08) or “*Who’s afraid of feminists?*” (Katya Delimbeuf, *Expresso*, 28-06-08).

A third group of titles allow us to see the articulation of feminism with gender and identity politics: “*Feminism comes out at the end of 80 years*”, “*Is Portugal still a coun-*

try run by trousers?” (Patrícia Jesus, *DN*, 26-06-08), *“Chicks’ stuff”* (São José Almeida, *Público*, 28-06-08).

The first title bears on the expression *come out* is connoted with the gay sexual orientation or gender identity and here it assumes a revivalist semantic tone given by the span of 80 years. In the second title we find the symbolic value of the piece of clothing once of the exclusive use by man. As for *“Chicks’ stuff”*, the approximate translation for *“Coisas de Gajas”*, it molds prejudices often found towards feminism and / or feminists. Its clearly derogatory tone is stressed by the dysphonic play of the names Chicks and Stuff - the first a slang term, the second being semantically emptied by its generic character.

Some opinion texts live on the engaged **voice** of the journalist, who expresses opinions and value judgments about the matters. It is the case of São José Almeida who, in the opinion articles *“Inequality is not a fatalism”* and in *“Chicks’ stuff”*, uses adjectival and/or adverbial expressions bearing a heavy semantic load: *“The low status of women in Portugal is appalling...”*, *“In Portugal, the women are rarely understood as individuals - neither by the public powers, nor by the ruling elites”*, *“elites are sexist and discriminatory towards women”*, *“In Portugal we have a seriously discriminatory situation for women”*.

Whereas only a handful of journalists within the Portuguese press sign opinion articles, the author of these two texts is by far the one who wrote more on the Congress (12 items of the total of 19 in *Público*). This is therefore a case of an exceptional engagement of a woman-journalist who holds the power within the paper to report and to issue opinions on the issue she is covering. Her voice is an authoritative one.

More educational than assertive is the tone taken by Inês Pedrosa who, in the opinion piece *“Curso Breve”* (*DN - Notícias Magazine*, 06-07-08), sets out to give 7 lessons to the unspecified ignorant, *“those who think little (...) in particular on what concerns women”*. A question (*“understood?”*) closes the text, underlining its pedagogic tone and by which the author assumes an authoritative and somewhat impatient position on a long-repeated and never learnt knowledge.

On **lexical choices and arguments**, beside the natural verbal abundance typical of the lexical field of gender, many texts are punctually marked by semantically stronger or more marked choices that point out to violence on women and their unjust suffering, making it communicatively more visible. This is the case of *“feminine genital mu-*

tilation", "women ... beaten up", "gender violence", "constant hassle and tiredness", "overwork ... the load that turns the life of the Portuguese women into a stifling intersection", "17 women were murdered", "trafficked and prostitute", "lapidation, genital excision, extreme poverty, trafficking in women and the abortion keep on being a problem", "women are seen from a bovine point of view, as reproducers".

The texts extend the communicative strategy we find in titles: the recall and re-contextualization of old stereotypes and prejudices translated into clichés. Some of the analyzed pieces are argumentative bits built upon more or less "classic" rhetorical strategies. Such is the case of *"chicks' stuff"*: it opens with a fact (one street of Lisbon being named after Maria de Lourdes Pintassilgo), leading to news about the Feminist Congress (*"where the ex-prime minister would certainly have a distinguished place"*); presents some central issues of feminism, supported by the force of numbers and examples and it concludes with the observation that the country lives *"a seriously discriminatory situation for women, perpetuated by a mentality that holds that women exist in order to have and to raise children"*, that is offensive of human rights – *"for the rights of women are human rights"* –, which shows the urgency of changing the *status quo*. Otherwise, one might as well approve the provocative challenge put forth by Ana Vicente: *"otherwise, let's be consequent and say that women are inferior to men"*.

Concerning **intertextuality and dialogue**, the concept of a fundamental dialogue within the discourse, at the core of Bakhtin's theory, is clearly present in the analyzed texts. As Gunhild Agger (1999) recalls, "in media studies, the conception of language as fundamentally dialogic proves useful for purposes of close analysis". Its significance can be explored in two opinion pieces signed by two men, coincidentally both named Miguel: Sousa Tavares e Portas: "My ladies" e "Women", respectively (Expresso and Sol, 2008-06-28).

The first text, the only opinion column in the analyzed *corpus* that deliberately sets against feminism and the Congress, is addressed to *the ladies*, in a paternalistic bonhomie; the second text addresses men in particular, presenting to them the situation of women, in an exhortative tone: "Men, for one minute only, put yourselves in the shoes of women".

In spite of the coincidence of dates, Portas answers (even unknowingly) the questions of Tavares: *"what justifies the Congress, what does it propose to discuss?"* And all the linguistic strategies that support "My ladies" are emptied before "Women": the verbal manoeuvre of entrenchment which Tavares was prophesying for himself

“the usual sorrows ... insults, slanderous insinuations and the usual anonymous rumours”; the ironic Gentleman-like manners with which he presented himself as *“food for the cannons of to the 3rd Portuguese Feminist Congress ... which, as we know, lacks available animals-men to test the bullets”*; even the unfortunate comparison of women with *“the handicapped and chronic patients, those of other race, the foreign émigré or those over 45”*, or some references of dubious taste (such as *“Zezé Camarinha”*) – all seem ineffective and, in certain ways, even *“harmless”*, when placed in intertextual dialogue with the clarity, linguistic efficiency and intelligent elegance of Miguel Portas’ text.

Final remarks

As final remarks concerning the media coverage of the 3rd Feminist Congress, we can point out the pre-planned nature of the event (explicit intended media projection and visibility) and the ability to set the agenda within quality press and local newspapers. Historical background and feminism as an urgent and necessary discourse for present and future is the clear macro-narrative of media representation of this single event. Liberal conception of feminism is dominant and shadows the focus on other feminist conceptions or on the main contemporary dilemmas faced by the movement. We also observed a less diversity in external voices (lack of gender diversity and mainly political and intellectual elite of women). Such external voices precisely celebrate a consensus around the dominant conception of feminism. We must also point out the apparent journalistic commitment with the feminist cause maybe regarding the fact that the authors of media texts were mainly female. We finally register the tendency for overlapped journalistic interest assessment and promoters goals.

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