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Towards a Parity Democracy: The Case of Spain as Inspiration for Political Equality in Europe

Ángela Paloma Martín Fernández

Espacio METIS, Gabinete de Liderazgo Público
Universidad Carlos III de Madrid

Abstract

Spain has become a European benchmark for political gender equality thanks to pioneering legislative reforms, such as the 2007 Equality Law and the recently adopted 2024 Parity Representation Law, which now guarantee gender-alternating electoral lists at all levels of political representation. These advances have placed Spain among the leading countries in political parity, demonstrating that progress is possible when there is political will and social commitment. Despite ongoing challenges, such as gender disparities in candidate selection for local and regional elections, the Spanish experience shows that these barriers can be overcome with genuine determination. This paper proposes translating the key elements of the Spanish model to the European level: binding legislation, enforcement mechanisms, political leadership programmes, and strategies to address emerging challenges such as electoral campaigning, media representation of women politicians, and the impact of artificial intelligence on political communication. Drawing on the experiences of Lithuania and Belgium, this paper proposes a common European framework to continue advancing towards truly transformative feminist leadership – ensuring not only that women gain access to power, but that they are fully empowered to exercise it.

1. Context

Spain's path toward women's political participation spans centuries of history. In the early 20th century, the fight against widespread discrimination led to key milestones that marked a turning point – such as the recognition in 1931 of women's right to stand for election, and, thanks to the leadership of Clara Campoamor, the achievement of women's suffrage, first exercised in the 1933 elections. Despite the setback caused by the Spanish Civil War and the Franco dictatorship, women returned to politics in 1977. During the Constituent Legislature that marked the beginning of Spain's democratic era, 27 women were elected, playing a crucial role in drafting the 1978 democratic Constitution, which remains in force today.

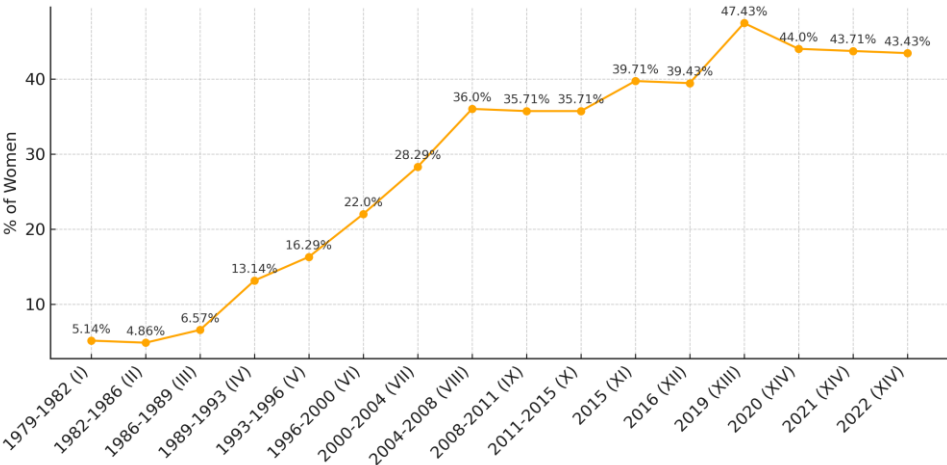
1.1 Legislative Framework

Article 14 of the Spanish Constitution of 1978 laid the foundation for the principle of equality and non-discrimination in Spanish democracy by stating:

"Spaniards are equal before the law, and no discrimination may prevail on grounds of birth, race, sex, religion, opinion, or any other personal or social condition or circumstance."

However, it was not until 2007 that Spain took a decisive step towards real equality with the adoption of the **Organic Law 3/2007 on Effective Equality between Women and Men**. This landmark legislation gave concrete expression to the constitutional principle by establishing the mandatory use of gender-balanced electoral lists, whereby neither sex may exceed 60% nor fall below 40%, both in the list as a whole and within each block of five candidates. In doing so, Spain translated the constitutional mandate of equality into its electoral system, driving forward significant progress that has positioned the country as a European leader in political gender parity.

Table 1: Evolution of Women’s Representation in the Spanish Parliament (1979-2022)



Source: Women’s Institute, Ministry of Equality (2024)

The 2007 Equality Law was promoted by the government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party – PSOE), whose 2004 electoral programme explicitly committed to forming a gender-balanced government. This commitment became a reality in April 2004 when Zapatero appointed Spain’s first gender-balanced cabinet, with eight women and eight men leading ministerial departments. This milestone, along with the widespread adoption of zipper lists, contributed to increasing women’s parliamentary representation. However, the law lacks enforcement mechanisms, meaning there are no penalties for non-compliance.

This parity model was maintained and strengthened by Pedro Sánchez, who formed gender-balanced governments in 2018, 2020, and again in 2023, consolidating Spain's leadership in gender parity at the highest levels of executive power. Furthermore, for the first time in Spain's history, all four vice-presidencies were held by women, positioning Spain as the sixth country in the world with the highest proportion of women in government, and the fourth in the European Union (Presidency of the Government, 2021).

In 2024, Spain introduced another major advancement with the **Organic Law 2/2024 of 1 August on Parity Representation and Gender-Balanced Participation**. This law amended several legal frameworks and transposed EU Directive 2022/2381, which aims to improve gender balance on corporate boards. In the political sphere, this new legislation seeks to guarantee effective women's representation by making zipper lists mandatory for elections at all levels: Congress of Deputies, Senate, European Parliament, Regional parliaments, Municipal councils, Island councils and assemblies. The law also extends the gender-balance requirement to high-level and senior positions within the General State Administration, such as: Secretaries of State, Undersecretaries, Directors-General of each ministry, to be implemented within the next five years. This obligation applies to all entities within the state's public sector.

1.2 Other Specific Measures

In addition to the milestone represented by the **adoption of Organic Law 2/2024 of 1 August**, Spain has implemented several **specific measures**, including:

- **Collection and analysis of data on women's political participation:** The *Women in Figures* database includes a section dedicated to "Power and Decision-Making", which is also reflected in the annual publication "Women and Men in Spain", jointly produced with the National Statistics Institute (INE).
- **ELLAS+ Programme for the political and economic empowerment of women and girls, promoted by Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID):** Launched in 2023, the ELLAS+ Programme aims to boost and accelerate women's participation and leadership at all levels of political, economic, social, and cultural decision-making. Each year, this programme invites proposals from states, NGOs, and multi-actor alliances seeking to contribute to Target 5.5 of the 2030 Agenda, which calls for the full and effective participation of women and equal leadership opportunities at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life.
- **Study on political gender-based violence:** In 2022, the Government Delegation against Gender-Based Violence published a qualitative exploratory study to analyse gender-based political violence in Spain, with the aim of raising awareness of the issue and informing future debates and potential legislation.
- **Third Strategic Plan for Effective Equality between Women and Men 2022–2025 (PEIEMH):** Approved on 8 March 2022, this strategic plan is the main policy instrument used by the Spanish Government to guide the institutional and social transformations needed to advance gender equality.

Additionally, Spain has taken significant steps in addressing disinformation, strengthening the digital and media ecosystem with the aim of protecting our democracy against the threats posed by an increasingly powerful industry—one that particularly affects women in politics, especially during electoral campaigns and when they are the candidates themselves. These forces distort their leadership by projecting a public image that is far from what these women intend to share or represent. These measures, which can be considered indirect, include:

- **Action Plan for Democracy**, aimed at expanding and improving the quality of governmental information, strengthening media transparency, pluralism and accountability, protecting journalists, promoting various legislative reforms to ensure courts can respond swiftly and effectively to defamation published in media or pseudo-media outlets, and enhancing transparency in both the Legislative Power and the electoral system.
- **At the 2025 World Economic Forum in Davos**, the Prime Minister of Spain, Pedro Sánchez, proposed a series of measures to regulate the impact of social media and digital platforms, aligning their responsibilities with those of traditional media. These initiatives seek to reinforce transparency, accountability, and the protection of citizens' digital rights. Key proposals include: eliminating anonymity on social media, opening and auditing platform algorithms, introducing criminal liability for platform executives, enhancing oversight through Spain's National Commission for Markets and Competition (CNMC) and the European Centre for Algorithmic Transparency, and integrating digital literacy education in schools through the "Código Escuela 4.0" programme.
- **Draft bill on democratic governance of digital services**, which includes the creation of a media registry. Its goal is to ensure greater accountability and transparency of digital platforms.
- **Draft bill on collective actions**, which strengthens mechanisms to protect citizens' rights against potential abuses, including in the digital sphere.

2. Current representation

Below are key figures on women's political representation in Spain (Ministry of Equality, 2024):

- In 2024, women held 44.54% of seats in the Congress of Deputies and 42.79% in the Senate.
- Regarding women's participation in the Government, by the end of 2024, 11 out of the 23 ministries and vice-presidencies were held by women, representing 47.8% female representation in the Council of Ministers. Notably, all three Vice-Presidents in Spain are women.

- In December 2024, the percentage of women in executive positions within political parties increased compared to the previous year, reaching 49.5%, up from 45.7% in 2023. When analysing each party individually and considering the gender balance requirement set by the Equality Law, all political parties met this criterion in 2024, except for EAJ-PNV (30.8%) and Coalición Canaria (27.3%) in their executive committees.
- Although the average percentage of women in regional parliaments remains below 50%, since 2007 it has consistently exceeded 40%, the threshold defined by the Equality Law as balanced representation. Following the 2024 regional elections held in several Autonomous Communities, the average share of women in these regional parliaments stood at 46.9%.
- Women currently hold 50% of Spain's 60 seats in the European Parliament. In the third quarter of 2024, the average share of women in national parliaments across the 27 EU Member States stood at 33.3%. In Spain, this percentage reached 44.7%, representing an increase of 0.4 percentage points compared to the previous year, placing Spain in third position among all EU countries.

Spain once again ranks among the **top ten countries worldwide in gender parity**, according to the Global Gender Gap Report of the World Economic Forum in Davos. Spain had already reached this position in 2007, and now ranks in the top ten for the third time (8th place in 2019). Since the previous edition, Spain has climbed eight positions, a positive shift mainly driven by strengthened political leadership parity and modest improvements in economic opportunity indicators. Despite never having had a woman as Head of State, Spain has narrowed its Political Empowerment gap to 49.4%, achieving full gender parity in ministerial positions (100%) and growing parliamentary parity (79.5% in 2024, up from 73.6% in 2023). According to the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), in its 2020 Gender Equality Index, Spain ranked 8th in the European Union with 72 out of 100 points, standing 4.1 points above the EU average (EIGE, 2020). In the 2024 edition, Spain advanced to 4th place, with the report highlighting: *“Germany, Spain, Luxembourg and Austria are performing better than the EU average and are advancing faster on gender equality, widening the gap with the EU”* (EIGE, 2024).

3. Obstacles

Despite the legal and institutional progress achieved in Spain, several obstacles still limit the full and effective participation of women in political leadership. Among them is the underrepresentation of women in top executive positions at local and regional levels, as women are often excluded from leading electoral lists.

In the research I conducted in 2022 (Martín Fernández, 2022), women politicians identified gendered expectations related to **care responsibilities** as another major barrier to advancing their political careers. Additionally, the **unequal treatment of women in the media**, which often focuses on their appearance or personal lives rather than their political leadership, makes it difficult for the public (especially on social media) to perceive them as truly transformative political leaders. Internal dynamics within political parties remain a significant barrier, as women face opaque

structures, limited access to decision-making spaces, and often hold only symbolic representation on electoral lists (Pitkin, 2014). **Electoral campaigns**, typically designed around male-centered strategies, tend to reinforce stereotypes and pose yet another obstacle for women. Moreover, campaign strategies are often based on stereotyped assumptions (Lippmann, 2003). These challenges are further compounded by the increasing use of **artificial intelligence in electoral campaigns**, which can amplify gender biases if not properly regulated. Finally, there is a lack of **support for women once they leave political office**, leaving them professionally isolated and unrecognized, which discourages sustained political careers. These challenges call for comprehensive strategies at both national and European levels to ensure that women not only gain access to power but are also able to exercise it effectively and sustainably. As Europeans, we should be concerned that, since 2022, four prominent women leaders have stepped down or been removed from office (regardless of the specific reasons for their departure): Magdalena Andersson (Sweden), Liz Truss (United Kingdom), Nicola Sturgeon (Scotland), and Élisabeth Borne (France). To this list, I would add Jacinda Ardern (New Zealand).

4. Conclusions

Spain can arguably be considered a role model in terms of gender equality. The debate over quotas, for instance, is something the country moved beyond years ago. That said, challenges remain—particularly in ensuring equal representation of women across all regions and within political party structures. It is also worth noting that Spain has never had a female president. Nonetheless, gender parity in political representation has largely been achieved. The real challenge now lies in sustaining this progress in the face of emerging threats, particularly disinformation.

Three key concerns deserve greater attention. First, as noted above, **territorial representation** remains a common challenge across EU countries: more women are needed in regional and local leadership roles, such as mayors and regional presidents. Second, **disinformation and digital violence**, which disproportionately affect women in politics. When a woman is not perceived as a strong leader, political parties often choose to marginalise her instead of addressing the root cause. Third, an issue that remains insufficiently addressed: **mental health**.

We cannot expect to inspire new generations of female leaders if those already in office end up resigning—like the last four European women heads of government (five, if we include New Zealand)—or if they publicly admit that “they can’t take it anymore.” When this happens, it sends a disheartening message to future women leaders, who may begin to question whether the cost is too high.

A critical yet often overlooked issue is how to manage the “after”: what happens when women leave political life, whether by choice or at the end of their term. Frequently, they are left with fragmented personal lives and limited support mechanisms to reintegrate into society or transition to new professional paths. Without addressing this gap, there is a risk of creating a political pipeline that successfully brings women into politics—only to leave them unsupported once they exit the public arena.

4.1 Possible Measures to Consider at the European Level

- **Establish Effective Monitoring and Sanction Mechanisms**
Establish effective mechanisms for monitoring and sanctioning to ensure compliance with gender quotas and *zipper* (alternating) candidate lists in political parties across all Member States—not only in the private sector, but also in electoral and political processes at all levels.
- **Address Gender-Based Political Violence as a European Legislative Priority.**
 - Explore the possibility of formally recognising gender-based political violence within European law.
 - Promote the development of a **European Directive on Gender-Based Political Violence**, similar to the recently adopted Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence (2024).
- **Scale Up Political Empowerment Programmes Across the EU**
 - Expand the **ELLAS+ Programme** at the European level as a replicable model to promote women's political and economic leadership across all EU Member States.
 - Finance a **European Network of Women's Political Leadership Schools/Academies** to support women throughout the three key phases of their political careers: **entry (before), tenure (during), and transition (after)**.
- **Establish a European Observatory on Gender Equality in Electoral Campaigns.** Consider creating a European Observatory on Gender Equality in Electoral Campaigns to monitor the impact of stereotypes, media treatment, and communication strategies on women candidates across Member States.
- **Develop Common Guidelines for European Media.** Propose common European action guidelines for media outlets to address and prevent the sexualisation, sexist treatment, and discouraging narratives that deter women from participating in politics.
- **Promote Female Leadership at Local and Regional Levels.** Advance specific European recommendations to promote women's leadership in local and regional governments, where gender gaps remain the widest. One example could be the mandatory application of gender quotas for lead candidates (heads of lists) in local and regional elections.

4.2 Transferability of Good Practices

The introduction of *lead candidate quotas* (as proposed by Belgium) or the *public monitoring of parity results* in each election (as suggested by Lithuania) could be additional measures to consider in Spain, particularly to break the glass ceiling in

regional and local governments, where women's representation remains stagnant, with fewer than 20% of mayorships held by women.

In addition, the following proposals are put forward:

- **Move from voluntary recommendations to binding legislation**, following Spain's example with the Equality Act of 2007 and the Parity Representation Act of 2024, which establish clear criteria and legal obligations.
- **Introduce sanctions or effective monitoring mechanisms for political parties to ensure compliance with gender quotas**. This remains a gap in Spain that should be addressed across the EU to guarantee not only the effectiveness of quotas but also fair internal treatment of women in politics, including measures on work-life balance, time management, psychological support, and professional development.
- **Strengthen local and municipal leadership by women**, particularly in Lithuania, where only 6 out of 60 municipalities are led by women, and in Belgium, where local executive bodies remain predominantly male. The Spanish experience shows that local governance is where the gender gap is most significant, requiring targeted policies.
- **Develop comprehensive support programmes for women leaders during and after their political careers** to prevent their silent exit or the negative personal impact often experienced after leaving office. This Spanish proposal could serve as a pioneering initiative across Europe.
- **Explore the regulation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in electoral campaigns from a gender perspective**, addressing a challenge already identified in Spain that is likely to emerge across the EU, to prevent AI from amplifying gender biases, discrimination, or disinformation targeting women candidates.

Annex

A Brief Historical Perspective

At the beginning of the 20th century, Spain was marked by deep political, educational, labour, and legal inequalities that severely disadvantaged women, who were fully subordinated to the economic and social system of the time. However, this reality laid the groundwork for the development of gender consciousness, which gradually gained strength (Arenal, 2019).

The 1931 general elections, held on 28 June, were the first conducted under a reformed electoral system, following the Decree of 8 May 1931, which amended the 1907 Electoral Law (El Socialista, 1931). For the first time, the Congress of Deputies became the sole chamber, with 470 seats. However, only men were granted active voting rights, while women had **passive suffrage**, meaning they could stand for election but not vote.

Twenty-eight parties gained parliamentary representation. Among them, the parties with the most seats were: The Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), The Radical Republican Party (PRR), The Radical Socialist Republican Party (PRRS), Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC), Republican Action Party (AR), The Progressive Republican Party (originally the Liberal Republican Right, DLR).

These elections marked the beginning of Spain's **Constituent Assembly**, which, for the first time in history, included **three women Members of Parliament**: **Clara Campoamor**, from the Radical Republican Party; **Victoria Kent**, from the Radical Socialist Republican Party; **Margarita Nelken**, from the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party.

Clara Campoamor ran on a feminist platform advocating for **women's right to vote, reproductive rights, divorce legislation, children's rights, paternity investigations**, and the **abolition of the death penalty** (Campoamor, 2006). She was the **only woman among the 21 members** of the **Constitutional Committee** tasked with drafting Spain's new Constitution. Thanks to her efforts, **women's right to vote was approved on 1 October 1931** and was exercised for the **first time in 1933**.

However, during the Franco dictatorship (1939–1975), combined with the rise of fascism and the outbreak of World War II, the progress made by women was virtually erased. Women's public and political roles were suppressed, and they were once again confined to the domestic sphere as so-called "*angels of the home*" (Nash, 2006), a situation that lasted until Spain's democratic transition.

In **1977**, during Spain's return to democracy, **27 women** (21 Members of Parliament and 6 Senators) were elected to serve in the **Constituent Legislature (1977–1979)**, becoming known as "**Las Constituyentes**". These women, along with their male colleagues, were tasked with the **historic responsibility of drafting the 1978 Spanish Constitution**, which remains in force today and enshrines the **dignity, rights, and duties** of all citizens in a democratic society.

Measures for Gender Equality in Political Parties

Verge (2006) identifies three types of internal strategies used by political parties to promote the inclusion of more women on their electoral lists: Rhetorical strategies, Positive action, Affirmative action (positive discrimination). These strategies have been implemented by three of Spain's major democratic-era political parties: United Left (IU), Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), People's Party (PP).

For example, the Communist Party of Spain (PCE), while operating underground during the dictatorship, already had a Women's Committee. Later, IU established the Women's Area, responsible for debating and promoting initiatives on women's issues. Similarly, from the constitutional period onwards, the PSOE created the Women and Socialism Committee (1977), later establishing the Women's Participation Secretariat in 1985, which was renamed the Equality Secretariat in 2000.

Verge (2006) also analysed the amendments made to party statutes to strengthen women's presence both in internal leadership structures and in public representation. As previously mentioned, on 23 January 1988, the PSOE introduced a 25% gender quota, promoted by the Women's Secretariat, then led by Matilde Fernández, with the support of Carmen Romero and Felipe González. In 1989, IU introduced its own gender quota, and in 1990, it increased the quota to 35%.

Political Debate

Women Driving Change: Leaders in Spain and Europe

In January 2020, Spain's 14th parliamentary term began with the **first-ever progressive coalition government**, led by the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) and Unidas Podemos (United We Can — UP). For the first time in Spain's history, a gender-balanced cabinet was appointed, featuring four vice-presidencies—also a first. Of the 22 ministries (excluding the Prime Minister), 11 were headed by women.

Spain has benefited from the **transformative leadership** (Brown, 2018) of several prominent women, including **Carmen Calvo**, **María Jesús Montero**, **Yolanda Díaz**, **Nadia Calviño**, and **Teresa Ribera**.

A leader can hold a position, but **holding a political office does not necessarily mean holding real power** (Martín Fernández, 2020). These women not only addressed the so-called “women's issues”, such as the gender pay gap, but also demonstrated their ability to exercise political power for the benefit of society as a whole through their public policies. They embodied a feminist and exceptional leadership (Martín Fernández, 2022), and their role represents what is known as substantive representation (Pitkin, 2014).

Carmen Calvo, as Vice-President, played a key negotiating role, particularly in securing the necessary agreements to form a stable government after the two consecutive general elections held in Spain in 2019. Under her leadership, the Ministry of Equality was established as a cross-cutting portfolio, making gender equality a transversal competence across the entire government.

Yolanda Díaz also played a key role, particularly during the most critical months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Her political approach has been characterized by discretion and a strong commitment to social dialogue and consensus-building. She implemented the Temporary Employment Regulation Scheme (ERTE), a mechanism that protected workers and helped save jobs and businesses during the health crisis. During her term, several important measures were also adopted, including royal decrees on pay transparency and equal pay, aimed at closing the gender pay gap in Spain. In addition, she was the driving force behind Spain's Labour Market Reform, which significantly transformed the country's employment framework.

Nadia Calviño (Vice-President and Minister for Economic Affairs and Digital Transformation) was responsible for Spain's most important economic policies and key legislation aimed at boosting the country's economy, such as the Startups Ecosystem Promotion Law and the Crea y Crece Law, designed to support SMEs (Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises) and emerging businesses. She played a leading role in the negotiations with the European Union in July 2020 that secured the Next Generation EU recovery fund in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. She was also responsible for designing Spain's Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan, the national strategy to channel these funds and modernize the country's economy (Martín Fernández, 2022). With her Vice-Presidency, Spain also played a leading role in the development of the Artificial Intelligence Sandbox, promoted by the State Secretariat for Digitalisation and Artificial Intelligence, as well as in advancing the European Artificial Intelligence Act (AI Act), a pioneering regulatory framework in Europe, thanks to the co-leadership of a key figure, Secretary of State Carme Artigas. Today, Nadia Calviño serves as President of the European Investment Bank (EIB).

Vice-President **Teresa Ribera** also played a key role in the Socialist government of Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez. She led Spain's response to the energy crisis caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Her leadership in Europe resulted in the so-called "Iberian exception", a special energy price cap agreement between Spain and Portugal to mitigate the impact of the crisis (2022). Ribera was in charge of energy, environmental policy, and demographic challenges. Under her leadership, Spain passed the Climate Change and Energy Transition Law, as well as other key strategies for economic transformation, public health, and the green transition, including the Long-Term Decarbonization Strategy, the Energy Poverty Strategy, and the Spanish Sustainable Development Strategy (MITECO) (Martín Fernández, 2022). She is now a key European leader, holding the position of Executive Vice-President for a Clean, Just and Competitive Transition, making her the most powerful Socialist in the institution and the second in command of the European Commission.

Obstacles

Representative Democracy

Although Spain is among the European countries that have made the most progress, equality in representative democracy is still far from being achieved.

Women make up 51% of the population, yet they remain underrepresented in key public institutions. Out of Spain's 17 Autonomous Communities and 2 Autonomous

Cities, only five are currently led by women (four from conservative parties and one from the socialist party). Moreover, out of more than 8,100 municipalities, the proportion of female mayors has never exceeded 20%.

Despite the significant progress achieved, particularly with the 2007 Equality Law, the law is not being fully implemented across all levels of political representation. Even though zipper lists and gender quotas exist, parties tend to favour male candidates to lead electoral lists, especially in local and regional elections, when the leadership of a city or a region is at stake.

Other Obstacles

Based on the research I conducted in 2022 (Martín Fernández, 2022), women in politics in Spain identified several remaining barriers to gaining and exercising real political power. These obstacles are outlined below:

Personal circumstances: The politics of "care"

Family responsibilities, motherhood, childcare, elder care or care for dependent persons, and the lack of equal work-life balance mechanisms continue to disproportionately affect women. Added to this is the unequal distribution of time, where women consistently lose out in political careers because they are still expected to shoulder most of these responsibilities.

Unequal treatment in the media

Women in politics face biased media coverage that not only gives them less visibility than men, but also tends to be sexist and objectifying. Coverage often focuses more on their appearance, clothing, physique, or personal life rather than on their political agenda or leadership qualities. They are asked questions about their private lives that male politicians would never be asked. This misrepresentation in the media distorts public perception of female leaders and undermines their credibility. Many women report that the hostility and public scrutiny, especially online abuse and social media harassment, can be so intense that they either reconsider running for office or leave politics altogether (N. Fernández, 2012).

Their Own Political Parties

Political parties offer a pathway to leadership, but at the same time, they are often one of the main barriers for women seeking to exercise real political power. Although women politicians acknowledge that parties have played a facilitating role in providing access to leadership positions (Martín Fernández, 2022), they also point to persistent structural obstacles within the parties themselves. Women report that party structures lack transparency, decision-making spaces are not accessible, and the unequal distribution of time prevents them from being present where strategic decisions are made. They also note that party leadership structures are opaque and difficult to access, with little renewal of teams or candidate lists under conditions of equality. Women tend to hold positions for shorter periods and are often used as token representatives or exchangeable pieces when it comes time to renew leadership teams.

Furthermore, women are frequently included for appearance's sake—a form of "aesthetic feminism"—to signal compliance with gender equality laws or to achieve

electoral goals, rather than as a genuine commitment to power-sharing. There is widespread recognition of the historical role of the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), the party most strongly identified with gender equality progress in recent decades. As Pablo Iglesias, founder of the Socialist Party, famously wrote to socialist feminist María Cambrils in 1925: *«In my life as an activist, one of the most persistent drivers of my fight for the emancipation of all human beings has been the irritating and shameful condition of inferiority imposed on women.»*

As former Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero has acknowledged, while socialism has successfully integrated feminism into public policy, it still needs to win the "battle of ideas" within its own party structures (Martín Fernández, 2022).

Electoral Campaigns

If political communication practices tend to follow male-centered patterns, electoral campaigns do as well. Campaign dynamics often change when the candidate is a woman, not only because she is a candidate, but because she is a woman in a space filled with barriers to power—barriers that women themselves consistently identify, including discrimination based on sexual orientation.

While electoral campaigns are a cornerstone of representative democracy, the way they are currently designed often fails to genuinely engage citizens, even if voter turnout remains high. In addition, media coverage and territorial contexts heavily influence these campaigns, making them uneven and incomparable across different levels—whether they are party primaries, municipal, regional, national, or European elections.

Campaign strategies are often built on gender stereotypes, with messaging shaped by whether the candidate is male or female. This is especially true when the objective is to mobilize a specific electorate, which may react differently depending on the region or cultural context, typically influenced by deeply rooted patriarchal norms. In reality, each campaign requires a specific strategic diagnosis, taking into account not only the candidate, but also the territorial context, the target electorate, the project being promoted, and the opponents' positions.

If the media and political parties are the main structural barriers that women leaders face, electoral campaigns risk becoming yet another obstacle, unless they are fundamentally reimaged to promote gender equality rather than reinforce systemic disadvantages.

Two Additional Tasks

Artificial Intelligence (AI), now increasingly used in electoral campaigns, presents a new challenge for gender equality in politics. Its application in audience targeting, personalized messaging, or automated reputation management can reinforce stereotypes and biases if it is not designed and applied with a gender-sensitive approach. Female candidates often face higher levels of disinformation, coordinated attacks, and online violence—phenomena that AI, if misused or left unregulated, could amplify. This makes it urgent to develop ethical and legal frameworks that regulate the use of AI in electoral campaigns to ensure it does not become yet another barrier for women seeking to lead and transform politics from an equality perspective.

In addition to this, it is essential to address the "post-political" phase of women's careers, which is frequently overlooked in public agendas. Women are often the first to be sidelined or removed from candidate lists or leadership roles, either due to internal party dynamics or the emotional and personal toll of navigating hostile environments. After stepping down, many face professional isolation, a lack of recognition, and barriers to re-entering professional or public life, leading to psychological impacts that are rarely acknowledged or addressed. Creating professional, emotional, and social reintegration support programmes should be a priority to ensure sustainable political careers and to prevent politics from expelling women who have already broken barriers but are left alone and unsupported afterward. As Europeans, we should be concerned that, since 2022, four prominent women leaders have stepped down or been removed from office (regardless of the specific reasons for their departure): Magdalena Andersson (Sweden), Liz Truss (United Kingdom), Nicola Sturgeon (Scotland), and Élisabeth Borne (France). To this list, I would add Jacinda Ardern (New Zealand).

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