

“Behave yourself, woman!”

Patterns of gender discrimination and sexist stereotyping in parliamentary interaction

Cornelia Ilie

Strömstad Academy, Sweden

After a record number of women were elected to the House of Commons in 1997, many incidents of sexism and abusive behaviour were reported. The aim of this article is twofold: on the one hand, to scrutinize the mechanisms and effects of sexist discrimination and stereotyping of women MPs in the House of Commons; on the other, to identify the strategies used by female (and male) MPs to subvert discriminatory representations, and to counteract gender-biased and sexist treatment. The focus of the multi-level analysis is on three recurrent strategies: objectifying women MPs through fixation on personal appearance rather than professional performance (e.g. making trivialising comments about women’s hair and dressing style); patronizing women MPs through the use of derogatory forms of address (e.g. directly addressing them by the terms of endearment “honey”, “dear”, “woman”); and stigmatizing women MPs through abusive and discriminatory labelling (e.g. ascribing to them stereotypically insulting names).

Keywords: parliament, parliamentary, Prime Minister’s Question Time, gender discrimination, sexist, stereotype, abusive language, identity, Master Suppression Techniques

1. Introduction

While the significant increase in the number of women in parliament in recent years represents an important step towards achieving the principles essential to democracy including gender equality, recent reports (cf. the Inter-Parliamentary Union study on *Gender-sensitive parliaments* 2011, the Inter-Parliamentary Union report on *Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians*, 2016) show that women parliamentarians all over the world are still being subjected to

sexist behaviour and sexist remarks. According to a recent national study conducted in the United Kingdom, up to 58% of parliamentarians have been stalked or harassed by members, as well as strangers. The findings point to the fact that by entering and acting in the political domain women are shifting away from a role that used to confine them to the private sphere and are entering the public arena where their legitimacy is being challenged. A serious impact of this state of affairs consists in discouraging women from being or becoming active in politics.

Gender stereotyping and sexist behaviour are highly complex and multifaceted phenomena that require in-depth examination of mixed-gender parliamentary confrontational interactions over time. Gender stereotypes, in particular those pertaining to culture-rooted practices, are fraught with difficulties as their complexities and dynamics reflect both institution-specific and culture-specific particularities. Scholars of parliamentary practices (Malley 2011, 174; Sones, Moran and Lovenduski 2005, 66) showed that sexism and discrimination is manifest in overt forms in Prime Minister’s Questions (PMQs). The episodes reported in the media about former Prime Minister Cameron’s behaviour towards female MPs (urging Angela Eagle to “calm down, dear” and patronizing Nadine Dorries by contending that “he understood her frustration”) during PMQs are indicative of an underlying culture of misogyny (see Elliott 2011; Gye 2011). The aggressive language used in PMQs is typical for a masculinised way of ‘doing’ politics, whereby women are often judged negatively, allowing for instances of institutionalised sexism to continue to occur.

Three main research questions have been the point of departure of the present study:

- (i) To what extent do gendered political institutions shape women parliamentarians’ professional status, role and impact?
- (ii) How are women parliamentarians talked to and talked about in discriminatory and sexist ways by fellow male parliamentarians?
- (iii) How do women parliamentarians react to and counteract fellow male parliamentarians’ discriminatory and sexist remarks and behaviour?

2. Approaches to sexist and abusive language/behaviour

Research on the relationship between gender and discourse followed two main directions: the “power” or “dominance” approach (stemming from communication studies and sociology) focused on unequal roles as the source of differences (Fishman 1983; West and Zimmerman 1983), while the “cultural” or “difference” approach (stemming from anthropological linguistics) focused on sex-separate

socialization as the source (Maltz and Borker 1982; Tannen 1994). The relation between women's sex discrimination through language and asymmetrical power relations between genders was emphasized by McConnell-Ginet, Borker and Furman (1980) and Thorne, Kramarae, and Henley (1983). In the 1990s, research on gender and discourse expanded further from its earlier focus on "women's language" to include the language of men and of other social groups, not included in earlier studies. Nowadays most scholars agree that gender is culturally mediated, and gendered identities are interactionally achieved. The constructivist approach (Hall and Bucholtz 1995) operates a distinction between expectations or ideologies and actual discursive practices, and regards gendered discourse as a resource for women's and men's presentation of self. Examining women's and men's language use in communities of practice, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992, 473) explained that "the relation between gender and language resides in the modes of participation available to various individuals within various communities of practice as a direct or indirect function of gender."

Undertaking a comparative approach to Australian, Canadian and UK Westminster-style bureaucracies, Chappell (2002) found that the operation of masculine gender norms in certain institutions, such as parliament and judicial and legal systems, made them hostile to the presence of women and led to the production of gender insensitive laws. She argues that gendered political institutions, alongside ideology, are central to shaping feminists' strategic choices, while emphasising that the relationship between feminists and political institutions is co-constitutive, with agents and structures continuously informing one another.

The UK Parliament belongs to the category of *debate parliaments* (Gallagher, Laver, and Mair 2011), which are known to function largely as an arena for lively adversarial debate and display of rhetorical skills (Ilie 2016). The rules controlling parliamentary forms of interaction are subject to a complex array of institutional constraints and socio-cultural norms bearing on the overall goal and impact of the institutional activities in which the MPs are engaged, and the extent to which MPs share common sets of assumptions and expectations with respect to interpersonal (mis)behaviour and mutual (dis)respect (Ilie 2000, 2003). Several studies on parliamentary interaction found that systematic face-threatening and abusive language is not only sanctioned, but rewarded in accordance with the expectations of British MPs who are socialized into an extremely competitive and confrontational parliamentary culture (Harris 2001; Lovenduski 2012). As has been shown in Ilie (2001, 2004) and Pérez de Ayala (2001), parliamentary debates exhibit systematic face-threatening acts articulated through unparliamentary language and behaviour. These acts cover a continuum that ranges from milder/mitigated acts, such as reproaches, accusations and criticisms, to very strong ones, such as insults. The various instantiations of unparliamentary language provide important clues about

moral and social standards, gender stereotypes, prejudices, taboos, as well as value judgements of different social-political groups, as well as individuals.

A fast-growing body of research on parliamentary discourse has been devoted to the ways in which asymmetrical gender roles are enacted in parliament (Wodak 2003; Lovenduski and Karam 2005; Ilie 2010a). Walsh (2013, 70) pointed out that “the overall culture of the Commons resembles a gentleman’s club”, whereas Ross (1995) and Puwar (1997) identified varying instances of verbal sexual harassment of women MPs. In a comparative study of the linguistic behaviour of male and female MPs in the House of Commons and the Scottish Parliament, Shaw (2002) found that in both parliaments, male MPs make more interventions than women MPs overall, and this practice constructs male MPs as more powerful participants as they assume the entitlement to break the rules. A comparative investigation of parliamentary addressing strategies in debates in the UK Parliament and in the Swedish Riksdag (Ilie 2013) showed that in both parliaments discriminatory addressing strategies are often embedded in female MP-targeted master suppression techniques (for further details see Section 5. on master suppression techniques) that result in turning issue-focused discussions into person-focused parliamentary confrontations.

Even more recent studies (Bou-Franch 2016) expose aggression and violence as socially constructed, as processes that carry a historical baggage of extreme tolerance when it is inflicted on women. Sexist behaviour is a multi-faceted phenomenon, ranging from verbal violence to physical harassment through psychological aggressiveness, at the private-public interface of interpersonal and institutional interaction. Power, ideology and socio-cultural values are at the heart of aggressiveness against women, since values and beliefs shared by social groups and conveyed through discourse construct, reproduce, challenge and/or resist gendered identities, behaviours and actions (Ehrlich, Meyerhoff and Holmes 2014).

3. Exposing gender bias at the private-public interface

‘Gender polarisation’ is based on the ideology that women’s and men’s behaviour is dichotomous (Bem 1993). When viewed through this lens, women and men who diverge from gender norms may be perceived as speaking and behaving ‘like the other sex’. Furthermore, evidence has shown that even when women and men do speak in similar ways, they are likely to be evaluated differently (Tannen 1994; West 1995). This dichotomy rests on the historically and culturally reinforced divide between the private and the public sphere, as a function of patriarchy (Pateman 1983; Gavison 1992) that reinforces the gendering myth, according to which women are emotional and nurturing creatures in the private sphere, whereas men are rational and dispassionate creatures in the public sphere. The hierarchy

inherent in this dichotomy places greater value on the 'public' and conceals the value of the 'private'. The very notion of separate spheres is fallacious because the public sphere has been created, after all, by individuals who instinctively carry over their personal values, principles, beliefs, etc. from the private sphere.

It was the second wave of feminism – supported by the slogan “the personal is political” – that made the first attempt to break down the gendered division between the private sphere attributed to women and the public sphere of men (Pateman 1983; Gavison 1992; Arneil 1999). Nevertheless, the notion of a separation of the public and private spheres still persists today, and assumptions about women and men, and their respective roles in the public and private spheres still affect the ways in which socio-political issues are approached and discussed in institutions such as parliament. The status of women is particularly affected, as was pointed out by Robin Lakoff:

Public women are much more subject to erosion of the wall between their public and private personae than are men, with anything unconventional about their private lives leaching into judgements of their public performance.

(Lakoff 2005, 174)

4. Discourse-shaped identity framings

During various kinds of interactions in particular communities of practice, individuals can be seen to display multiple identities, some of which are changing over time. Zimmerman (1998) identified a threefold distinction:

- *Discourse identities*, specific for a given speech situation, are enacted as participants orient themselves to particular discourse roles in the unfolding organization of the interaction (e.g. initiator, listener, questioner, answerer, narrator);
- *Situated identities*, adopted by individuals when engaged in a particular social activity, and which are explicitly conferred by the context of communication, such as shopkeeper-customer, or doctor-patient identities in a medical context, or teacher-student identities in a classroom context;
- *Transportable identities*, which travel with the individual across a variety of interactions, and are carried from one interactional context to another; they are latent or implicit but can be invoked during the interaction, such as when a teacher alludes to her identity as a woman, a mother or as a keen gardener during a language lesson.

Identities from these three categories display varying degrees of dynamic flexibility, and in particular contexts and at particular times, some of them are able

to coexist with each other. In many professional environments, discourse-shaped identities undergo continuous change: for example, newly emerging identities in post-modern societies (e.g. top-ranking female leaders) tend to coexist with tradition-rooted identities (e.g. wives and mothers). The coexistence of these identities is largely conditioned and/or constrained by professional status and power relations. People tend to have a set of transportable identities that can get correlated with certain types of discourse identities. While moving through life, they engage in social practices with other people, where they adopt discursive and situated identities. Gender identities are a case in point, as they are constructed in dynamic social processes articulated by particular linguistic practices.

5. Parliamentary usage of Master Suppression Techniques

As has been shown by gender scholars, discussions of gendering need to be located within particular communities of practice (Eckert and McConnell 1992). Thus, in the political sphere it is noticeable that the rising number of women acquiring and using political power has challenged the previously male-dominated field of politics where feminine traits and politics were viewed as incompatible. A growing body of research about women’s and men’s discursive strategies in several parliaments (Shaw 2002; Wodak 2003; Lovenduski and Karam 2005; Atanga 2009; Ilie 2013) provide us with clear indications about gender-rooted asymmetries in political representation and women’s current role in agenda-setting and decision-making. Women MPs in different parliaments have been increasingly exposing and condemning instances of gender discrimination which constitute serious violations of good parliamentary practice.

The present approach integrates a pragmatic and discourse-analytical approach with the theory of *master suppression techniques* developed by the Norwegian social psychologist Berit Ås (1978). Being a politician herself, Ås had the opportunity to closely observe and reflect on the explicit and implicit mechanisms used by influential individuals or groups to exert control and power over other individuals. According to her definition, master suppression techniques are strategies of social manipulation by which a person or a dominant group – consciously or unconsciously – exercises power to maintain their position in a hierarchy. This may be achieved by making gender-biased remarks, by displaying derogatory behaviour, by addressing abusive and loaded words. Ås’s theory helps to identify what is going on when individuals notice they are not listened to, when they are looked down upon, trivialized, overlooked or ignored. She pointed out that in many male-dominated institutional settings these techniques are used in specific combinations and situations with regard to women.

The five master suppression techniques identified by Ås can be described as follows:

1. *Ignoring/Making Invisible* is to silence or otherwise marginalise persons. Making someone invisible means that a person chooses to treat an individual or a group as if the person or group were not there or as if they were not worth taking into consideration or giving attention to. This technique serves to deprive individuals of their identity, making them feel inferior and insignificant. In parliament women MPs appear to be most affected by this technique. However, by learning to recognize and counteract this master suppression technique, women, as well as men, can learn to avoid this humiliating and depressing feeling.
2. *Ridiculing* is to deliberately describe the efforts and arguments of, or the persons themselves, in a ridiculing fashion. This technique is used when women are made fun of, are laughed down, are called names – like “bitch” or “whore” or “feminist” – or compared to animals. According to Ås, it is often used when men discuss how and why women say something instead of discussing what they have actually said. It is a technique meant to create a feeling of insecurity and to silence the targeted individual. Some frequent effects of ridiculing in institutional settings are: laughter, scoring points (audience-related); embarrassment (interlocutor-related).
3. *Withholding Information* is to exclude someone from the decision-making process or to play down her/his role by deliberately withholding information from her/him so as to make the person less able to make an informed choice. Formal and informal social rituals in traditionally male institutional settings – insiders’ meetings at exclusive clubs, drinking after work, sauna sessions – allow men to meet and make preliminary decisions without involving their women colleagues. This suppression technique fosters discrimination and it results in competent persons feeling ignorant, insecure and disconnected.
4. *Double Binding* (Damned If You Do and Damned If You Don’t) – also called the ‘can’t win’ approach – is to put someone in a situation where s/he is belittled and punished regardless of which alternative s/he chooses; it involves being squeezed and pressured between mutually exclusive choices. For example, a female manager can be accused of weakness when she tries to listen and act democratically – and of lacking femininity when she shows her claws and forces her will through. And a female politician can be attacked for tunnel vision when she insists on women’s interests and for being a traitor when she doesn’t. This suppression technique is used when what women do and don’t do is equally wrong. It discourages initiative and results in constant guilty conscience, in addition to the feelings of inadequacy and burnt-out.

5. *Blaming and Shaming* (Heaping Blame and Putting to Shame) is to embarrass someone, or to insinuate that they are themselves to blame even when they are victims; it thereby forces victims to accept blame. Thus, the persons ill-treated feel deeply ashamed and partly responsible for what is happening to them. This suppression technique discourages assessing the actual or real source of problems and concerns. The result is that it indirectly encourages those ridiculed to ‘accept’ their lowered status by shaming them directly or in front of others.

The use of Berit Ås’s theory of master suppression techniques provides a basic systematic framework for examining and comparing the various ways in which women are being discriminated against by men during debates in parliament: by being ignored, by being turned to ridicule, by being underrated, by receiving trivial objections and irrelevant personal criticisms.

6. Where does the British parliamentary bully tradition come from?

Male parliamentarians take advantage of institutional tolerance to aggressive, face-threatening communication, including sexist verbal attacks against women, in order to discredit their targeted addressees and to boost their own image, thus acquiring notoriety since such aggressive incidents get publicized in the media as “confrontainment” = confrontation + entertainment (Holly 1994).

From the perspective of psychological and behavioural neuroscience, Duffel (2015/2014) provides a compelling argument that many of the male British political leaders have been shaped by the public school ethos, which prizes rationality and confident talk while it minimises emotions. He explains that the British “elite are raised in boarding schools – away from their families, out of the reach of love, far from the influence of any feminine values” (2015, 2). According to him, former public school students tend to hide their vulnerability behind a façade of ostensible confidence and tough behaviour, having to “reinvent themselves as self-reliant pseudo-adults”. His conclusion is that “we are being run by ‘the boys in the men who run things.’”

To illustrate his findings, Duffel recalls the incident during PMQs on 27 April 2011, when the former Prime Minister (henceforth PM) David Cameron uttered the widely cited (in)famous words “Calm down, dear, calm down, and listen to the doctor”, in response to a comment made by the Shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury Angela Eagle, who interrupted him to correct an inaccuracy regarding the claim that GP Howard Stoaite and former Labour MP lost the election, when in

fact he did not stand for election. Her intervention is marked as “interruption” in the official Hansard transcripts, as illustrated in (1) below:

- (1) Edward Miliband: [...] Let me make this suggestion: just for once, why does he not listen to the doctors, the patients and the nurses and scrap his reorganisation?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman asks me to listen to doctors, so here is one doctor I am definitely going to listen to. I hope Opposition Members will remember Howard Stoaite, who was the Member of Parliament for Dartford. He is no longer an MP because he lost the election – because of the Conservative candidate, I am afraid. He is now a GP –

[Interruption.]

Calm down, dear. Listen to the doctor. Howard Stoaite, GP, says: “My... discussions with fellow GPs... reveal overwhelming enthusiasm for the” –

[Interruption.]

I said calm down. Calm down, dear – and I will say it to the shadow Chancellor, if he likes. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us briefly have the answer and move on to Back Benchers, whose rights I am interested in protecting. I want a brief answer from the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: This is a very brief quote from a Labour MP who is now a GP. He said: “My... discussions with fellow GPs... reveal overwhelming enthusiasm for the chance to help shape services for the patients they see daily”.

That is what Labour MPs, now acting as GPs, think of the reforms. That is what is happening.

Ed Balls (Morley and Outwood) (Lab/Co-op): *Apologise to her!*

The Prime Minister: *I am not going to apologise; you do need to calm down.*

[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is far too much noise in the Chamber.

[Interruption.] Order. It makes a very bad impression on the public as a whole, and others are waiting to contribute. I think the Prime Minister has finished.

(Hansard, 27 Apr 2011: Column 169–170)

Responding to Ed Miliband, David Cameron was defending the (Conservative) Government’s plans to reform the NHS, which he said were actually backed by former Labour MP Howard Stoaite, now a practising GP, after allegedly losing the election. At this point, shadow chief secretary to the Treasury Angela Eagle loudly retorted to correct the inaccuracy, i.e. that GP Stoaite was not defeated in the election, because he did not run in the preceding year’s election, as Cameron falsely claimed. In typical parliamentary bully tradition, Cameron reacted by addressing sexist and patronizing remarks to Angela Eagle: “Calm down, dear. Listen to

the doctor.” These remarks were in fact mimicking a famous catchphrase from a widely known car insurance advert starring Michael Winner. While Conservative MPs were having a good laugh, Labour MPs erupted in outrage, and Labour leader Ed Miliband called for an apology. It is noteworthy that the Speaker of the House (John Bercow) failed to fulfil his institutional duty and apostrophize the PM over his blatantly sexist remarks. He intervened very late, downplaying the whole incident: “There’s far too much noise in this chamber, which makes a very bad impression on the public as a whole”.

MP Angela Eagle said during an interview: “I have been patronised by better people than the Prime Minister.” Labour’s deputy leader and former equality minister Harriet Harman declared that Cameron’s “contemptuous response” to MP Eagle showed “his patronising and outdated attitude to women”. Ed Miliband suggested that the PM resorted too easily to bullying: “When he doesn’t have an argument, he’ll throw an insult”. BBC News Channel chief political correspondent Laura Kuenssberg reported that Labour MPs reacted angrily to the remarks, with one saying: “It’s pure Bullingdon Club”, a reference to the exclusive Oxford University society of which David Cameron was a member.

In terms of Berit Ås’s theory, Cameron made use of the master suppression technique number 2 (*Ridiculing*), which is explicitly aimed at embarrassing and silencing MP Eagle, whose only purpose was to correct an inaccuracy in one of his statements. Another equally important aim of this technique in an institution like the parliament is to trigger the audience’s laughter, while also scoring political points. Wanting to strike a ‘humorous’ note, Cameron drew on the stereotype of women as hysterical and needing to be contained. The premise rests on the pre-conceived idea that women are more emotionally volatile and their opinions are less important. But in this particular case, only Government members laughed, while Labour MPs reacted angrily asking the PM to apologise. Putting the spotlight on MP Angela Eagle’s transportable identity as a woman, Cameron was seeking to suppress her situated identity as shadow chief secretary to the Treasury, as well as her discourse identity as parliamentary spokesperson. Eventually, faced with growing criticism, David Cameron had to apologise.

Examining such parliamentary bullying tactics more closely, Duffel discovered a culture of misogyny, where powerful bullies like Cameron actually hide their inner vulnerability and insecurity, which make them overreact by (counter) attacking someone else rather than taking a moment of reflection and self-scrutiny. By repeatedly uttering the infamous “calm down dear” statement, he is actually projecting unto her his own anxiety. This type of personality (called *Strategic Survival Personality* by Duffel) develops under duress when a child has to survive alone at a boarding school. A major trait may be either the aggression as the preferred form of defence (Cameron’s case), or a conflict-avoidance style.

Duffel's findings are corroborated by the testimonies of several MPs. For example, *Huffpost* of 30 September 2012 reported that shadow equalities minister Kate Green had launched an outspoken attack on sexism in parliament, declaring that "the place is organised around the life experiences of a particular sector in society who went to prep school, who went to public school, who went to Oxbridge, who went into bar, who went into parliament."

7. Manifestations of British parliamentary sexist discrimination and bullying

Arriving at Westminster as newly elected 'others', women were perceived as disrupting the established norms – in this case, of white masculinity. Puwar (2004) noted that the very presence of others – that is, non-male and non-white representatives – is disruptive because it draws attention to the hidden expectations that an MP is a particular kind of man. Such types of behaviour are manifest both verbally and non-verbally. The present investigation focuses on three very frequent types of sexist language and behaviour: (1) *objectifying women MPs through stereotypically sexist remarks*; (2) *patronizing women MPs through derogatory forms of address*, and (3) *stigmatizing women MPs through abusive labelling*.

7.1 Objectifying women MPs through stereotypically sexist remarks

When male MPs make sexist and trivialising comments about women's looks, hair or dressing style in the middle of a budget debate, for example, they show a fixation with the personal appearance, rather than professional performance of women. Through this sexist objectification of women MPs, men are reinforcing stereotypical thinking patterns by downplaying and trivializing women's roles and contributions to parliamentary work.

Women MPs have long been subjected to objectification by means of sexist remarks about their bodies or physical attributes which are made in parliament by male colleagues from opposing parties, as well as their own. These remarks reflect outdated sexist attitudes about women's position in the public sphere that certain male MPs nurture and feel entitled to voice during debates. Excerpt (2) below illustrates a prototypical case.

- (2) Hazel Blears (Labour): The right hon. Gentleman appears to be floundering a little at the start of his contribution, and I wonder whether I might, in a constructive spirit, offer him a small lifeline. [...] As I understand it, there is a surplus of about £ 3.4 billion in the national non-domestic rate

pool [...] If we were to put the £ 3.4 billion back into the formula grant, that would enable us to reduce some of the devastating impact of that first year of cuts, certainly on Salford council, which is facing cuts of £ 40 million. If the right hon. Gentleman accepts my lifeline I will be very happy.

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Mr Eric Pickles: I am most grateful to the right hon. Lady for that, and, *to start on a positive note, may I say that the entire Front-Bench team likes her new hairstyle?* There is not a £ 3.5 billion surplus in non-domestic rates in the year coming. There is a potential £ 2 billion surplus in 2013–14. [...]

(Hansard, 6 December 2010, Col. 42)

MP Pickles’s parenthetically inserted sexist comment, which is apparently framed as a compliment, is totally inappropriate and serves to distract the attention, while surreptitiously undermining the sense of legitimacy and professional competence of the targeted female MP. He focuses on a physical attribute with no relevance whatsoever for the ongoing debate, instead of addressing the serious issue raised in MP Blears’s fully justified question. His strategy constitutes a reversal of Berit Ås’s master suppression technique number 1 (*Ignoring/Making Invisible*): rather than marginalising this female MP by ignoring her, Pickles misbehaves in the opposite direction in that he directs misplaced and disproportionate attention to her appearance in an attempt to brush off and diminish the value of her contribution to the current debate. Thereby, MP Blears’s transportable identity as a woman, which bears no particular relevance in the context of this parliamentary debate, is deliberately foregrounded at the expense of her situated identity as MP, which is indeed relevant in this context. By using this master suppression technique, Pickles reinforces a widespread gender stereotype: “Comments about looks are much more dangerous to a woman’s already fragile grasp of power than to a man’s: they reduce a woman to her traditional role of object, one who is seen, rather than one who sees and acts.” (Lakoff 2005, 173). Indeed, comments about looks work much more effectively to disempower women than men, and are more hurtful to women, whose looks have stereotypically been emphasised as a primary attribute. At the same time, women MP like Hazel Blears are in a ‘double bind’ situation in the sense that not only are they expected to conform to the narrow ideals of femininity, but they are also deliberately deprived of the opportunity to conform to the male ‘norm’ of what it means to be a debating politician. This coincides with Berit Ås’s master suppression technique number 4, *Double Binding*, whereby the targeted person is belittled and punished regardless of which alternative s/he happens to choose. In other words, what a woman does and doesn’t do ends up being equally wrong.

Sexist objectification of women MPs occurs far too often in the UK Parliament. They are being objectified through fixation on personal appearance rather than on professional performance (e.g. women wearing the ‘wrong’ clothes, being concerned with the ‘wrong’ issues). The Labour Home Secretary Jacqui Smith was criticized in 2007 for wearing a top that revealed too much cleavage for the TV cameras while making a statement in parliament (Slack 2009). Labour MP Lisa Nandy reported that the first time she attended a Budget someone shouted “knickers” when she considered sitting in the gangway in a skirt.

7.2 Patronizing women MPs through derogatory forms of address

Forms like “honey”, “love” and “dear”, normally classified as endearments, do not always or necessarily express affection. They are unmarked when used symmetrically between people who perceive their relationship as intimate (Coates 2003). Asymmetrical usage signals condescension, for example, in service encounters where the relationship between server and customer is not one of intimacy. Wolfson and Manes (1980) found that the usage of terms of endearment like “dear” is directly related to the sex of the addressee. In male-dominated institutions, like the parliament, the use of “dear” can actually be condescending or demeaning, especially when addressed by a male MP to a woman MP. McConnell-Ginet’s statement below applies to parliamentary institutions too:

[...] the significance of particular forms of address lies in the history of patterns of usage within and across particular communities of practice and in the connection between addressing and other aspects of social practice that build social relations and mark them with respect and affection or with contempt, condescension, or dislike.
(McConnell-Ginet 2003, 79)

Labour MP Caroline Flint, Shadow Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, accused Mr. Cameron of using the word “dear” to “put women down” (referring to his comment “Calm down, dear” addressed to MP Angela Eagle – see Extract (1) above). She also revealed that she had been on the receiving end of the same tactic from Communities Secretary Eric Pickles, when he told her to “just get behind the programme then, dear”, as illustrated in (3) below.

- (3) Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman mentions funding for public health, which is estimated to represent at least 4% of the NHS budget. Will that move across to local government?
The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Mr. Eric Pickles: *The right hon. Lady* is playing a game whereby if money moves from the health service it represents a cut in the health service, but if it moves to local authorities it fills a hole. Conservative Members have been saying for

years that there is a role for councils in public health, and we are backing that. I recall, at the Opposition Dispatch Box, asking the then Government for the kind of financial commitments that we are currently giving to deal with adult social care. Frankly, *the right hon. Lady* should be thanking us- [Interruption.]

Well, I'm glad *you're* supporting it. *Just get behind the programme then, dear.* That'd be marvellous. (Hansard, 6 December 2010, col. 50)

The evidence provided in Excerpt (3) shows that Cameron isn't the only MP in the habit of using the derogatory form of address “dear” to put women down. MP Pickles, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, uses the same tactic when addressing Labour MP Caroline Flint. He started by appropriately addressing her as “the right hon. Lady”, which is the correct form in terms of her official status in parliament, but went on and switched over to the second person pronoun “you” (“I'm glad *you're* supporting it”), which is an unparliamentary form of address. The default forms of address in the UK Parliament may consist of the gender-specific title (“the hon. Lady” or “the right hon. Lady”, for a member of the Privy Council) or the third person pronoun “she” or “he” (Ilie 2010b). But Pickles commits an even more serious transgression when he calls MP Flint “dear”. It is again surprising that the Speaker of the House did not intervene, as he should, to reprimand MP Pickles and ask him to reformulate his statement using the correct form of address. After all, the institutional role of the Speaker is to make sure that MPs follow the rules of the House during debates, such as “directing an MP to withdraw remarks if, for example, they use abusive language” (www.parliament.uk). There is a twofold problem about the inappropriateness of the word “dear” in this context: first, it is an unparliamentary form of address, and second, it is a condescending and sexist way of addressing a fellow MP. The use of “dear” not only creates an asymmetrical relation between two MPs in a community of members with equal rights, it also turns to ridicule and trivializes a woman MP (Berit Ås's master suppression technique number 2 – Ridiculing). When addressed by a male to a female MP, it results in downgrading and reducing her to the attributes of her basic transportable identity, at the expense of her situated identity as an MP and her discourse identity as a parliamentary questioner who requests and deserves a serious and dignified answer.

A comparable incident, illustrated in (4) below, happened during a debate on the upcoming appointments to parliament's various select committees on 3 June 2015, when former SNP leader Alex Salmond made disparaging and sexist comments targeted at the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise, Anna Soubry. Salmond's outburst has been compared to David Cameron's infamous remarks addressed to Labour's Angela Eagle in 2011 (reproduced in Extract (1)).

- (4) Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): I once heard the Barnett formula described as being like the Schleswig-Holstein question in European politics, in that only three people ever understood it: one is mad, one is dead and I have forgotten it, but I will try to remember enough of it to allow the hon. Gentleman to understand how it works. For example, additional public spending on health in England has a knock-on effect in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The reverse does not apply – it is not a question of allocating for Northern Ireland and then reverse-allocating England. The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise (Anna Soubry, Con): Move on.

Alex Salmond: Move on where? *Luckily the right hon. Lady is on the Front Bench, so will not be standing to be a Chair of one of these Select Committees, otherwise she would have done her chances no good whatever. Members on the Treasury Bench should behave better in these debates. She should be setting an example to her new Members, not cavorting about like some demented junior Minister. Behave yourself, woman!*

(Hansard, 3 June 2015: Column 710–711)

Alex Salmond was criticised for his “19th century” behaviour when apostrophising Anna Soubry, in response to her call for him to “move on”. His comments are directly face-threatening and downgrading: “Luckily the honourable lady is on the frontbench, so therefore won’t be standing to chair of one of these select committees, otherwise she would have done her chances no good whatsoever.” He went on and doubled down when he compared MP Soubry to a “demented junior Minister”. Afterwards, like Eric Pickles in Excerpt (3) above, he resorted to the same Master Suppressing Technique number 2 (Ridiculing), by addressing her, in an unparliamentary fashion, in the second person and using a derogatory and openly sexist form of address: “Behave yourself, woman!”. In doing so, he violated the parliamentary rule according to which the default form of address is the third, not the second, person. And just as in Pickles’s case, the Speaker failed to intervene and call MP Salmond to order. Soubry later responded on Twitter that Salmond seemed to think that women “should be seen and not heard”, and that his attitude belonged “firmly in the 19th century”. She also added: “Salmond can dish it out but he can’t take it”.

Several incidents of sexist remarks by male MPs have been reported in the media by the affected women MPs. For example, in a Sky News’ Murnaghan show (8 March 2015), MP Nicky Morgan, the Education Secretary, claimed that her Labour opposite number (MP Tristram Hunt) condescendingly called her “love” during a debate about education issues in the House of Commons. His actual words were: “Not my responsibility, *love*”.

7.3 Stigmatizing women MPs through abusive labeling

In various communities of practice, labeling practices do not simply characterize, but rather evaluate, often negatively, their targets (McConnell-Ginet 2003). The significance of name-calling lies in how names are bestowed on members in particular institutions and cultures. In the case of gendering labels targeting women, they serve to de-emphasize those women’s status as worthy individuals, focusing on power and status differentials. Even where the semantic content of a label might seem purely descriptive, the addresser’s obvious intentionality is to ascribe a particular gendered label meant to activate negative associations in connection with the targeted individual.

A largely publicized name-calling incident occurred when the employment minister Esther McVey was called a “hard-hearted Hannah” by Labour MP Barry Sheerman during a debate on a Work Programme for Disabled People.

- (5) Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): One of the greatest disabilities that stops young people getting a job is autism. Is the Minister aware that autism is predicted to cost this country £ 32 billion a year? *Will she stop for a moment being the “hard-hearted Hannah” of the Front Bench and be a little more compassionate about disabled young people looking for work?*

The Minister for Employment, Ms. Esther McVey (Con): I understand a lot about autism and the extra support, help and work that we need to do. That is why the Secretary of State and I introduced the campaign, Disability Confident, which reaches out to employers and says, “Listen to the needs of the people and find out what we can do and how we can best work with these people.” *I do hope that the hon. Gentleman’s comment was not sexist, as I have had very many such comments from the Opposition Benches.*

(Hansard, 9 March 2015: Column 15–16)

Sheerman’s patronizing and discrediting comments are framed in a powerful rhetorical question aimed at triggering a negative emotional reaction from the audience with respect to MP McVey, whom he identifies by the sexist label of “hard-hearted Hannah”. In doing that, he uses a combination of two master suppression techniques, viz. number 2 (Ridiculing) and number 5 (Blaming and Shaming). The latter is aimed at embarrassing his addressee (the blaming strategy) and making her feel ashamed (the shaming strategy). McVey counteracts Sheerman’s reproachful words about her alleged lack of compassion by providing detailed information disproving his accusations, and ends with a meta-comment about his sexist behaviour: “I do hope that the hon. Gentleman’s comment was not sexist, as I have had very many such comments from the Opposition Benches.” This strongly confrontational exchange had a significant follow-up during the same parliamentary debate, under Points of Order, as illustrated in (6) below.

- (6) Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am known to be a long-term champion of equality for women in our society and at work. During Question Time, only a few moments ago, *I referred to the Minister for Employment, the right hon. Member for Wirral West (Esther McVey), as “hard-hearted Hannah”, which I think she thinks was a sexist remark. It was not meant as a sexist remark; it is actually the name of a famous song sung by Ella Fitzgerald. The Minister has a reputation for being a very hard champion of the welfare reforms that this Government have introduced, so I believe that it was a fair comment to make and that it was unfair to call me a sexist.* [Interruption.]

Mr. Speaker: Order. All I need say is twofold. First, the hon. Gentleman has put his point on the record. Secondly, the way I would prefer to characterise it – I am not arguing with the hon. Gentleman – is that the Minister of State is an extremely robust character who can make her own case with force and skill, as she has done on several occasions today, and indeed at all times. If the Minister, who felt aggrieved against and to an extent aggrieved, wishes to speak briefly on the matter, I would of course give her that opportunity.

The Minister for Employment (Esther McVey, Con): Further to that point of order, Mr. Speaker. The reason I want this put on the record is that *it is not the first time Opposition Members have been like this to me. John McDonnell came to my constituency and asked people – I know this is unparliamentary language – to “lynch the bitch” live in Wirral West. That is what Labour Members ask people to do in other people’s constituencies.* [Interruption.]

(Hansard, 9 March 2015: Column 24)

It is encouraging to see in Excerpt (6) that the Speaker acts as an enabler of a clarification dialogue between Sheerman and McVey. Sheerman, as expected, denies having addressed any sexist remarks to McVey and tries to offer justifications. However, Esther McVey’s explains that these were the latest in a line of sexist remarks from Labour MPs, reporting to the concrete case of John McDonnell, MP for Hayes and Harlington, who told her Wirral West constituents to “lynch the bitch”, where the name calling refers to her.

8. Reactions to and actions against male MPs’ sexist and demeaning behaviour

Recent disclosures and developments in parliamentary communication practices have shown that female MPs (as well as male MPs) are increasingly exposing and condemning instances of gender discrimination and sexist stereotyping. Women MPs who, like Harriet Harman, reached high positions in the parliamentary

hierarchy and succeeded in maintaining their standing, are reacting forcefully to gender discrimination. As a Labour MP and Leader of the House, Harman did not hesitate to resort to master suppression techniques (Ilie 2012) in order to counteract the sexist attacks of her male political adversaries. The current reactions to male MPs’ sexist and demeaning behaviour take different forms, which can be grouped into three main categories, to be discussed in the sections below.

8.1 Informal reactions and follow-ups

Some female MPs react to sexist behaviour on the spot by naming and accusing the perpetrator, if they have the opportunity to take the floor again during the same debate (as did MP Esther McVey in Excerpt 6). This strategy enables the discriminated women MPs to both respond and counterattack, while addressing all MPs present in the House.

A number of female MPs took the initiative of giving interviews in the media, reporting incidents of sexist behaviour that they have been subjected to by fellow male MPs.

Several male MPs get involved by passing on good advice about appropriate behaviour to their fellow MPs. Thus, given the publicity about Barry Sheerman calling Esther McVey a “hard-hearted Hannah” (cf. Excerpt 5 and 6), the former adopted a self-critical stance and advised Alex Salmond (cf. Excerpt 4) to refrain from addressing other female MPs as “woman” in future.

Some male MPs do actually apologise for having used sexist language, when faced with strong criticism for their gendering behaviour. For example, in 2011, David Cameron apologised after he told the then Labour shadow treasury chief secretary, Angela Eagle, to “calm down dear” (cf. Excerpt 1) multiple times during a debate in parliament.

8.2 Online feedback (through Twitter, social media)

Several male MPs’ sexist behaviour and comments have sparked heated debates online.

MP Soubry (cf. Excerpt 4) commented on Twitter that Salmond seemed to think that women “should be seen and not heard” and that his attitude belonged “firmly in the 19th century”. “Salmond can dish it out but he can’t take it.” (4 June, 2015).

Anna Bird, a member of the gender equality campaign group the Fawcett Society, jumped to the defence of Angela Eagle who was subjected to Cameron’s sexist remarks “Calm down, dear”: “Those women that have made it into Parliament must fight an uphill battle to ensure their views are taken seriously,

and face a culture of sexist jeering and dismissive comments – not just by other MPs, but by the Prime Minister himself.”

8.3 Institutional initiatives: Constructive proposals and sanctions

Some important institutional initiatives have been taken against sexist discrimination. For example, a motion establishing a Women and Equalities Committee was announced in the House of Commons by MP Angela Eagle (cf. Excerpt (1)). Her motivation is most revealing: “*It will also no doubt provide an excellent platform to hold the Government to account for any decisions that could roll back equality, and enable a new generation of parliamentarians to learn that they should never, “Calm down, dear.”*” (Hansard, 3 June 2015: Column 707)

The All-Party Political Group of Women in Parliament – which includes two deputy speakers – recommended that Parliament adopt a zero tolerance stance towards bullying or unprofessional behaviour, including considering “additional sanctions” such as stopping an offending MP from speaking in debates for a few days. In September 2017, the Speaker of the House John Bercow admitted that MPs’ behaviour in the Commons is out of control, and sexist politicians are getting out of hand as they heckle each other during debates. Consequently, he made the proposal to create more targeted “rules” in the House of Commons, such as imposing penalties on unprofessional MPs. It was further suggested that the standard of behaviour in Parliament should be what is accepted in other work places. He also expressed the intention to introduce yellow cards for rowdy MPs to stop sexist behaviour.

9. Concluding remarks

The present investigation has focused on the underpinnings and effects of parliamentary interaction practices at the interface of gender stereotyping language and sexist behaviour. It is based on data from PMQs in the UK Parliament, which provides compelling evidence about women MPs being submitted to sexist discrimination that reinforces gender-related asymmetry in a prototypically male-dominated environment. A multi-perspective and multi-level analysis has been carried out, combining the strengths of pragmatics and discourse analysis with the theory of master suppression techniques (Berit Ås 1978). Three main research questions have been explored: (a) to what extent are women’s parliamentary status and roles being interactively co-constructed and shaped in parliamentary dialogue confrontation? (b) how are women parliamentarians talked to and talked about in discriminatory and sexist ways by fellow male parliamentarians? (c) what are women parliamentarians’ reactions to and actions against male MPs’

sexist and downgrading remarks and behaviour? To explore these questions, the master suppression techniques have been used as analytical tools for identifying discourse-shaped identity framings of women MPs confronted with male MPs’ sexist discrimination and bullying. Three recurring strategies of sexist language and behavior have been found in parliamentary interaction: (i) objectifying women MPs through stereotypically sexist remarks about personal appearance (hair style, clothes), rather than professional performance, which results in the trivialization of women’s contribution to parliamentary work; (ii) patronizing women MPs through derogatory forms of address, such as “dear”, or “woman”, which are condescending and sexist tactics that, when addressed by a male to a female MP, create an asymmetrical relation whereby the latter is downgraded and reduced to her gender attributes; this also represents a violation of the parliamentary rule according to which the default form of address is the third, not the second, person; and (iii) stigmatizing women MPs through abusive labelling and name-calling, which result in ascribing them a particular gendered label, meant to blame and shame them.

The findings point to the fact that by entering and acting in parliament as newcomers, women are being challenged, while their institutional legitimacy is called into question. The findings also show that, as women MPs are becoming more solidly established in parliament, they acquire more self-assuredness and know-how about effective ways in which to subvert and counteract gender discrimination and sexist behaviour. At the same time, there is growing need for substantive change of the parliamentary culture of prevailing abusive behaviour, gender bias and sexism, especially during PMQs, which can only be brought about by means of concerted institutional and behavioural normative reform (Shackle 2011), as well as by parliamentary culture ‘regendering’ (Chappell 2006).

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Address for correspondence

Cornelia Ilie
 Professor of Linguistics and Rhetoric
 Strömstad Academy
 45280 Strömstad
 Sweden

cornelia.ilie@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6220-0150>

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