



Introduction: Gender and Politics in Auto/Biographies

Politicians all over Europe used to write about their lives, and keep doing so. Like other well-known persons they are “unusual biographical subjects”, because the biographical activity concerning their lives often starts while they are still alive (Frank 1999). On the one hand, classical autobiographies written by politicians themselves (and their co-authors or ghost-writers) are published widely and are not only an important part of the memory politics and the construction of national history, but also a contribution to the stabilization of gender conceptions (Depkat 2014, p. 247–265; Ulbrich, Jancke and Bosch 2013, p. 5). Often the (auto)biographers intend to contribute to political and historical analyses. On the other hand, life writing has changed and diversified rapidly during the 20th century. The widespread desire for authenticity and truth seems to be enormous, so we can see a process of democratization, including a change of the concepts of private and public spheres. Nowadays everybody is entitled to present his or her life in public (Ulbrich, Jancke and Bosch 2013, p. 5). Life writing took place not only in hard copy, but in many different media, like radio, film, tv, blogs, Facebook and other new social media. So it seems a good moment to look at the (auto)biographies and memoirs in the political area during the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century.

Politics was, and still is, a world in which a male culture is dominant. After female suffrage was established in Europe, the first women politicians tried to develop a new female style which was meant to be a basis for better and more peaceful politics after World War I. Many female politicians took it as self-evident that they would act as experts in social politics. This was actually what feminists to a high degree had promoted in the 19th and early 20th century as an argument for the female citizenship. The female intervention into politics changed the playground: Suddenly, there were questions of political competence, of prioritising issues like foreign affairs and social politics, and of male and female politicians’

difference and equality. As the few women politicians could not change the male-dominated character of politics, some were disappointed and withdrew from this field, others tried to be successful in adopting the existing rules and behaviour of the political scene. The interwar period was a challenging period for all politicians of the democratic parties. After a short period of a search for reconciliation, the situation changed with the upsurge of extreme movements both in the right and left. The entering of women politicians into the European parliaments coincided with the radicalisation of politics. This development influenced not only female politicians, but also the political persona of all politicians.

After World War II women made slow progress in parliaments in Europe and it was only from the 1970s they began to make huge steps forward in the wake of the second feminist wave in Western and Northern Europe (Dahlerup 1988). The rise of female political leaders, parliamentarians, cabinet ministers and even Prime Ministers dates from that time.

Even in the second half of the 20th century women in higher and managerial occupations had to fight enormous barriers because they had to struggle against the prejudice that they were not capable of maintaining their positions in what traditionally counted as a male profession. This held true for woman politicians. As the American political scientists Michael Genovese and Seth Thompson formulated it in 1993: “A politically ambitious woman” has to deal with “... tensions between her emerging self-view as capable of functioning effectively at the highest political levels and the generalized social view that neither she nor any other woman has that competence” (Genovese and Thompson 1993, p. 5; also see Adler 1996, p. 145).

Research in the field of female political leadership from, amongst others, the Dutch political scientist Liesbet van Zoonen and the American political scientist Elaine Scorpio shows that general judgements on the competence of woman politicians became less negative up to the end of the twentieth century, but that the view that men are better in what are called hard political areas, like the home office and foreign affairs, defence and economic affairs is very persistent, especially in the United States (Zoonen, van 2007, Scorpio 2008). However, this was also the case in Europe, as is shown for instance, in the overview of the British historians Ruth and Simon Henig. In 1997 only 28.3 percent of all ministerial posts in ten important Western and Northern European countries were occupied by women. The percentage of women in the aforementioned ‘hard’ ministerial posts was negligible, but they were relatively well represented in the ‘soft’ ministerial posts of education, culture, societal work and environment¹ (Henig and Henig 2001, p. 56, 59). It appears that since the new millennium this one sided division of cabinet posts over the

sexes in Europe has lessened, just as the number of female parliamentarians and government leaders has increased (Jalalzai 2013).

How did women politicians manage to compete with the existing prejudices about the competence of women in politics? Foremost they had to show they were competent in dealing with government affairs and politics in general. But the competence of female political leaders should also be apparent in other areas, gender sensitive areas. Namely, it was also important how they combined public and private matters and presented themselves to the public, as well as their style of leadership (Bosch 2007; Zoonen, van 2006).

As exceptional women, female political leaders in general felt vulnerable in their private lives, because such a life deviated from the male political area and the lives of men (Walsh 2001).² The Dutch historian Mineke Bosch has pointed out that it was of paramount importance for women politicians in the past to hide their gender. The important political figures were all male, so it was the male perspective that counted. Women politicians and their world were less important and should be as self-effacing as possible. The few female politicians with a husband and children had to ensure that their family life was perfect so as to avoid criticism: an imperfect family life would increase their vulnerability. After all, until the last quarter of the 20th century the commonly held view was that married women ought to look after their husband and children and should not have a paid job outside the home, let alone participate in the male world of politics. Female politicians tended to be unmarried and tried to hide their private life: all that counted was their political—and public—career (Bosch 2007). A prime example in the Netherlands is Marga Klompé, the first female member of the Dutch Cabinet (1956). Klompé was unmarried and is famous for concealing her private life. She used to boast that the only thing distinguishing her from male politicians was her powder compact. In all other respects, and certainly as a politician, she did not differ from men. She could not be persuaded to write her memoirs because—she told everyone—it testified to a kind of vanity. But her reluctance may have been tied in with a fear of vulnerability. Hilda Verwey-Jonker, a famous Dutch social democratic politician and social scientist in the 1950s and 1960s, who was married and the mother of four children, did write her memoirs. But this piece of work, which is notable for its modesty in many ways and the writer's frequent contentions that her political acts and career achievements were unimportant, could be interpreted as an attempt at self-effacement. The male view that women were less important than men was translated in invisibility (Verwey-Jonker 1988; Steen, van der 2011).

The British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1979–1990) was far from modest, and certainly not in her memoirs, but she too tried to make

herself invisible in her private life—through perfection (Thatcher 1993, 1995) If she was perfect, she would not be criticised for her gender. A perfected political image was her answer to the problem of being a woman in a man's world and the vulnerability this implied. Invisibility could be achieved by going down the same road as Marga Klompé in government affairs. As far as political competence was concerned, Thatcher did not wish to distinguish herself from men. She was tough in parliamentary and government affairs. And indeed, she was judged to be competent in the content of her politics, no matter how controversial her policy was. As Prime Minister she could not conceal her private and family life, but she endeavoured to make them look as perfect as possible, which they were not, of course (Ribberink 2010a, 2012a).

Most woman leaders have been criticised for their appearance and leadership style—no matter how competent in content they were—and therefore paid a price for their status as competent politicians. Because of the fact that they were strong women, they were often considered to be too authoritarian or even 'masculine'. Powerful leadership does not fit the traditional image of femininity.

AUTO/BIOGRAPHIES AND MEMOIRS

The cluster's articles deal especially with the questions: What does a seemingly gender neutral way to write history mean in a field as politics, which is marked by a pronounced gendered character? What is the function of (auto) biographical articles and books on politicians in modern historiography?

First, there are several ways to 'prove' that woman politicians were competent indeed. Written and audiovisual media report on their acts and deeds during their term. This can give an impression about their competence, although the historical verdict about government and politicians afterwards can differ from the judgement of contemporarians. A famous example is the Dutch cabinet lead by prime minister Piet de Jong, from 1967 to 1971, in which Marga Klompé played a prominent role as a cabinet minister of cultural and social affairs. This was the time of the roaring sixties, in which politicians and government were often criticised; this happened with this cabinet, that was labelled as 'dull' and 'conservative'. But nowadays historians are rather positive about this cabinet, because it managed to govern rather well in a difficult period. And Klompé indeed did a good job (Merriënboer, van and Baalen, van, 2013). Second, other means for shedding light on one's life and political acts are biographies and portraits, autobiographies and memoirs. Biographies and portraits have appeared on the Swedish politician Alva Myrdal, about Marga

Klompé, about Margaret Thatcher, about the Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland and the German chancellor Angela Merkel, to name a few. One thing stands out: although some of these women were controversial in their politics, for instance Margaret Thatcher, all of them appear as competent in their biographies (Ribberink 2010b, 2012b).

Writing an autobiography or a memoir could be a way for a protagonist herself to show how competent she had been and at the same time serve to hide her private life, either by actually ignoring it or by describing it as perfect. After female suffrage had been won in several Western countries in the first half of the 20th century, there were some brave women who dared to be pioneers in politics by becoming members of parliament. Even more than after World War II they had to struggle with the prejudice that women could not be good politicians. These pioneers among the women politicians' pioneers fought against a vast number of prejudices and assumptions. During and after their careers some female politicians in Great Britain and Germany wrote their autobiographies, to show how 'perfect' they had functioned in their job. Their autobiographies became their political weapons in retrospect (Cowman 2013, Schaser 2013). And, as it appears, in their autobiographies they tried to be as good—or better—as their male colleagues and did not mention much about their private lives. And of course, they had to be satisfied with the “soft areas” of parliamentary work. Except for one part of foreign politics: their struggle for peace, because women had manifested themselves very much in this field in the women's movements (Cowman 2009, p. 147–152; Hertrampf 2014; Stoehr 2012).

In her article on the Swedish cabinet minister Ulla Lindström (1909–1999) in this cluster, Gunnel Karlsson writes about another instrument to justify oneself: the political diary. Lindström served as minister without portfolio in a social-democratic cabinet in the period 1954–1966, rather a long time. She claims during her term to have repeatedly been attacked in the Swedish press in a sexist way. Because of this experience she published her diary after her term, in 1969 and 1970, being an edited version of the original one that had been made up with the help of shorthand notes. The political persona in her published diary is vastly different from the one appearing in the press during her term. The press used to describe her as an “incompetent” politician, a “...stereotypical woman (...) who talked too much and made *faux pas*”. Needless to say that Lindström did not agree with this verdict. And one wonders how someone who was judged to be incompetent could be a cabinet minister that long.

Katarina Leppänen writes on the Estonian-Finnish author and politician Hella Wuolijoki (1886–1954) who started writing her autobiography in prison, with the aim to legitimise her political development as well as several choices she took in her life. Katarina Leppänen analyses how

Wuolijoki “played” with different author names in order to destabilise a taken-for-granted author position and how she relies on Alexandra Kollontai’s book on the Socialist New Woman.

Last but not least Dietlind Hüchtker shows that politics and gender are also important issues in the life stories of non-privileged groups in the Polish interwar period. Memoir competitions organised by newly founded sociological institutes show a counter-interpretation of Polish society which established gender differences in the new born Polish state. These competitions helped to construct a convincing (auto)biography of the new national state.

All things considered, the articles exemplify how politicians and scholars position themselves in public and create a professional and political identity or a national narrative, for political reasons. The vital question about the meaning of gender is answered by the contributors in different ways, but all articles point in the same direction: gender does matter. Now we see the floor open for complementary articles on male politicians and political scientists and their (auto)biographies, and for texts which introduce a transnational perspective to this field.

The editors,
Tiina Kinnunen
Kirsti Niskanen
Anneke Ribberink
Angelika Schaser

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ABOUT THE EDITORS

Tiina Kinnunen is Professor of Finnish and Northern European History at the University of Oulu, Finland. She has published on the memory cultures of the Civil War 1918 and World War II in Finland with a focus on gender, and the history of European feminism in the long 19th century. She is currently working on a comparative biography of Ellen Key and Alexandra Gripenberg.

Kirsti Niskanen is Professor of History at Stockholm University, Sweden. She has published on gender and social history during the 20th century as well as biography, life writing and the history of social sciences. She is currently working on a monography on international research exchange, gender and “scientific persona”.

Anneke Ribberink was Associate Professor in Political History at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. At the moment she is guest researcher at the same university. She has published on the second feminist wave in the Netherlands and on female political leadership in Western and Northern Europe from the 20th century until now.

Angelika Schaser is Professor for Modern History at Universität Hamburg. She has published on nation and gender in the history of the 19th and 20th centuries as well as on religious conversions, minorities, and auto/biographical research.

NOTES

- 1 The countries involved are Sweden, Norway, France, the Netherlands, Spain, Denmark, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Italy, Germany.
- 2 See especially chapter 3 on the Labour government under the leadership of Tony Blair.