***The visibility (and invisibility) of women and gender in parliamentary discourse during the Portuguese economic crisis (2008-2014)***

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DRAFT PAPER

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*Introduction*

The recent economic crisis affecting southern European countries has been singular in both its intensity and complexity, and as such, it has had a profound impact on the economic, political, social, and institutional realms. However, we still know very little about how discourse regarding the economic crisis and austerity policies has constructed *by* different actors and *about* different actors.

Portugal suffered two consecutive economic recessions, one following the international financial crisis of 2007-2008 and the other following the European sovereign debt crisis. In 2011, the country received a bailout package from the international financial institutions - the ‘Troika’, but in return had to commit to implement drastic ‘adjustment programs’ that would rebalance its budget and meet fiscal consolidation demands (Armingeon and Baccaro 2012, 254). This led to three years of large-scale cuts in social expenditure, public sector reforms, and tax increases Freire, Lisi and Viegas 2015). Although the economic crisis is a complex phenomenon affecting both men and women, research has shown that austerity driven measures adopted to alleviate the crisis have had disproportionally adverse consequences for women (Ferreira 2014; Karamessini and Rubery 2014). Indeed, a 2013 Eurobarometer poll[[1]](#footnote-2) shows that women, more than men, perceive that the economic crisis led to an increase in the pay gap, to more violence towards women, and to more job insecurity. Moreover, data from the 2014 *Gender Equality Report*[[2]](#footnote-3) shows that it is among Southern European citizens that gender inequality issues are more of a concern.[[3]](#footnote-4)

Recent policy debates in Portugal have started to address the impacts of several years of economic crisis and austerity policies on women relative to men. Particularly, the effects of these policies on gender equality in employment, on what the retrenchment of the welfare state represents for women, on increasing domestic violence, and on the decline of birth-rates. However, we do not know how these specific dimensions gained visibility vis-á-vis other potential gendered concerns. In fact, there is little research addressing how discourse on women and gender has been constructed by politicians during the crisis. Was gender inequality mentioned in tandem with a range of other social inequalities in Portuguese parliamentary debates? Is there a perception that the recession affected women more than men? Are female MPs, compared to male MPs, more actively voicing the gendered impacts of the crisis? These are some of the central questions this chapter engages with. The structure of the chapter is as follows, a theoretical overview regarding political discourse and discursive representation; an assessment of women experiences during the crisis; a methodology section; and the empirical section and analysis of parliamentary discourse on women and gender.

***Political discourse and women’s discursive representation in times of crisis***

Economic crisis are mostly “events for which people seek causes and make attributions” (Coombs and Holladay 2004, 97). Therefore, in the process of providing an evaluation of the economic crisis, parliamentary members are key political actors that construct discourses about the causes of the economic crisis, those responsible, those affected, and its prospects. All of this with the intent to influence the public’s perceptions and to construct a narrative regarding the most affected groups and the most viable solutions (An and Gower 2009). As Freire (2013, 69) summarizes it, the economic crisis is a phenomenon constructed by distinct social, political, and economic actors and such constructions, such meanings, are both descriptive and performative, they describe *and* create the reality of the economic crisis. In Portugal, state actors and parliamentary members are among the most influential political actors in the economic crisis. In fact, Moury and Standing argue that discursively there was a strengthening of the executive power during the economic crisis and a de-legitimation of non-state actors(2015, 4-5). Thus, parliamentary members appear as crucial actors involved in an ideological and gendered construction of meanings to the public, in which they are both in a privileged position to incorporate differences of power, and to give rise to particular relations of power. Following a Foucauldian perspective, the “reality of the economic crisis” cannot be known or interpreted outside of discourse, since we must conceive “discourse as a violence which we do to things, or in any case as a practice which we impose on them” (Foucault 1984, 127).

I argue that silencing or voicing a particular social group is an active construction of meaning and a performance in claim making (Saward 2006). If the political system does not address women’s reality, their experiences, their struggles, women lack substantive representation (Pitkin 1967) and do not see themselves in politics. Thus, the lack of discursive representation impacts the substantive representation of women and can further alienate women from the political process. Dryzek and Niemeyer argue that democracy entails also the representation of discourses not just persons or groups (2008, 481). Therefore, it is in the women’s interest that their experiences are accounted for in parliamentary debates, since those both *reflect* and *influence* political decision-making.

Women’s discursive representation can occur in two main ways, one is through the recognition of women as a separate and relevant social category. The second is through the acknowledgment of an unequally gendered balance of power (Wängnerud 2000, 70). One facet of representation is defined as the “substantive acting for other” (Pitkin 1967), so the ways in which women and gender inequality are captured in parliamentary discourse, the kind of visibility given by MPs to women and to gender issues, is reflective not only of what representatives ‘do’, but also of the creative and interactive process of constructing a narrative about the “reality” of the economic crisis and those affected.

***Understanding women’s situation during the crisis***

Research on women in the era of post-crisis austerity has argued that the global financial crisis has launched “a set of profound cultural shifts” (Negra and Tasker 2014), and that austerity policies represent “a critical juncture” for gender and social regimes at the EU level and at the country and regional levels (Karamessini and Rubery 2014; Paleo and Alonso 2015).

In Portugal, there has been some research on how the economic crisis and women and austerity policies have impacted women and gender equality. But there is far less work on political representation and political discourse on women and gender (Espírito Santo and Lisi 2015, 430). My research addresses this gap and builds on the current literature on austerity in order to understand how these challenges women were facing are discursively constructed.

Most of the impacts during the crisis and austerity in Portugal affected the labor market, labor relations, unionism, and the restructuring of the welfare state and public sector (Costa 2014; Ferreira 2011; Guerreiro 2014; Leite et al., 2014; Natali and Stamati 2014). Male employment was hit first by the crisis in 2009 (particularly the manufacturing and construction sectors), while women’s employment started contracting a year later, mostly due to job losses in agriculture, manufacturing and private households (Ferreira 2014, 213-215). Unemployment affected men and women of all age groups[[4]](#footnote-5) and impacted the consumption habits and nutritional choices of families[[5]](#footnote-6) (Wall et al. 2015). As unemployment rose throughout the crisis, it affected mostly those with less education, while graduates were the least affected (Wall et al. 2015, 31; Ferreira 2014, 219).

The recession’s impact was not the same across all social groups. Some economic sectors and groups were the worst affected by the crisis: younger male and female workers, female self-employed workers, civil servants, domestic employees, unpaid family workers and fixed-term contract workers (Ferreira 2014, 219).

Unemployment was a major contributor to poverty since the outset of the economic crisis. Children (0 to 17 years old) were the age group at the highest risk of poverty, a risk that increases considerably depending on the unemployment status of parents or single-parent households (Wall et al. 2015, 30-34). But unemployment was just one of the several factors impacting women’s lives during the crisis. The increase in the cost of living, the reduction of family incomes, the retrenchment of the welfare state, and overall cuts in social provisions, all contributed to the strains felt by women and families during the economic crisis (Leite et al. 2014, 110; Ferreira 2015, 224; Costa 2014). Some of the most dramatic measures implemented following the *Memorandum of Agreement*[[6]](#footnote-7) targeted public sector workers, a sector in which women are much more represented than men. Some of these measures were: salary cuts, lack of career advancement, decrease in pensions and retirement benefits, and an increase in working hours (Costa 2014, 48).[[7]](#footnote-8) This added to an already traditionally strenuous’ work-life balance of Portuguese women (Casaca 2012; Crompton and Lyonette 2006; Perista 2002).

Austerity measures also curtailed the provision of social benefits and cash allowances for families, raised direct and indirect taxation (with an impact in the cost of living), deregulated labor markets leading to more flexibility in the termination of work contracts and elimination of job posts, and decreased unemployment subsidies, while demanding stricter conditions to apply to those subsidies (Wall et al. 2015, 75; Ferreira 2015, 220; Costa 2014, 47-48). Ferreira also alludes to the ‘feminization of the labor force’ during the crisis; the Portuguese male workforce were affected in a way that made it resemble the female labor force more. That is, more disposable, more flexible, more precarious (Ferreira 2015, 221).

Employment standards dropped during the economic crisis in a way that was similar to how the female labor force was structured before the crisis (Ferreira and Monteiro 2015, 60). Costa and Leite et al. also allude to a similar point by noting how austerity policies contributed to an overall “devaluation of the individual worker” and to the “decline of workers’ rights” (Costa 2014, 49; Leite et al. 2014, 110). Since in Portugal the women’s employment share has been traditionally high[[8]](#footnote-9), this devaluation of the worker is sure to have impacted women as well. Despite some increasing similarities between the male and female labor force, there are still significant gender asymmetries regarding pay, labor flexibility, and part-time work. Women are underpaid compared to men and overrepresented on short-term contracts and part-time work (Casaca 2012: 25-28). These gender inequalities in the Portuguese labor market not only persisted, but were strengthened by the economic crisis, thus contributing to reinforce traditional gender representations of male and female roles.[[9]](#footnote-10)

The changes in labor relations, the increasing unemployment (with half of the unemployed not eligible for unemployment subsidies), the loss of social benefits, the cuts in family allowances and the overall decline in purchasing power, all contributed to the “reinforcement of the informal welfare society, whose main pillar is the family, or, in other words, the unpaid work of women” (Ferreira 2015, 225). Women, families and the family home, emerged as a support mechanism and as a protective space during the crisis for the most vulnerable in Portuguese society (the unemployed youth, the elderly, children).[[10]](#footnote-11) Women, as family members and neighbors, played a central role in the family and in the networks of community support, since it was mostly them, not men, who provided economic redistributive assistance and caregiving (Lima 2016, 82). Additionally, the overrepresentation of women in the service sector, education and social services further reinforced gender roles that placed women in feminized jobs, thus perpetuating gender segregation at work (Souza 2015, 261, and contributing to a return to traditional gender roles (Karamessini 2014, 14; Negra and Tasker 2014).

The impact of the economic crisis was also felt on health, health systems, and particularly on the decline of mental health in countries adopting strict fiscal austerity (Antunes 2015; Silva 2012; Karanikolos et al. 2013). In terms of gender differences, women are more vulnerable to stress, anxiety and depression, while men more likely to commit suicide and to increase alcohol consumption[[11]](#footnote-12) (Serra 2014, 130).

The media also given considerable attention to the surge in domestic violence in Portugal during the economic crisis. On average, five women died a week due to causes connected directly or indirectly to domestic violence (Almeida 2014, 5), and domestic violence was diagnosed as a health crisis according to the IV National Plan Against Domestic Violence (a state sponsored plan).

The economic crisis and the austerity policies also have affected birth rates (Nunan and Peixoto 2012; Peixoto 2012; Padilla and Ortiz 2012). In comparison to other EU countries, Portugal is “less childless, more single child, and less second births” (Cunha 2014, 22), and has experienced a steep decline in births in recent years that coincided with the economic crisis.[[12]](#footnote-13) Family-friendly policies are increasingly part of the political discourse but have been unable to tackle low fertility and maternity postponement in any effective way. This is probably because these issues are related to broader ones, such as, job insecurity, the persistence of gender inequalities in paid and unpaid work, and women's workload with housework, family care and community support (Wall and Escobedo 2013; Amancio 2007; Monteiro and Ferreira 2015).

In conclusion, to better understand the total dimension of the gender-specific impact of the economic crisis, one has to analyze not only its impact on economic constrains, on changes in health care regimes, or on the retrenchment of the welfare state, but also how all these changes, in turn, influenced the social dynamics of gender relations. Santos (2011, 76) provides an example of just such a dynamic. When the state makes substantial cuts in social provisions, society needs to balance the retreating of the welfare state. Women then take on that role and are overrepresented in doing so, but in the process, traditional gender roles are reinforced and women tend to lose autonomy.

***The political system and women’s representation***

The Portuguese democratic system tends to be highly centralized and closed. It is not inclusive of new political or social actors, is rooted on a feeble civil society, is characterized by weak women’s movements,[[13]](#footnote-14) and few political opportunity structures for feminist actors (Monteiro and Ferreira 2012; 14; Jalali 2007; Freire and Baum 2001). This political system is dominated by highly centralized political parties, whose members come mostly from educated urban elites mostly disconnected from its constituents (Monteiro 2011, 33).

The political landscape of the economic crisis is characterized by an overall decline of trust in the political class, the worsening of economic conditions, and the perception of poor management by the government (Teperoglou et al. 2014, 459). Inside the political parties, women party members are often underrepresented and lack real power compared to men (Lisboa, et al. 2006, 178). This can be ascertained both by the exclusion of women from decision-making processes and the reduced role of women’s departments inside the parties (Jímenez 2009; Monteiro 2011, 41-45). Even after 2005, with the implementation of gender quotas, women’s representation in government was at the highest point only at 20%, while in parliament women make-up for just 30% of all MPs.[[14]](#footnote-15) As Verge and Espírito Santo pointed out, while the gender quotas led to a feminized party office, the “core positions are still gendered and women are still absent from decision-making arenas” (2014, 11). Women do not hold top political office, i.e., Prime-Ministers, Ministers, and Secretary of State, and are mostly represented in middle level positions[[15]](#footnote-16) (Lisboa, et al. 2006, 182). Furthermore, women’s policy agencies (the state feminist branch) and gender equality agendas, tend to have a marginal status within the governmental apparatus and programs.[[16]](#footnote-17) As Monteiro and Ferreira conclude, in Portugal the articulation between women’s movements and the state women’s agencies has “not produced significant political outcomes in terms of gender equality and mainstreaming”, and gender issues are still perceived has having “limited relevance” and “low political prestige” (2012, 18-24).

Gender inequalities are not a source of electoral competiveness and are mostly absent from electoral programs and discourses[[17]](#footnote-18) (Jiménez 2009, 239). Krook argues that Portugal possesses one of the configurations that generates low levels of women’s representation in Parliament, which is “[having] quotas, women’s low status, non-autonomous women’s movements and weak new left parties.” (2010, 897). All of these factors tend to lead to a political discourse on the economic crisis that is mostly the *ungendered* discourse of male political elites. But one cannot assume that parliamentary’ discourse is uniform across parties or insulated from the discourse of non-institutional actors or even everyday discourse (Chilton and Schäffner 2002, 7). In fact, the indifference towards gender inequalities or gender issues might not just be confined to political elites, but could also be a characteristic of Portuguese society in general (Ferreira 2000).

***Methodology: Critical Discourse Analysis***

This study investigates seven years of parliamentary debates on the economic crisis and austerity policies combining Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and frame analysis as research tools. This approach concerns how politicians accomplish specific personal, social and political projects through the use of language (Schiffrin, Tannen, and Hamilton 2001). Thus, it is important to assess how meanings are expressed and constructed, by examining how the story is told and how group identities emerge and reflect an understanding of reality that is created and mediated through language. Critical discourse analysis assumes from the start that language is invested and that meanings are constructed without neutrality. Thus, messages are not just transmitted, but are instead a ‘communicative event’ constructed in a particular way of understanding an aspect of the world, and operating as a representation of the agendas of the speakers (Fairclough 2001; van Dijk 2001, 98; Phillips and Jørgensen 2002). The CDA approach explores, and critiques, how the use of language is embedded in a social-cultural practice and links that to how values and attitudes are presented and how they express vested interests. This is a methodological approach well suited for a gender analysis.

Frames are also a powerful mechanism that define, construct, and make sense of causes, problems, and potential solutions regarding the economic crisis and austerity policies. Discourse makes certain utterances possible while it suppresses others – the ideological machination of discourse (Ferree et al. 2002).

Data collection started with selecting within parliamentary debates the main keywords for the study: ‘austerity’ and ‘economic crisis.’ Once those debates and documents were located, another set of words were searched within that data. Those words were woman/women, wife/husband, mother/father, gender, feminine/masculine/feminist, and female worker, as well as the plural form of these words. Data was analyzed primarily by looking at the utterance of these specific words, a unit smaller than the debate or the document as a whole.

All parliamentary debates were available online through the Parliament official website (<http://debates.parlamento.pt/search.aspx?cid=r3.dar>) and data was collected online from February to May of 2015. The terms austerity (*austeridade*) and economic crisis (*crise económica*) were searched to determine low and high-utterance of those terms per debate and per year. Parliamentary debates with only one or two utterances were excluded from the sample, but all the debates with three or more utterances were included. All of the high-incidence debates were coded and analyzed for both austerity and economic crisis. A total of 3956 utterances of the words 'austerity' and 'economic crisis' were coded and used to locate utterances on ‘women and gender’.

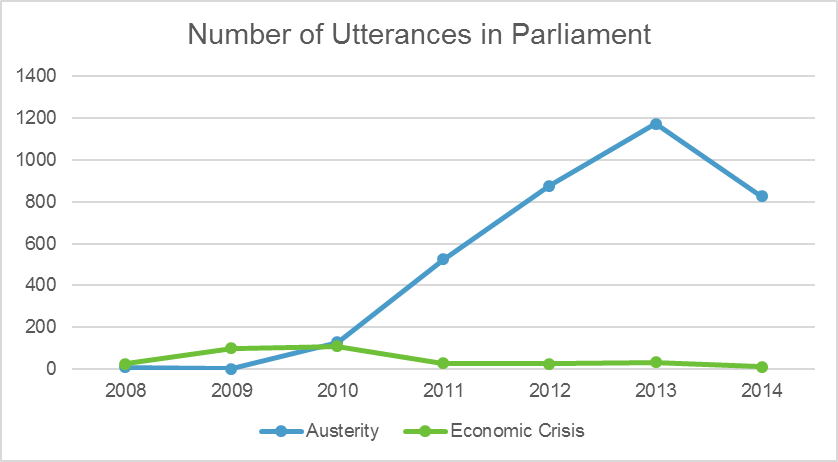
Several coding instruments were used to trace political discourse. The unit of analysis is the utterance in the parliamentary debates. An *utterance* is the speech act or statement produced by a single speaker (Ferree et al. 2002, 50). The coding procedure was to first code each utterance with regard to the *speaker* (political party of the MP, in government or opposition, gender of the MP), and second to code all the *idea elements* contained in each utterance. Often times, ideas were grouped into clusters of ideas that were similar even across different *frames*.

Once the data were coded, I also included framing typically used when analyzing any type of crisis. I used a set of crisis frames and adapted those to the economic crisis and austerity policies and how women and gender enter the discourse.

***The invisibility of women during the first years of the economic crisis***

An analysis of parliamentary discourse reveals that the term ‘austerity’ is far more popular than ‘economic crisis’ in parliamentary debates. Also, the life-cycle of the two terms does not coincide in Parliament (Figure1). This is to be expected, since the international financial crisis in 2007-2008 and its potential impacts on Portugal, led to ‘economic crisis’ being debated from early on. Austerity policies were only formally enacted in 2011, following the fiscal consolidation measures agreed with the Troika, so references to austerity only began to take shape in 2010 involving discussions about the national debt and the need to address it with a bailout.

Figure 1.



One of the most striking findings is how women and gender were rarely addressed in the first years of the economic crisis (Table 1). In fact, 'women and gender' were only mentioned 13 times in four years of parliamentary debates. In order to have a better grasp of the relative importance of ‘women and gender’, I also compare this category to other potential groups.

Table 1

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| # of utterances | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | TOTAL | % |
| Economic Crisis + Austerity | 43 | 139 | 269 | 552 | 1003 | % |
| 'women and gender' | 1 | 3 | 6 | 3 | 13 | 1.3% |
| 'youth' | 1 | 35 | 26 | 18 | 80 | 8.0% |
| 'family' | 23 | 77 | 113 | 132 | 345 | 34.4% |
| 'worker' | 11 | 52 | 89 | 101 | 253 | 25.2% |

Of a total of 1003 utterances on ‘economic crisis’ and ‘austerity' in the first four years, ‘women’ were only mentioned in 1.3% of total utterances. In contrast, MPs mentioned ‘youth’ (8%), ‘families’ (34%) and ‘workers’ (25%) more often. Thus showing that any of these categories is more salient than ‘women and gender’ in economic crisis debates. Women or gender inequality are not salient categories of inequality, victimization, or any kind of politicization. Women and gender were politically ignored by parliamentary members (of all parties) or implicitly subsumed into other categories (families, the poor, the unemployed, etc).

Additionally, in the first four years 'women and gender' were also mentioned mostly in conjunction with another group, not as a stand-alone, relevant social category. Out of the thirteen times ‘women' were mentioned, nine of those utterances were followed by a reference to another group. For example, “(…) unemployment affects mostly the youth and women”[[18]](#footnote-19) or “(…) the government needs to protect… the children, the elderly, and single mothers”[[19]](#footnote-20). While the lack of utterances on ‘women and gender’ speaks to how women were not politicized or deemed relevant in the overall discourse. Being mentioned mostly in conjunction with other victimization groups (children/elderly) shows the low status of ‘women and gender’ as a social category of inequality in the overall discourse, and reflects a lack of discursive representation of women in Parliament.

***The gender turn?***

Parliamentary discourse from 2008 to 2011 was mostly *un-gendered*, but in the following years the discursive representation of women changed considerably. While in 2011 there were only 3 utterances of ‘women and gender’, in 2012 that number rose to 94 total utterances (Table 2).

Figure 2.

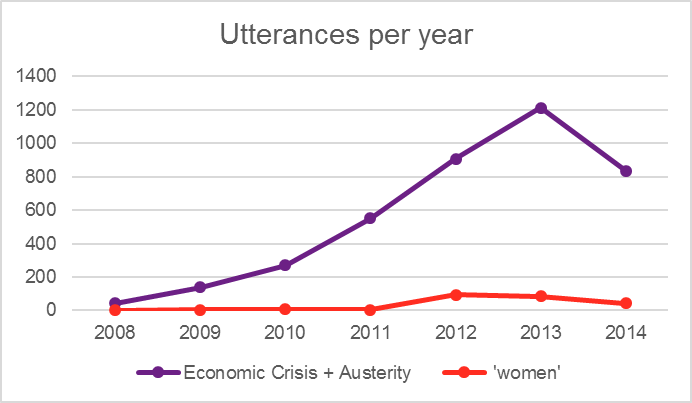


Table 2.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| # of utterances | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | TOTAL |
| Economic Crisis + Austerity | 43 | 139 | 269 | 552 | 907 | 1210 | 836 | 3956 |
| 'women and gender' | 1 | 3 | 6 | 3 | **94** | 86 | 44 | 237 |
| 'women and gender'' % | 2.3 | 2.2 | 2.2 | 0.5 | 10.4 | 7.1 | 5.3 | 6.0 |

As we see in both Figure 2 and Table 2, utterances on the economic crisis and austerity increase exponentially already in 2011, but the increase in utterances on ‘women and gender’ only start in 2012. Both in absolute and in relative terms, ‘women and gender’ are mentioned more often in the parliamentary discourse of the last three years than in the earlier period. What can explain these variations? Although a definite answer might still alludes us, a governmental change from the Socialists to a center-right coalition government in the summer of 2011 is sure to have contributed to these changes. Research has shown that it is mostly left-wing MPs that tend to address gender concerns in parliament (Celis and Childs 2014; Lovenduski 2007; Monteiro 2011; Prata 2012). Therefore, it is plausible that left-wing party opposition to the new government, has contributed to the increase of utterances on ‘women and gender’. Mentioning the social costs of tough austerity measures opened the door towards the visibility of ‘women’ as one of the main social groups affected. But 2012 is also characterized by strong mobilizations of Portuguese citizens (Baumgarten 2013, 3; Accornero and Pinto 2015), which probably also produced spill-over effects on parliamentary discourse.

If there was indeed a ‘gender turn’ in parliamentary discourse in 2012, how was discourse on ‘women and gender’ constructed and what speakers were responsible for voicing it in Parliament? In order to answer these questions, I take a dual approach to the empirical analysis. First, I look at the main idea elements that are present when we break down the category of ‘women and gender’ into all its components. Second, I look at what were the most prevalent frames of ‘women and gender’ within the parliamentary debates on the economic crisis and austerity. In both approaches, speakers are taken into account in order to grasp who were the MPs substantively representing women in Parliament.

*“Even in austerity there is gender discrimination!” – The construction of women’s economic victimization*

References to ‘woman’ or ‘women’ considerably outnumbered all the other components of the category (Figure 3). This is to be expected because the term ‘woman’ has much broader usage compared to the other terms.

Figure 3.

MPs spoke of women in the context of the economic crisis and austerity measures mostly as a way to underscore how women were victimized economically. Utterances on women’s victimization display this group particular vulnerability, specify their victimization process, those to blame, and potential solutions. Likewise, the most prevalent framing on the impacts of the economic crisis on women and gender were also economic.[[20]](#footnote-21) Here are some examples from parliamentary debates of how both women’s victimization and economic framing were constructed by MPs:

“(…) we know that women are the biggest victims of unemployment among this cataclysm of unemployment that the country faces. We know that women have lower salaries than men. We know that women are subject to greater precariousness… so naturally the Government has responsibility.”

(Female MP, Green Party, DR 7/9/2014)

“ (…) the Portuguese were the victims of a brutal increase in [price of] transportation; yesterday we learned the record numbers of unemployment and that women are the main victims of unemployment, precariousness and low wages. Even in austerity there is gender discrimination! … the policies of this Government have excavated the crisis and have made women its victims”

(Female MP, Left Bloc, DR 2/2/2012)

“(…) the scenario is even darker and harder for women. We live in a profound economic and social crisis, where once again women are in the front line of unemployment, of precariousness, of low wages, and low pensions. Women make up most of the 400 000 workers getting minimum wage. … Women and children are the biggest percentage of those living below the poverty line.”

(Female MP, Communist party, DR 2/2/2012)

“(…) grassroots organizations … that fight against domestic violence, they tell us that it were the cuts in social provisions, the cuts in social benefits that have substantially reduced women’s autonomy. What they say is that austerity policies have led to the increase of these heinous crimes.”

(Female MP, Left Bloc, DR 10/30/2012)

Women were mentioned as vulnerable and as victims, mostly in their role as “women workers”. They were singled out by parliamentary members as a *relevant* category of victimization, mostly through their presence in the labor force. Even in the few instances when women were portrayed as victims of domestic violence, economic reasons, such as, cuts in social provisions or unemployment, were the main explanatory variables of women’s victimization. In this context, it is the economic conjuncture of the crisis and austerity measures that are to blame, not aggressive partners or a patriarchal culture. Likewise, gender inequality in the labor market was also mostly presented as the result of the economic crisis and not part of an institutional work-culture that has long discriminated against women even before the crisis. In fact, the economic framing regarding the impacts of the economic crisis is not only prevalent, it’s hegemonic. Both problems and solutions to gender inequality, labor market discrimination, or a lack of women’s protections, were often presented almost exclusively as economic or political, not cultural or institutional. In other words, for the most part MPs do not acknowledge the unequal balance of power between the sexes as part of the diagnosis or prognosis of women’s victimization during the crisis.

Utterances of ‘gender’ and ‘feminist’ were scarce within parliamentary debates (28 total utterances in seven years). Gender was mostly utilized in the context of domestic violence. MPs mentioned how we need to fight against ‘this gender violence', how we need to take on ‘a gender perspective’ to solve the domestic violence problem, or on how we need to promote ‘gender equality’. 'Feminist' is also used in similar ways. For example, MPs mentioned how we need to commit to a ‘feminist vision of society’, or how the Left Bloc is 'committed to all feminist struggles’. The construction of both gender and feminist appears in parliamentary discourse often tied to intentions and to 'what we ought to do’, and less as part of an existing pressing reality or as part of the diagnosis of the crisis.

References to ‘mothers’ and ‘fathers’ in parliamentary discourse on the economic crisis are somewhat distinct. Similarly to women as 'workers', women as 'mothers' are also mentioned in the context of economic victimization and vulnerability caused by measures implemented by the government.

“They are victims when pregnant and they are victims when mothers, they receive lower wages and when they don’t get fired - and being fired is recurring in these situations - … they take a pay cut! These are unacceptable discriminations.”

(Female MP, Left Bloc, 3/9/2013)

"with the latest [price] increases announced... A family with a father, mother and two children who live in central Lisbon spend over 36 euros more per month on transportation. If they have to commute from Sintra to Lisbon…the monthly fee increases to 100 euros. This is unaffordable!”

(Female MP, Left Bloc, 6/22/2012)

As we see from the quotes, mothers appear in the discourse mostly in conjunction with other victimized groups, such as children or the unemployed, not as relevant category on their own. Some of the utterances on ‘father’, however are distinct and introduce into the debate the idea of who are to blame for the social and economic crisis.

“The fathers of the financial, economic, and social instability of our country now want to add to that legacy also political instability."

(Male MP, Social Democratic Party, 4/4/2013)

“The illusion, the spending, and the debt are the progenitors of austerity, and these politicians some of who speak here ... are the biological fathers of the strain the country is experiencing.

(Male MP, Social Democratic Party, 10/31/2012)

‘Father’ becomes a category used in parliamentary discourse also as a metaphor about who was actively responsible for the economic situation of the country. While ‘mother’ was presented mostly as a ‘passive’ construction of victims. These constructions by MPs also reflect gendered constructions of meanings of mother and father and a stereotypical and patriarchical way of organizing political discourse.

While economic framing dominates the discourse on the gender impacts of the economic crisis, 'social justice’ also appears in the debates. That is, framing the economic crisis and austerity measures as producing socially unequal impacts. MPs that use this framing commonly juxtapose those that seem to fair well during the crisis with those that do not, those that should be blamed for the crisis, with those that are impacted by the crisis. In this 'us' versus ‘them' dichotomy, the government, the troika and rescued banks are the 'them', while women and other social groups are presented as the ‘us’.

"While social provisions are stolen and child benefits are taken away affecting more than 1,25 million children, while women are pushed into poverty and accept new forms of slavery such as the exploitation from prostitution, and they accept it as inevitable in times of crisis. At the same time, you give banks 12 000 million of euros… to some all sacrifices are demanded while others are handed privileges.”

(Male MP, Communist Party, 3/22/2012)

This ‘social justice’ frame is often used by left-wing MPs to questions the priorities, the morality, and even the justice of the austerity policies of the government.

In regards to speakers, we find some outstanding results. The MPs that voice women’s victimization and women’s struggles in parliament are mostly female MPs and mostly from left-wing parties. In fact, more than 70% of all utterances on ‘women and gender’ can be traced back to MPs from the Left Bloc, the Communists, and the Greens. Politically, voicing women in Parliament is part of an on overall left-wing party strategy of criticizing the policies of the center-right coalition government. This finding is consistent with research from Freire, Lisi and Viegas (2015, 406) that demonstrates that MPs critiques of the economic crisis tend to follow the traditional ideological cleavages of Left and Right. Thus, it is mostly the left-wing parties (and the radical left-wing) that contest the center-right coalition, while Socialists tend to be more cooperative.

Across all political parties, female MPs are the ones giving women’s issues visibility. And among those, it was mostly the left-wing female MPs that were responsible for most of the discursive representation of women in the parliamentary debates on the economic crisis. Although this group was a minority, compared to the majority of male MPs, or even to the female MPs from the Socialist and Social Democratic parties, they were nonetheless overrepresented as speakers within these parliamentary debates.

Finally, another way ‘women and gender’ appear on economic crisis’ discourse is also through symbolic dates, collective actions of women’s movements, and anti-austerity mobilizations. All these contributed to increase the visibility of ‘women and gender’ in parliamentary discourse. The Women’s International Day, the 25th of April, a petition from the Women's Democratic Movement, and anti-austerity mobilizations are all examples of how political events or collective actions create opportunities for the discursive representation of women in Parliament. Here is an example:

“What do you have to say to those that demonstrated in the streets on the 15th and the 21st, and that will demonstrate this Saturday? How can you tell the men and women that have no work, that can’t support their families, that the government is honoring their word?”

(Female MP, Left Bloc, 9/28/2012)

Both events and collective actions all represent discursive opportunities that are connected to a dynamic institutional context. Therefore, as mobilizations in the streets unfold, so thus the involvement of the Left Bloc party in supporting social movement activity (Freire, Lisi and Viegas 2015, 406). Both of these played a role on how this party constructed their opposition and their discourse in Parliament. Discourse always possesses an interactive dimension, which is made of the relation between discourses and the institutional context in which they are embedded (Forest and Lombardo 2012, 17-18).

Conclusion

In parliamentary discourse, ‘women and gender’ as issues have had their own history throughout the economic crisis. From being neglected during the first four years, to constituting a separate and relevant social category in discourse after 2012.

From 2008 to 2011, women’s experiences and struggles during the economic crisis were silenced and women lacked discursive representation in Parliament. This happened at a time when other social groups, such as, youth or workers were already part of the discourse.

In 2012, following a governmental change, the Memorandum of Agreement, and unprecedented civil society mobilizations, ‘women and gender’ enter the parliamentary discourse on the crisis and austerity. But the construction of women as a relevant social category was closely tied to valuing women as 'workers' and as ‘mothers’. Both dimensions were instrumental for MPs to construct the victimization of women and for the recognition of this social group as one impacted by the crisis. Women were victimized first and foremost economically, by unemployment, by declining purchasing power, by cuts in social provisions, by tax increases. Women gained visibility mostly because of their participation in the labor force or through their family roles. This happened while young women, migrant women or retired women still remained invisible. Likewise, only some dimensions of gender inequality were made visible, while others were neglected. For the most part, MPs ignored how the crisis and austerity measures created increasing challenges with reconciliation, sexual harassment, reinforced traditional gender roles, and contributed to women’s loss of autonomy.

I argue in this chapter that while the last three years of the crisis in Portugal provided women with some discursive representation, women still lacked substantive representation, since most MPs did not acknowledge the unequally gendered balance of power or how the economic crisis affected the dynamics of gender relations following the retrenchment of the welfare state. In other words, 'speaking of women' is not the same as 'speaking for women'. The reality of the economic crisis created by the discourse of parliamentary members was narrowly constructed and based mostly on the discursive hegemony of economic impacts and economic victimization.

On a final note, this chapter also shows that while the discursive representation of ‘women and gender’ increased in the Portuguese Parliament as the crisis unfolded, overall the issue of gender equality was still of no particular importance to most parliamentary groups. In fact, ‘women’ compared to ‘youth’ and ‘worker’ were always less politically salient. In addition, the group that pursued gender equality issues more actively and gave visibility to ‘women and gender’ as a social category was also relatively small, those were the left-wing female MPs. This finding seems to support the theory of the politics of presence (Phillips 1995, 66). Although this group was not very big, it was made almost exclusively of women, speaking for women.

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1. The Eurobarometer report on this poll was accessed on 5/2/2013 and is available on the website <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/eurobarometre/2013/femme/synth\_PT.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Source: Special Eurobarometer 428, Gender Equality Report, March 2014. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/files/documents/eurobarometer\_report\_2015\_en.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. In Spain, Greece and Portugal views on the ‘need to tackle gender inequality’ and that ‘Equality between men and women is a fundamental right’ are the most widespread within the EU countries (97% to 99%). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. From 2010 to 2013 the number of unemployed couples registered in employment centers increased 688% (Wall et al. 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. A few studies have begun to address how food-insecurity increased in Portugal throughout the crisis (Duarte 2014; Wall et al. 2015) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Austerity measures were the result of the implementation by the Portuguese government of what was agreed upon in the 2011 *Memorandum of Agreement* following the financial assistance (78.000 million Euros) provided by the IMF, the European Central Bank and the European Commission (the Troika). In return Portugal had to commit itself to a fiscal consolidation strategy and to make structural reforms in several sectors (labor market, judicial system, health system, housing and services, etc). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. The Memorandum Agreement increases the weekly hours worked by public workers from 35 to 40 hours. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. From 1999 to 2010, 61,1% of Portuguese women were employed (ages 15 to 64), while the EU average for the same time period was 59.5% (Casaca 2012: 119). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Employers tend to offer part-time work mostly to women and women due to ideological and practical constrains “opt” for this work (Casaca 2012:33). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Wall et al. also mentions as well the crucial role of grandparents as part of this support network that helped buffer some of the adverse consequences of the economic crisis (2015:189). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Among the EU15, Portugal placed fourth on reported anxiety and feelings of sadness, and third on citizens feeling depressed. According to Serra this decline on mental health is undoubtedly linked to the economic crisis and to the implementation of austerity measures (2014: IX). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Although it follows a long-term and steady reduction that has been happening since the 1970s. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. A notable exception was the significant mobilization of women’s organizations during the struggle for abortion decriminalization (Prata 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Only in the small left-wing party, *Bloco de Esquerda*, women occupy leadership positions and are represented above 30% (Verge and Espírito Santo 2014; Jiménez 2009, 236). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. This happens independently of the ideological orientation of the government, with no significant statistical difference if the government is center-right or center-left. Women are only 7.1% of all nominations for top political office and they tend to be more represented when there is a one-party government instead of a coalition (Lisboa, et al. 2006, 179-182). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Following austerity policies, significant cuts were made to the budget of women’s state agencies. This resulted in eliminating or defunding gender equality programs, and led to the restructuring the equality machinery (Monteiro and Ferreira 2012, 18). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. In Portugal, the center-right PPD-PSD has often been the governing party, and its female party members have reported the pressure to “act as male politicians”, and not to tackle gender-related issues due to fears of damaging their political careers (Jiménez 2009, 259). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. DR, 1/23/2010, n.25, p.18. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. DR, 7/1/2011, n.3, p.13 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. The economic crisis/austerity are constructed in terms of the economic impacts on women or gender issues. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)