Women candidates: the relationships between gender, media and discourse

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ABSTRACT

On this paper we discuss, within the cross over of two representations – woman and politic function – the media's power to influence voters' choices and their roles as interpreters of media messages. Under a position that understands the relativity of the media's power, we set the idea of gender discourse as a mediator of its influence. Whereas literature shows how a candidate suffers an important effect of media exposition, transformed in a marketing product, we suggest that women in politics suffer from the stereotype that states "women's place is at home". We conclude that women politic participation is strongly linked to the way in which they are represented in the common sense and a change in the hegemonic discourses about women that cross individuals and social groups becomes necessary as to have this situation modified.

Key Words: Gender; Politics; Elections; Discourse; Media

Media influence and the public sphere

The influence of the media on public opinion is of interest to both the general population and social scientists. Elections to political positions customarily raise this discussion, in which the suggestibility of voters to the communication media is questioned. Although the literature concerning the political debate, or that is social scientists, has not always sufficiently considered the power of the media - very often delegating it to a secondary position - [1] the discussion of the relationship between the media and political practice in Brazil in recent years has received important contributions.

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[1] Luis Felipe MIGUEL, 2000.

Considering that mass culture requires the individual to lose or to not form an image of oneself in relation to society, according to Darcy Azambuja,[2] the media operates on individuals in order to manipulate their choices and political behavior. In this perspective, these individuals do not have a notion that they are influenced by the mass media, developing, for example, a passive position before the news presented by newspapers or TV programs, and gradually annul any critical position in relation to the message. Thus, according to Azambuja, individuals and social groups are nothing more than mere receptors who accept prepared opinions that come from the media, without considering how these messages are constituted in other instances, and adhere to these ideas as if they were in fact their own productions.

In a less critical position, it has also been considered that the media encompasses contradictory institutional logics.[3] On one hand, the communication media are run as businesses and are instruments for political-social influence. But they cannot remain indifferent to public opinion because they depend on their audience. The formation of opinions by the communication media, therefore, takes place through the exercise of an institutionalized liberty that can modify the opinions that are developed over time.

But if the media traditionally has had an "invisible presence" in political literature, the influence of large monopolies of information, on the other, is felt in Brazilian political campaigns, in which they demonstrate an unparalleled power to articulate and define the political agenda.[4] In a recent study, Luis Felipe Miguel[5] analyzed the effects of the communication media on political practices and maintained that individuals simply resonate discourses constructed by the elites - although not exclusively and all the time. To some degree they select, interpret and structure the information received according to the codes that they possess, which do not necessarily come from the media realm, but belong to the political realm. Although Miguel recognizes in the media an important factor in the accreditation of political capital and definition of the political agenda, he understands, however, that the media is not a component of the political institutions, such as the parliament, the executive branch, political parties or the elections. Therefore, the political and media fields are necessarily separated. Although the media is an important element of influence in the political game, it cannot be said that the communication media dominate this field. In this case,

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[2] AZAMBUJA, 1987.
[3] Victor BLANCO, 1999.
[4] MIGUEL, 1999.
[5] MIGUEL, 2002.

the importance of the media would not only be to construct the discourses, but in its power of *recognition* as the key to the conquest of political capital.

Working from a perspective close to this that relativizes the power of the media, we maintain that to speak in alienation is to consider a confrontation of *discourses*.[6] This concept embraces both a criticism of the idea that the mass media plays a determining role, as well as the idea that the message the media presents does not reach empty space, but a living environment, with its own characteristics, which transform and interpret the message. Based on this concept one can also speak of various forces acting on various individuals and discourses that are not always easily accounted for. Constructed in everyday relationships face to face and or through virtual relationships, made possible by the continuous expansion of the communication media, these discourses are associated to the different social categories that mark the social territory, such as race, religion, nationality or gender, encompassing not only the dominant groups in society but also those we generically call the excluded.[7]

The choices made by individuals and social groups with their peculiar histories and existences are thus guided, not only by pure rationality or by absolute emotion, but also by the manner that they are *traversed* by these different discourses. The confrontation between them stores the tension between reason and affection, words and images, and encompasses the nearly always hidden power relations that characterize them.

Television and political propaganda in the here-and-now society

Among the mass media, television has been considered to be one of the principal shapers of opinion when speaking of electoral campaigns, particularly in the case of Brazil, where free air-time for political propaganda has enormous importance in the choice of candidates for public office.[8] In a society in which individuals spend increasingly more time in front of a television than in face-to-face social relations, television is an important channel for the cultural conditioning of the population. Particularly through the presentation of news, television provides much of that which orients voters' judgements and choices.[9] It should be recognized that the news is not necessarily concerned with fact, but with details that can be attractive to viewers.

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[6] John THOMPSON, 1989.
[7] João Eduardo CARVALHO, 1999.
[8] Rogério SCHMITT, Leandro CARNEIRO and Karina KUSCHNIR, 1999.
[9] Stephen ANSOLABEHERE, Roy BEHR and Shanto IYENGAR, 1993.

Political propaganda in Brazil has been prepared with the same proposal, which characterizes it more as a marketing than an informative action.[10]

In Brazil, free air-time for political advertising on TV is one of the main media vehicles used by political parties during elections. Using this free air-time in the months before elections, political parties organize the participation of their candidates with significant consequences for their public image and performance in the elections.[11] The political campaigns presented through these programs are capable of interfering in the opinion of the voters and in election results. The preferences for candidates can, for this reason undergo changes, particularly during the period of the electoral campaign, in such a way that the result of an election can be changed as a result of electoral propaganda until the end of the dispute. These programs are seen, in whole or in part, by all the voters during the weeks of the campaign, making the propaganda displayed on free air-time one of the three most important sources of political information for voters, and essential in voters' decisions.[12]

Reaching the entire public, without discrimination, since it is broadcast on all Brazilian television channels, the political propaganda creates the impression that it is aimed at each television viewer individually. Reproducing a face-to-face conversation, the image of the candidate seeks to provoke a sense of intimacy in the viewer. The political propaganda also uses an emotional tone in its discourse, seeking to touch the hopes, ambitions, disillusionment, prejudices and fears of the subjects. In this way, the political discourse is used by governments and political parties, creating lines of opinion, stirring collective desires, distracting, captivating and directing attention of the population.[13] Through marketing techniques, the political propaganda "sells" an image of the candidate, linked to the issue of suggestibility, indicating a form of perception of the politicians by the viewers.

Miguel[14] maintains that one of the critical elements in the political dispute is the creation of representations about the problems, crises and political dynamic and finally about the candidates themselves. According to Miguel, the ability to disseminate meanings about social reality, that is, of these discourses, is contemporarily concentrated in the media, indicating that the political impact of the content presented by the media cannot be ignored. In the long term, it involves an impact present in different types of programming, ranging from those dedicated to information to entertainment programs. In the short term, the information media is particularly

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[10] MIGUEL, 1999.
[11] SCHMITT, CARNEIRO and KUSCHNIR, 1999.
[12] SCHMITT, CARNEIRO and KUSCHNIR, 1999.
[13] AZAMBUJA, 1987.
[14] MIGUEL, 1999.

important, given that it is presented as a source of supply of the resources that the voters have when choosing their candidates. Thus, that which the media, in the Brazilian case particularly the televised media, presents or fails to present is significant from the point of view of the perception of social reality that is accessible to the population.

In general, the behavior of the media is influenced by the action of the market and the socio-educational formation of the professionals in the field. This scenario is compounded by the fact that 90% of Brazilian social communication is controlled by only 9 families, which characterizes a true oligopoly that intervenes openly in various social, economic and political questions. Through the hierarchization of the issues, selecting what should, or should not be public knowledge and deciding what should be discussed, debated or considered, this monopoly acts by generally guiding the flow of information to the issues that interest it.[15]

It is also necessary to situate this media presence in a context that emphasizes instantaneity, discardability, short term gains and speed, characteristics of a society where everything is discardable, because it quickly becomes obsolete. In these terms, the construction and maintenance of the identifying images, such as the image of a competent and reliable politician, will take place through the association of individuals to certain traits, such as clothes, automobiles, ideas or even genders.

In fact, according to Carvalho,[16] in a society in which social groups are associated to identity marks that do not require a support from relationships, that is, marks that are built independently from face to face social relations, their values are excessively dependent on the public presence, especially through the media. That involved with being a politician, or a woman, therefore, is presented through discourses which transverse us and constitute the place that these marks occupy in the universe of the identifying marks available in the social game.

The changeability and susceptibility of these identity marks to the influence of the media is determined in the weight of their construction more as social categories and less as organically constituted groups. These *images* are not based only on the everyday face to face relations, but are also controlled by virtual relationships between people who customarily "meet" through the mass media. The fragility of these identities does not make them less effective, but extremely dependent on the actions that are produced on their imaginary dimension. One of the most important vectors of these actions is the media. In this sense, the value that we place on individuals, how we recognize them and how we understand them in everyday relationships, can be understood through the social categories

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[15] Cecília COIMBRA, 2001.
[16] CARVALHO, 2002.

in which we place them, whose meanings and values are also built and presented by the influence of and through the media.[17]

The same principal is in play when we position ourselves before a choice, as in the case of elections to public positions. Here, added to the ideological and structural determinants, the way that we identify candidates and how we recognize the marks that affiliate them to certain social groups, also guides the choice of a certain *image*, that which we consider to be the best or more suitable candidate.

Women candidates, the media and private space

Studies about the political participation of women and the way that they have been represented by the communication media and by electors offer some leads to help understand the difficulties involved in more effective political participation by women.[18] Among other indications, Margareth Conway, Gertrude Steuernagel and David Ahern[19] point to the public disadvantages created by these difficulties, given that women have a political agenda and a way of handling the *res publica* that is clearly distinct from that which is typical of men. Woman occupying public legislative positions, for example, have systematically directed their interests to feminist issues, establishing fronts for the defense of women, whether in relation to violence against women, reproductive rights or women's health.[20]

Concerning the reasons that explain the differences of gender in political orientation, these authors explain that boys and girls tend to be educated in a different manner. The results of this difference, indicate more than positions to the left or right of the political spectrum, and influence understandings about whether women should, for example, have the same political participation as men or if a "woman's place is in the home". Differentiated education encompasses a broad social territory that ranges from the question of political participation to how differences between men and women are treated by the law, or in the labor market, in a continuous process of gender discrimination that is fed by religious orientations, as well as by the manner that women see themselves or not linked to the social category or group of "women".

Studies have systematically shown that, while acceptance of women candidates has grown, gender prejudices and stereotypes are still active, and this is even true in developed countries such as the United States, with an important history of female participation in

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[17] CARVALHO, 2002.
[18] Caroline HELDMANN, Susan CARROL and Stephanie OLSON, 2000.
[19] CONWAY, STEUERNAGEL and AHERN, 1997.
[20] Michele SWERS, 2001.

politics.[21] Women candidates to elected positions must confront the stereotype that places men in positions of political leadership, reserving for women the handling of domestic problems. Men have taken for themselves the principal role in the construction of what is politics, of what a politician does and of the electoral agenda. Women candidates thus must overcome this stereotype, presenting qualities necessary for leadership, without, however, failing to present themselves as women: "They must present strength and assertiveness without appearing to be masculine".[22]

In the literature that concerns the stereotype of gender in politics, one of the results that appears most instigating concerns how women are associated more immediately to stereotypes, while men do not betray these preconceived marks. Even when voters are sympathetic to women candidates, these stereotypes are still present.[23] This indicates the presence of a "male" discourse about women that has been constructed and maintained, while men are often protected from discriminatory marks. As a result, while men have a social place that guarantees the public presentation of their idiosyncrasies, women candidates appear to suffer from a lack of social recognition about what it is to be a public and or political woman, stimulating the assumption of stereotypes whose primary sources are found in women restricted to the private realm.

Sapiro[24] also indicates that gender difference is present not only in the male-female distinction but also in the way that these traits are perceived in the candidates in the expression of gender and even in the nature of the positions that are being disputed, that is if they require more "feminine" or "masculine" characteristics. The responsibilities associated to the position and their gender dimension have a clear impact on voters' choices, with the relationship between gender and the political agenda being especially important when there is little information about the candidates.

In relation to the particular qualities of a gender associated to stereotyped images, in the areas said to be a women's specialty, such as education and health care, woman are better appreciated than men, and are considered more honest and sensitive to the suffering among the population.[25] In areas of male specialty, on the other hand, depending on the electoral conditions (the post to be filled, the knowledge of the voters about the candidate and the electoral agenda) male candidates may be better evaluated and have a greater chance of victory. In a study about the gender differences of candidates for legislative positions in the United States, women candidates are more highly considered even when the topics are considered more

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[21] Barbara BURRELL, 1994.
[22] BURREL, 1994, p. 15.
[23] Mark Stephen LEEPER, 1991.
[24] Virginia SAPIRO, 1982.
[25] Kim Friedkin KAHN, 1996, p. 132.

clearly masculine, such as public safety and economics.[26] Nevertheless, even when evaluated at the same level as male candidates, those interviewed said that women candidates have less chances to win the elections. This suggests that voters are not making their decisions based on the ability of the candidate, but on their understanding of the place that men and women should occupy in the public space.

It is as if the message transmitted by those interviewed is that women could occupy these places – but shouldn't. The important issue raised by these studies is that women candidates confront a burden of being women that cannot be explained – or counter-attacked – by reason, demanding that they make a greater effort to be accepted as effective occupants of leadership positions.

On the other hand, the work of Kathleen Dolan[27] about U.S. elections during the 1990's indicates that the question of gender is not the only variable in the choice of a candidate. Contrary to what many other studies intend to demonstrate, the sex-gender of the candidate does not affect all voters in the same manner and its impact depends on the candidate, his or her party, the voter and the environment. The choice also depends on the characteristics of the voter: his or her gender, education, values and the interests that he or she will recognize or not in a certain candidate. According to Dolan, the effect of gender on an election does not have value in and of itself, but depends on other variables, such as, for example the fact that the stereotype of gender is associated to other stereotypes such as those related to a political party and its ideology.

Even so, it would be possible to say that, although the choice is not made because of a candidate's gender, it appears to be related to the candidate's discourse – which may be antagonistic to his or her gender: a male discourse in a female "body". [28]

In addition to the presence of sexual stereotypes among voters and the political agenda for a certain election and position, dynamic elements that steer perceptions of the candidates by voters and thus their choices,[29] the strategy presented in a candidate's propaganda to deal with these factors and the media coverage is also important.

Under these conditions, the media would have a preponderant role, and could have four different effects in the electoral campaigns: supplying information, defining the political agenda, defining responsibilities and finally, persuading the voter.[30] The greater and more focused the media coverage, as in the case for example of elections for executive positions, the

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[26] SAPIRO, 1982.
[27] DOLAN, 2004.
[28] Lynette LITHGOW, 2000.
[29] KAHN, 1996.
[30] ANSOLABEHERE, BEHR and IYENGAR, 1993.

greater the influence of gender on the voters' decisions. Media coverage also has significant importance in the transformation of the candidates. Generally, it is more belittling of woman candidates and distorts their messages,[31] and it is a preponderant factor in influencing voters in favor of male candidates in detriment to feminine candidates. This role of the media would be determined by the emphasis that is given to the areas of public safety and economics, considered to be "male" specialties, generally presented by the media as more important for the choice of a candidate than those of "feminine" - and social – appeal, such as healthcare and education. But this role of the media is also related to how a woman candidate may be more predominantly described in terms of her personal life, appearance and personality than a male candidate.[32]

It is worth noting that, although gender stereotypes contaminate voters, candidates and press coverage, they are not always handicaps, but can be used by women candidates as advantages depending on the agenda of a certain election in which emphasis may be given to areas of knowledge usually associated to women.[33] Or these stereotypes may be associated to other characteristics of the women candidates, who may be seen as the legitimate heirs of family groups and of male leaders. This has been the case in the recurring choice of "widows" to occupy top executive posts in various Asian countries, such as the Philippines (Corazon Aquino) and in Sri Lanka (Chandrika Kumaratunga). In these cases, the media has an important role in sustaining the stereotypes that collaborate in the installation and maintenance of women who are not leaders, but "continuers" of the works of their fathers, brothers or husbands.[34]

Electoral Propaganda: gender and stereotype

Historically, the image of women presented in propaganda for a wide variety of consumer goods associates them to a subordinated position,[35] which has not seemed to change significantly in recent decades. Moreover, political propaganda appears to have the affect of disqualifying a candidate, which, in certain circumstances, can be broadened by the gender effect.[36]

To understand this situation, we juxtapose the importance of feminine stereotypes as guidelines for the construction of the image of women candidates to the elected positions. First, it is important to consider that those authors who have discussed

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[31] KAHN, 1996.
[32] HELDMAN, CARROLL and OLSON, 2000.
[33] KAHN, 1996.
[34] LITHGOW, 2000.
[35] Marc VENKATESAN and Jean P. LOSCO, 1975.
[36] Cláudia FINAMORE, Adriana SALVIO, Angelina DAL CORTIVO, Sonia GIANETTI and João Eduardo Coin de CARVALHO, 2002.

these social marks in the realm of electoral choices have treated them based on the concept of stereotype. As identifying traces that resist transformation over time, stereotypes are decisive in our choices. But, although the idea of stereotype is useful for understanding certain social phenomenon, it can establish a tendency to take them as natural phenomenon. In this way, it is important to consider, in the process of construction of these collective images, the conditions in which stereotypes are produced and maintained, considering the social-historic and imaginative conditioning factors that are found in the processes of categorization, at the center of the intergroup relations and in the constitution of social identities. By considering these conditioning factors we will now reflect on the importance given to the discourse about women and politicians and the media to the dynamic of these inter-relations.

Women's Participation in the Brazilian electoral process

Although the analysis of the opposition between the public and the private and its relationship with gender has been discussed in the literature about this issue in Brazil, it has not been able to provide greater clarity about how the differences related to gender better situate the position of women, even in the private realm, as participants of the political processes.[37]

In the Brazilian situation, while the veto of the dominant class to the participation of women in politics is debated, this confrontation between women and politics can be accompanied in daily activities by the influence of the discourses about women and politicians that circulate among the social groups. This can be seen in daily newspapers, in television coverage of economic and political facts that have "male personalities" as their protagonists, or in the strong presence of women in the entertainment news and in the "visibility" conferred in "feminine" and "masculine" magazines that inundate newsstands, or even in advertising.[38] In this situation, the mere presence of women among the candidates, supported by a quota policy, is not enough to transform the position that they occupy, although this presence is a necessary element in the articulation of any change. First, the presence of women in the ranks of political parties and among candidates to elected positions must be associated to those images of women and politicians that are predominant today, and as a rule, conflicting in our society.

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[37] Maria Noemi BRITO, 2001.
[38] Ruth SABAT, 2001; and Tânia SWAIN, 2001.

The low participation of women in the political field should not be understood as a result of their lack of interest, or simply as a veto of the gender by the political parties. One of the vectors of this participation is the confrontation between the different trajectories usually taken by women and the way that politics is conducted in the country.[39] Next to the importance of the "calculations of instrumental and strategic rationality of the parties before the system",[40] "male-political party resistance" can not be considered a negligible factor in an attempt to understand the participation of women in politics. In this sense, Clara Araújo indicated the importance of associating the characteristics of the Brazilian political model with the issues traditionally linked to feminine exclusion in the realm of gender prejudice. If we present this resistance here, it is an attempt to locate it not in the framework of reason, but in the tension that appears to exist between the public and private roles occupied by women in our society. It seems that women in politics must conduct a balancing act – as all women dedicated to dual shifts of paid work and "daily tasks" know well - between being a politician (pragmatic, malicious, individualistic) and being a woman (mother, housewife, concerned with the family). The latter is the role of Maria, constructed for women since the discovery of Brazil, as the woman martyr, submissive to men, the result of a macho culture that understands men as natural commanders of government and public activity.[41]

In a political campaign, it is clear that this confrontation can be made sharper or mitigated as a function of whether the campaign has a commitment to the "truth" about a given woman candidate. The content of the propaganda, that is if it attacks the opponent or focuses on the candidate's qualities, whether it proposes a more or less feminine agenda, will thus have a role in the image constructed and presented by women candidates, as other studies have shown.[42] This has been utilized, in a greater or lesser scale, by women candidates to political positions, which can be found through the historic performance of women candidates to elected positions. This performance has in fact improved slowly over time, and grew sharply during the 1990's.[43]

Therefore, it does not involve determining if the truths about the candidates are presented to and assimilated by the electorate, but in understanding to what degree the confrontation between different discourses is present in the positioning of the individuals and of the social groups. The importance of the media in the configuration

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[39] Clara ARAÚJO, 2001.
[40] ARAÚJO, 2001, p. 239.
[41] Eros DESOUZA, John BALDWIN and Francisco DA ROSA, 2000.
[42] KAHN, 1996.
[43] Mala HTUN, 2001.

of an electoral campaign cannot be doubted, but the media should not be understood as the only villain in the dispute. It is an amplifier of the discourses that are circulating among the social groups, shaping the social identities and the very symbolic universe where these groups exist. If voters, as Miguel believes,[44] analyze and reflect on political campaigns, and do not passively absorb information presented on TV, this takes place in an environment mediated by forces that are present not only in electoral propaganda, but even outside of it. The action of the media on these efforts, by refracting these discourses, causes a shift in the *image* of the feminine candidates, but is not the only matrix of this image. The discourse that circulates in the media anticipates this image in the expression of concepts and images, including those about social groups. The media participates in the creation of a certain discourse, acting most particularly in its modulation. By interfering in its flow, the media increases, certain "tones" and leaves others inaudible, producing a secondary effect on these discourses.[45]

The example of former São Paulo Mayor Marta Suplicy, who lost her bid for re-election in 2004, is emblematic. Suplicy has an image of a sophisticated, intelligent, university professor and a member of one of the most traditional families of São Paulo society. That is, the image of *a woman* produced by an eminently male discourse, has been countered, since before her first election in 2000, to the image of a person of action, political, interested in occupying a notably "male" socal role, that is, the image of a *politician*[46].

At the beginning of Brazil's municipal elections of 2000 we studied the influence of free electoral television time for propaganda on candidate Marta Suplicy's campaign.[47] The study analyzed if and how the free electoral advertising presented on TV would influence voters in relation to the candidate's image. Voters were interviewed before they watched the free electoral propaganda, and once again after watching five consecutive days of the propaganda.

In the first interviews, conducted before the interviewees watched the free electoral propaganda, the candidate was seen positively as a woman who is active in politics, with qualities that helped in the occupation of the position of mayor, such as sensitivity to social problems, good administrative sense and a background suited to the executive position. In the interviews conducted after the subjects watched the electoral propaganda, only a few days after the first interviews, the image of the mayoral candidate suffered a significant change according to the statements of those

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[44] MIGUEL, 2002.
[45] CARVALHO, 1999.
[46] Translator's Note: In Portuguese all nouns have a gender an the word politician is masculine.
[47] FINAMORE, SALVIO, DAL CORTIVO, GIANETTI and CARVALHO, 2002.

interviewed. Perceived as a marketing effect, the image of the candidate presented in the media lost its legitimacy by acquiring a falsely constructed character.

At that opportunity, the TV ads proved to sharpen a contradiction between these two roles, that of woman and of politician, which was not sufficient, however, to impede the candidate's victory, considering the dynamic of the electoral process and the different political forces found in the confrontation with the other candidates.[48] In the re-election campaign, her defeat can be understand as more than the result of the simple "effect" of the media on voters. The defeat has ties to the intense confrontation between discourses, in which *the image of the woman*, is compared with *the image of the politician*, which would broaden the sensation by voters of being doubly "fooled" by a woman who acts like a politician.

The media has a fundamental role in the dissemination of representations of social-economic reality and of the image of women and of politicians, by influencing the formation of public opinion in different circumstances, including during the electoral process. We understand, in the complex scenery where voters' choices are built, that it is necessary to seek the political determinants in the dissemination and maintenance of certain discourses through TV, especially in the Brazilian case. The prevalence of the image that crystalizes the role of Maria, keeps women contained in the private realm and presents them as consumer products. Thus, even if it is possible to intervene globally and institutionally, seeking arguments that sustain the reasonability of a change in the role of women, we understand that in the everyday realm, guerrilla actions can be taken that attack the hegemonic discourses about women, discourses that are deeply rooted, among men and women.

We thus find it necessary to pay attention to how the *quotidian* construction of these hegemonic discourses is conducted, through all the means that touch the common sense found in public opinion. Daily conversations, their presence in the "non-informational" media, such as television dramas, comedy programs or entertainment magazines, and the use of this image in advertising, contribute to normatizing the image of women that traverses our society. The discussion and constant criticism, and not only at election time, of the presence of these reified understandings in public opinion, using tools that can interfere in their imaginative dimensions through the media itself, is what can guarantee the effective presence of an effectively feminine discourse in the political realm.

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