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Media Interpretation of a Leading Woman Politician's Performances and Dress Code Challenges

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Introduction

This paper is part of a more extensive feminist study on the production of gendered identities of women politicians. My concern is with how women's identities are enacted in institutional contexts, how women in leading positions are managing to find their ways to influence and power, and how the media interpret their performances. In this paper I focus on two salient pictures of Carme Chacón, the first Spanish woman defence minister, both of which challenge traditional gender dress codes. These two pictures, which were widely reproduced, also illustrate the roles the media interpreted as successfully performed from April 2008 to March 2009: mother, and hybridly-gendered military officer/minister. Because both her clothes choices and roles contested gender codes, I understand it is a feminist task to examine media coverage.

Assumptions

Taking a feminist social constructionist approach, I assume that women can perform diverse and multiple identities, which are constructed and negotiated through different and possibly competing discourses. By 'perform' I am referring to playing roles when this acting is a consequential one.

I also assume that even women in leading political positions are subject to gender ideology and discursive gendered relations of power, which can be negotiated, contested, or complied with. As Lazar put it,

...pervasive and insidious in modern societies ... is the operation of a subtle and seemingly innocuous form of power that is substantively discursive in nature. This form of power is embedded and dispersed throughout networks of relations, is self-regulating, and produces subjects in both senses of the word ... The effectiveness of modern power (and hegemony) is that it is mostly cognitive, based on an internalization of gendered norms and acted out routinely in the texts and talk of everyday life ... [H]owever, [it] can be discursively resisted as well as counter-resisted in a dynamic struggle... The mechanisms of power not only often work in subtle and complex ways, but the relations of asymmetry are also produced and experienced in complexly different ways for and by different groups of women ... (2005: 9-11)

One of the tasks of a feminist investigation is to reveal precisely how women and men are exposed to different forms of power relations and how they resist or accept them.

Another of my assumptions is that any woman in power is likely to be constricted by rigid regulatory gender norms (Butler, 1990; Gal, 1991). Although the question of individual agency and its limitations by cultural constraints remains controversial, I assume that a woman has 'agency' (Austin, 1962; Butler, 1990: 145). Up to a certain point, she can (and has to) manage her way to escape from dominant gender scripts and counter-construct a worthy and powerful persona, as manifested in her performances. In the case of women politicians, their identities are especially subjected to the media's interpretation of their performances. Here I join Walsh's (2001) and Lakoff's (2003) claims about the relevance of the study of those performances (and the media discourses which interpret them).

Previous studies

The contradictions between leadership and feminine identity have been widely discussed in the literature of language and gender, or of gender and the professions (e.g. Acker, 1992; Alvesson and Billing, 1997; Baxter, 2003, 2008; Davidson and Burke, 2000; Kendall and Tannen, 1997; Mullany, 2007; Rosener, 1990; Wodak, 1997, 2003). Women's performances in specific communities of practice have also been the focus of studies too numerous to mention (e.g. Fisher, 1991; Gunnarsson, 2001; Walsh, 2001; West, 1998b; Wodak, 2003). Analyses have deduced that there is not only one unified manner/way of doing femininity in the public arena. And that, although women have sometimes managed to conform to prevailing norms in the professions in different ways, and in some cases they have even succeeded in developing new standards for those professions – instances often mentioned are police officers (McElhinny, 1998) or female doctors (West, 1998a) –, there are not many versions of femininity available to women in power. In general, previous studies have concluded that “there is clearly a great deal still to be done to broaden the conception of

an effective female leader to encompass a wider diversity of leadership styles” (Holmes, 2005a: 18). Further, as Philips (2003) demonstrated, while the leadership role continues to be gendered, many unexamined cultural assumptions will present barriers to women's ambitions.

Aims and methodology

After collecting a corpus of articles and columns from political sections of different newspapers, I analyze the media's approaches to Chacón's performances. By means of these performances Chacón negotiates her identity as a politician and participates actively in the construction of meaning and in new arrangements between the sexes. My main interest is to study the active accomplishment (if there is one) of a powerful woman within the institutional frameworks of a ministry and the military, whether in her performances she is appropriating some of the so-called 'masculine' traits, and how she is expanding the 'feminine' traits. Following Holmes, one of my aims is to “document change in progress and active resistance” to hegemonic gender behaviour by women leaders. A word of caution is called for here:¹ by 'feminine' behaviour, I am only referring to what the (still) prevalent binary order has associated with women for a long time (e.g. Tannen, 1990, 1994). That's why the term appears in inverted commas.

Being especially concerned with gendered traits of leadership, my analysis relies on the ways Chacón's identities permeate the press's assessment of her performances. 'Identities' is a term which puts the emphasis on the role of the subject as agent of her own performances. Although the strategies displayed by women leaders are often the outcome of the demands of specific social contexts these women encounter, the strategies they choose to perform should also help them to assert their authority and become 'effective' leaders.

¹ Not always do we seem to be able to disentangle ourselves and our feminist interpretations from dual gender notions, which are constantly reproduced in our own academic discourse. In this sense, I assume the criticisms put forward by Sidnell (2003: 347, note 8).

I focus particularly on two of Chacón's pictures (see Appendix A). Visual images of women in the media are never neutral or irrelevant – through them the social order is articulated. And pictures released by the press are fundamental in the construction of the social identity of any woman politician. In Chacón's case, her fragmented identities emerge across some cultural practices in the course of social occasions, some of which involve dress – and, as is well known, dress is a cultural gendered artefact which has proved to be a most powerful semiotic system. When Chacón is recorded in an image which symbolically disrupts the prevailing discourses of classification of women and men, it is not marginal, but central to my concerns.

Finally, I have found it necessary to discuss how 'effective' the roles she chooses to perform are. Although 'effectiveness' is problematic and complex to measure, I consider that an effective performance is one that contributes to empowering the actor, and to convincing the audience of her reliability. I take for granted that a member of the government should aim both to achieve proposed political changes and to be accepted by citizens as reliable leader. Chacón being a politician and a member of the government, I have identified her effective leadership with positive reactions from the media, citizens' approval (even if I know that long term tendencies are difficult to estimate), and social changes brought about according to the political programme she was elected for.²

Corpus

In order to carry out my study, I collected 63 articles, lead articles, editorials, columns, reports or news in the Spanish press and one from the British press (from *The Guardian*) that mentioned Chacón. The texts' web addresses are provided in Appendix B.

² What I understand as 'effective' here is different from what Marra, Schnurr and Holmes understood as 'effective leadership' (2006). My definition of 'effectiveness' here is rather controversial, as hegemonic thought is likely to permeate a woman's effectiveness. I am perfectly aware that a politician may wish to challenge hegemonic constructions even at the risk of losing her popularity – if that were the aim of her performance, we might consider it effective. But for the purposes of this paper the above indicators of effectiveness may be serve well enough.

The 63 Spanish texts appeared in 33 paper or digital dailies: ranging from ones with more national readership (5 were taken from *El País*, 12 from *El Mundo*, 6 from *ABC*) to local or regional newspapers. The 63 samples also ranged from left-wing papers (*Público*) to right-wing ones (*Confidencial Digital*). My only guide criterion for a text to be included in the corpus was that it somehow assessed, characterized, described or valued her or her performances. The dates span her first eleven months in office – from April 2008, when she was appointed as defence minister, to March 2009.

Once the samples were gathered, I observed that two types of salient roles seemed to be performed by Chacón in the first eleven months: minister mother, and hybridly-gendered minister/military officer. These roles are also indicators of her public acceptance: a continuous rise of public appraisal for eleven months, until March 2009. Because these roles were congealed in two illustrative pictures of her which appeared in the press cuttings of my corpus, I reproduce them in Appendix A. Each picture synthesizes each one of the two roles: one depicts Chacón's first inspection of the nation's troops in April 2008; the other is taken during the most solemn festivity of the Military Christmas (*Pascua Militar*), in January 2009.

In what follows, I will look into her performances clustering around the two pictures and roles, as captured and perceived in the press, and into their effectiveness. All quotes are taken from my corpus; the number in square brackets after the quotation indicates its source, and corresponds to the number on the list in Appendix B. The translation of the quotes is mine.

The minister mother (April-July 2008)

The very first days in office: A pregnant body

In April 2008, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero was re-elected Spain's prime minister. In his previous term in office, Zapatero, who calls himself a feminist, had passed sweeping

gender-equality legislation, legalised gay marriage and toughened up a law against gender violence. For this new term he handed out top jobs in government to women, including the appointment of Carme Chacón as Spain's first female defence minister. Formerly a lecturer in law, later vice-chair of the Spanish Parliament and minister for housing, 37-year-old Chacón was then expecting her first child and had no previous military experience.

The first challenge to the gender order was her appointment as defence minister: not only a young woman but, furthermore, a young seven-month-pregnant mother-to-be, who declared herself a pacifist.

As was predictable, Chacón's visible pregnancy was made even more visible by the media. Immediately after her appointment, her gendered being and condition were understood to be politically relevant, and were underlined by all the press. As the new commander-in-chief, she inspected the nation's troops wearing a maternity blouse, a picture which was on the front page of most of the world's media [22] [**Photo 1**]. For instance, a British daily, *The Guardian*, reproduced it over the following caption: "Mother-to-be who signalled the changing of the guard" [64]. Her pregnancy and gender were still salient in all newspapers in the days following her appointment [9, 58], many of which focused on her maternity clothes:

Pregnant Minister of Defence starts to sport dresses common to her state.

The minister has lately attended official events wearing wide dresses aiming to hide her incipient little belly. [16]

She visited Spanish peacekeeping detachments in Lebanon a week later. All newspapers emphasized her pregnant condition, and some did not fail to mention that she was "accompanied on her trips by a medical team including a gynaecologist" [62, 64]. The daily

20 Minutos displayed pictures of her in its web site titled 'Chacón, a pregnancy full of activity'³.

By constructing her as a pregnant body, the first media texts devoted to Chacón demonstrated that public space (the state, the polis and the military) is still the space of men. The 'anomaly' of a heavily pregnant body in the public sphere, manifested in these newspapers, shows how masculinised public space operates symbolically. Still more easily accessible to men, its nature is still so deeply masculinised that it does not seem appropriate for a pregnant body to occupy it.

In fact, her appointment was openly resisted in the discourse of the most conservative male journalists [3, 4, 5, 23] (and of some male journalists of the left [1]), who attempted to construct her as inept and incompetent for the post, to which she had gained access only because of the parity policy. An instance of this discourse can be seen in a column which offensively remarked that her appointment as Defence Minister was ridiculous, simply because of her gender. Under the command of a 'broody hen', the nation's troops also fell in value, transformed into 'chicks':

It causes hilarity to see her ordering the troops to stand or uttering ordinance shouts; she looks to us like a broody hen calling her chicks to follow her. [6]

Even at the risk of being too simplistic, it is difficult not to envisage these men's laments as a fierce elegy for their loss of dominance, a notion reinforced by the recognition of what her appointment entailed by the chief editor of the newspaper with the highest daily circulation, *El Mundo*. In a long editorial article, Chacón's identity was constructed by means of castrating mother metaphors: she will make "the military expiate males' sins, with a gun salvo". "All this iconography" has as its aims, "male taming" by "a firm-tender woman", he lamented. She "perfectly embodies Zapatero's subjugation of feminine magnetism" [3]. One

³ <http://www.20minutos.es/galeria/4300/0/0/> Retrieved 10th June 2009.

is tempted to say that fear is revealed by this man's frustrating recognition that Chacón's appointment and image were gender troubling ones. Interestingly, in this first stage, women journalists and columnists of all political positions received her warmly or remained quiet, but did not join in with these men's pronouncements. Another type of discourse stands out in my corpus – one that rejoices in the gender-troubling image that her appointment shaped. As the previous press cuttings show, the concurrence of motherhood and military might seem unnatural. Maternal characteristics are very different from the qualities necessitated by war (Macdonald, 1987: 15). And the rousing warm acceptance of this juxtaposition of images that unsettled the current gender order by most of the Spanish media seemed to prove that this order might be starting to be transformed. The news coverage by a British paper noted: “the visual contrast between this attractive⁴ young woman, heavy with child, and the straight-backed military men standing to attention with rifles and gleaming brass buttons was undeniably striking” [64].

The allegedly astonishing association of direct military orders and motherhood is highlighted in all the newspapers, but happily also accepted in most of them, as something new, refreshing and thought-provoking. The photo of Chacón inspecting the troops was “an amazing sight, but you needed that media impact to unsettle the old gender order. That's essentially what that image represented” [64]. And this was the exact message sent by her inspection of the troops for a lot of Spanish newspapers. “A historic landmark” [7]; newspapers mentioned words such as “the President's brave decision”, “proud to be Spanish” and “justice between the sexes” [54]. “Just one picture in itself reflects something as deep as a change of era, and even a change of mind” [54]. A male journalist recognised its extreme significance claiming that the photograph of the minister inspecting the troops “had

⁴ The bias and discrimination in the coverage of women politicians by the media have already been studied and described (e.g. Author, 2003; Lakoff, 2003; Ross and Sreberny, 2002: 101-20; San José and Molina Petit, 2000) and might aptly be applied to our corpus, for instance in the recurrence of mentioning women's looks. But relevant as it is and denounced by the press itself (in my corpus, by both men and women journalists, e.g. [10, 12, 23]), it is not exactly the focus of this paper.

visualized equality between women and men” [15]. He saw the minister as “proudly sporting her bulky bulge, while ordering the troops to stand firm or to fall out” [15].

Months later the press would claim that the picture had “laid the foundations of her popularity” [25].

Motherhood, a powerful image of leadership

The press highlighted her motherhood-to-be, and, once the baby was born, a series of photographs and interviews [22, 30, 52] made her motherhood even more visible [58]. Tied by the media to her identity as a mother, she consequently exploited this role as a powerful one allowed to women. She probably expected this to be a role universally regarded with respect in Spanish society, especially among its most traditional members (e.g. the military).⁵ On the other hand, to act out the motherly role permitted her to seize power, and make room for herself in the masculinised space of public government by negotiating different and competing discourses. The motherly role allowed her to reconcile authority and gender identity and to produce a public identity as a government leader.

In the literature of women management and leadership, the role of mother is one of the first which women seem to adopt to exercise authority in the public realm (e.g. Kanter, 1975; Wodak, 1997; Holmes, 2005a, 2006, 2007). The establishment of a symbolic family dimension can be used to overcome the social discourse of denial of a female powerful identity. The norms set as a result of social expectations of the mother figure “reach far beyond the private sphere of the family; motherliness becomes a quality in itself which [is] also apparent as a strategic method of organising relationships in many public arenas. The exercising of power by women within the mother’s role [is] quite obviously legitimized” (Wodak, 1997: 353).

⁵ Being powerfully mothered is a role that organizations and the military seem to concede, provided it does not affect the structure of symbolic binary power (the tough warrior paired to the nurturant mother, one of the paired stereotypes which Kanter as early as 1975 described as having an influence in organizations, and which Pringle (1990) also documented in relatively successful relations between (female) secretaries and (male) bosses).

What exactly does the role of mother involve? In the private and public realms, motherliness is expected to be displayed in both nurturing and controlling. One of the current and more compelling discourses on motherhood stresses precisely the role of a mother as “tough but gentle”, as illustrated in the Persil ad displayed on TV in 2009:

“What is a mum? A mum is someone who has always got the balance between being tough and being gentle just right. A mum is someone who uses Persil: Tough but gentle for a hundred years”.⁶

Performing simultaneously gentleness and toughness is a strategy which permits many a woman to break binary classifications, apparently contradictorily. And the ‘tough-but-gentle’ identity is one Chacón is ascribed with in the press time and again. She was remembered, by the Dean of the Faculty where Chacón used to teach, as having already performed this strategy when she was a university lecturer (another mother role): “She was a strict teacher, who did not take an imposing stance nor try to be the students’ ‘buddy’” [26]. Although her “strength, initiative and firm soundness” [53] are foregrounded, some officers of the general staff are quoted as saying that “she has an iron hand in a silk glove”, and that “she is not exactly friendly, but both congenial and firm; hard and sensitive” [22].

Chacón’s communicative ways to make room in the patriarchal space of government and space in the military for herself are complex. According to the press, she relies on “a firm voice, low tone” [55] which transmit authority. “She speaks quietly, but clearly. She does not skip a line of the message she wants to transmit. Her thin bone structure and her short sightedness provide her with a certain delicacy that disappears as soon as she speaks” [22], asserts one newspaper. “Trustworthy and authoritative, her voice was far from any male sexist authoritarianism” [54], acknowledges another male journalist. “She is the boss, she knows how to order firmly” [22], an admiral is quoted to say.

⁶ <http://www.visit4info.com/advert/Tough-but-Gentle-for-100-years-Persevering-Persil-Mums-Persil-Range/71639>).

What is most significant is how well two apparently contradictory roles (mother and commander-in-chief) co-articulate without dissonance. The two identities do not seem to be competing, and the outcome is a complex, authoritative one. The gendered labour of mothering can thus be brought to workplace domains, as Holmes or Wodak had already demonstrated, and produce the best results in terms of popularity and acceptance, as even the conservative press recognises: “Your appointment was a good decision. From the very first moment you took the armies’ pulse. Your trips and decisions have been successful. You got my applause, together with that of many others” [44]. Even those dailies which opposed her acknowledge that “all reports indicate that generals and admirals have welcomed the primipara minister with a mix of gallant friendliness and protecting feelings which will be at their height when the newly born becomes the *grand fils du régiment*” [3].

As for Chacón’s ‘efficiency’ as political leader elected to implement certain policies, she “stuck to her feminist principles” [6]. Not only did she “share maternity/paternity leaves with her husband” [52, 58], in her first months in office she promoted more women in the army [46]; changed military structure – now, time in the army is no longer a criterion for promotion, which will permit women to become generals – [25]; and “adopted the picturesque decision to change women’s uniforms” [58], as they were ‘universal male’ and did not fit women’s breasts or bodies. In a couple of months she had become a popular minister, very favourably valued by citizens.

The only complaint by women politicians of the opposition in those first months (April-July 2008) was the minister’s exploitation of her motherhood (probably because they were aware of the public relations value the minister was obtaining from that): “her objective should be her condition as a woman not to be news anymore” [22], a female conservative member of parliament claimed. Although it seems difficult to envisage how she could have acted otherwise, given the absolute emphasis the press had placed on her sexed body, this is

what she will endeavour to do in the following months, to “leave aside her woman condition”⁷.

The hybridly-gendered minister and military officer (August 2008-February 2009)

Months after her baby was born, Chacón could not (or decided not to) exploit her motherhood any more,⁸ and started to construct a hybridly-gendered identity based on her commitment to the forces. She had to shift between competing subject positions, and construct herself as a powerful persona, under the obligation to demonstrate that ‘I am worth it’ and that she could make decisions, give orders, be respected, and have her authority acknowledged.

In order to achieve that, Chacón kept on expanding the range of feminine traits which she had started to develop during her first months in office. Hybrid is the adjective which best describes her performances. Two examples will illustrate this hybridity, which I have described in Author (forthcoming).

One of her first decisions was to replace the highest-ranking officers in the armed forces by others who suited her policy aims better, a most authoritative decision which openly challenged the Establishment. But at the farewell ceremony of the previous general staff, she looked “moved”, “almost crying” [22]. She justified her emotion: “I have worked so, so, so well with the previous ones” [22]. Here she used a construction documented as most feminine (García Mouton, 2000; López García and Morant, 1991), “*a gustísimo*” [so, so, so well], an inessential qualifier that a man would probably not utter in public formal performances (Lakoff, 1975), as it is a device which may “position a speaker as lacking in

⁷ Others, however, ask her to be “more feminine”, to display her ‘bright’ womanhood in an even more visible manner, from a female position. For instance, a man in a leftist paper speaks that out, favourably recalling when a member of the Spanish parliament (of the Communist Party) took her newborn child to the parliament and breastfed him. He complains of some of the male stances: “I’m fed up with them. It’s alright to gaze at women in the tube, isn’t it? But women politicians must be masculine, with invisible tits, if possible”. No, they should act out womanhood, he concluded.

⁸ Part of the press would continue naming her “minister mother” [e.g. 53].

'real' authority, as drawing in [this resource] in an attempt to divert attention from a lack of institutional status or socially conferred prestige that would enable 'plainer' words" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003: 81).

One may tend to ascribe Chacón's emotion to a typically feminine style of leadership, where women's difficult decisions may lead them to crying. Holmes has observed how there is an underlying pressure to counter the effects of 'masculine' strategies with more 'feminine' behaviour. According to Holmes, this evidences that "societal assumptions about women's behaviour continue to operate and impose restrictions and constraints, even when women have apparently broken through the glass ceiling" (2005b: 52-3). Chacón's display of emotion here can be read as a similar way to negotiate her identity. In terms of 'effectiveness', on that particular occasion, both generals, the replaced and the replacement, looked happy, smiling next to her in the press pictures. How exactly she managed to achieve this cordial ending did not emerge in the media.

Chacón's success in deploying hybrid performances adds to the very many women in the public domain who have opted for mixing 'masculine' and 'feminine' traits in the construction of powerful self-identities. For Marra, Schnurr and Holmes (2006: 256), 'effective' senior management in the corporation is being "able to skilfully integrate transactional and relational goals". Their findings were later supplemented by Baxter, who showed how the managers and CEOs in her sample deployed "a wide repertoire of gendered linguistic strategies in order to achieve the diverse goals of their business", and additionally were "able to shift their subject positions" by means of competing allegiances "from one moment to the next" (2008: 216). In Chacón's case, she did not only give out hybrid verbal signs: she attempted hybrid iconical ones too.

Her tuxedo, bun and make-up

Well aware of the fact that women are often judged on different criteria than men, and on which compelled to prove their worth, Chacón strongly invested in her symbolic presentation – “Chacón knows about symbols” [11], claimed a daily. Eckert argues that, to the extent that men traditionally controlled material capital, women were constrained to accumulate symbolic capital (as defined by Bourdieu). According to her, “actual personal influence without power requires moral authority. In other words, women’s influence depends primarily on the accumulation of symbolic capital: on the painstaking creation and elaboration of an image of the whole self as worthy of authority” (Eckert, 1990: 93). That is why “women have to focus on the production of selves – to develop authority through a continual proof of worthiness – ... focusing on how they are” (Eckert, 1998: 73).

As if she were following Eckert’s observations, Chacón tried to establish her credentials through her actions (the media covered her constant quick visits abroad to where Spanish troops were serving in peace missions [53], and spoke of never-ending meetings with the general staff and office work [22]), but also taking great care in “less tangible attributes of appearance, dress, demeanour, personality and speech” (Cameron, 1997: 17). She is described as “elegant, modern and casual” [14], even by the British press [2]. “She walks straight as a sail, firm jaw, a young woman dressed in black and trendy high-heeled sandals” [22]. “Her high-heeled sandals and trousers to inspect the troops” [49] are interpreted as “marking territory” [22]. Very significantly, the press link her careful concern for her looks with “exercising power” [49].

Is identity given, achieved or both? What seems unquestionable is that the subject negotiates her roles and positions, which may be contradictory and in open conflict. It is in these first months of Chacón’s office that her gender identity production can be clearly seen as a process which involves power strategies and counter strategies. Foucault stressed how

resistance to power is open to subjects in a variety of alternative options in a much quoted passage:

there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial; ... focuses of resistance are spread over time and space at varying densities, at times mobilizing ... individuals in a definite way, inflaming certain points of the body, certain moments in life, certain types of behaviour". (Foucault, 1976: 96)

One of the 'moments in Chacón's life' clearly 'inflamed by a conscious resistance' to gender norms was the solemn festivity of the Military Christmas, in January 2009. Because of its relevance for the purposes of the present paper, I will dwell a while on it.

If there is one context where gendered expectations about normative behaviour are more obvious than it is protocol norms for solemn formal occasions. A military solemn communal celebration, an occasion to congregate with military commanders, the Military Christmas in Spain is a most formal event, presided over by the King and Queen at the Royal Palace. "Rigid protocol norms require strict uniform for the military, evening dress with long skirt for civilian women, and tail coat for civilian men" [13]. "Challenging protocol" [13, 18], "in a bold shocking image" [13], Chacón, who had to deliver the institutional speech, appeared wearing not a tail coat (as a man would), not a uniform (as a military would), not an evening dress (as a woman would), but a black tuxedo – what the British call a dinner jacket.⁹ "The military code requires military women to have their hair in a bun on solemn occasions" [13, 27]. "Chacón's hair was gathered tight up in a bun. She was also heavily made-up, strong eye-liner and colours" [13, 18] [**Photo 2**].

Iconically "transgressive and provocative" [17], the minister challenged and twisted the role of dress in women's identity. She opted for an image which conferred gender flexibility, accepting some of the constraints of being in command of the military and yet

⁹ Defined as "a semiformal evening dress for men" (<http://www.synonym.com/definition/tuxedo/>), the fashion designer Yves Saint Laurent converted it into female attire in *haute couture* as well.

feminine. Her tuxedo projected a self able to symbolically (re)position herself out of the context of fixed and close options. But, on the other hand, her concessions to heavy make-up and elegant design did not seem to compromise her femininity, as she was complying with some of the cultural demands related to gender. In this way, her tuxedo and make-up showed a certain resistance to gender norms: effectively challenging and troubling some of them; accepting some others; successfully mixing them.

Her dress and intended meaning were contested by some of the press, producing clashes of opinion among different media [e.g. 8, 10, 13, 27]. Some celebrated her transgressive performance, her doing gender while playing with gender (“is this a fashion statement in drag?”, asked a journalist [21]). What others could not admit was precisely that game: some claimed that “something more military would have been more appropriate” [17], while others accused her of exactly the opposite, of “sexist choice” when she decided to wear “a masculine tuxedo”, “as if ashamed of her sex” [19]. She was also accused of “being frivolous” and of “aiming for all eyes to be on her” [19].

What most of the media recognised as a success was her hair up in a bun, which was unanimously read as “a wink in solidarity to her female subordinates” [13], a strategic alliance with women military personnel. Perfectly aware of the troops’ feeling of sharing in a hierarchical framework, she demonstrated her strong attachment to soldiers, and her affiliation to the women in the forces (who make up 12% of the Spanish military). The uniform and the rituals allow every soldier and commander to transcend themselves as individuals via identification with the encompassing institution of the military forces/the nation. Somehow at the centre of the imagery carefully devised by Chacón was her hair choice, aimed to embody the institution itself. She was also offering herself as symbolic reassurance for the military to be co-opted into the notion of a woman boss.

It was a ceremony of the greatest significance, and the minister intended this significance to show on many levels: while delivering a most relevant speech on her targets during her term of office, she was paying attention to the symbolic. She wanted to demonstrate her commitment to the role, her feeling of membership, her sense of belonging to the collective identity. Studying the Israeli military, Gal has argued that commitment is the backbone of the profession and a powerful motivation, especially “when military activities involve high risk, extreme demands, and severe stress” (1985: 553). “For most military professionals, belonging to the armed forces is not merely a question of a place to work, a job, or an occupation; it is a way a life and frequently a lifetime commitment” (Gal, 1985: 553). And for those in a position of command, commitment is requested at all levels: physical, emotional, affective, in values, beliefs and responsibilities (Bass and Riggio, 2006). The hair style chosen by Chacón was visibly guaranteed her commitment and her sense of connection.

Chacón's performances during her first months as a minister were interpreted as “effective” [58] even by the rightist press. She announced her determination to “manage the defence ministry as an organization of 125,500 militaries and 32,000 civilians” [22], and a ten-million-euro budget” [4, 26]. She was quoted as claiming that “the human dimension in this ‘house’ should not be disregarded” [22] – ‘house’ seems a very ‘feminine’ term for what was, a century ago, ‘the ministry of war’. In addition to that, she managed to change the nature of the military, which according to surveys would soon “come closer to civilian society more than ever: under her office, the military forces are better valued than ever after Franco's death”¹⁰ [46]. In February 2009, her efforts to belong to the roles assigned to her seemed to have worked. It was then when she concentrated/commanded “more respect” [25, 53]. The media praised “her initiative, soundness and coherence” [53], and acknowledged

¹⁰ Francisco Franco was the authoritarian dictator of Spain from October 1936 until his death in 1975. Supported by the military forces, he maintained his control through the implementation of repressive and authoritarian measures.

“her acceptance by the military” [25]. Also, “according to surveys, citizens’ assessments of her were so high that they surpassed any other minister in the cabinet (included the President)” [25, 58]. Most newspapers hinted that she might be President Zapatero’s future successor [28, 47, 49, 58, 59...].

In addition to that, Chacón was voted one of the ‘sexiest’ women in the world by Spanish men. Lakoff has already noted how “the public perception of powerful women is ambivalent. Powerful women are variously sexualized, objectified, or ridiculed” (2003: 173). In Chacón’s case, the list released by the American magazine *FHM (For Him Magazine)* included her as number 97 of the sexiest women in the world, as voted by 685,000 Spanish men; the actor Penélope Cruz was number 45. The survey was carried out in mid-2008, at the summit of her popularity. What exactly is the link between her performances and male desire, as expressed in *FHM*’s results? A commentator for *The Star* wrote, “In *FHM*, the women are totally unattainable – “too good for you, buddy” ... Their womanliness reminded male audiences of their manliness” (March, 2008). Although he was referring to other attractive women (top models, actors and stars), the mere fact that Chacón was actually voted by some Spanish men as one of the sexiest women is probably an indicator of how this young powerful woman’s performances could arouse male desire. The fact that she was deliberately expanding the traits traditionally considered ‘feminine’ makes it even more interesting. The changing social context in Spain provided a complex gender position for a woman in charge of the military. As a response, an also complex hybrid identity was formulated. Chacón juggled the demands of competing identities, and blurred the boundaries between competing assigned roles, something which seemed to endow her with status, authority, popularity... and sex appeal! A male journalist recognised that “she arouses me” [49].

Lakoff (2003) has discussed how women politicians’ objectification via elaborate discussion of appearance is normally disempowering for them:

...comments about looks are much more dangerous to a woman's already fragile grasp of power than to a man's: they reduce a woman to her traditional role of *object*, one who is seen rather than one who sees and acts. Because this is a conventional view of women, but not of men, comments about looks work much more effectively to disempower women than men, and are more hurtful to women, who have always been encouraged to view looks as a primary attribute – as men usually have not". (2003: 173)

Nevertheless, as Lakoff herself acknowledges, and, at least in Chacón's case, objectification seems to be more disempowering than sexualisation.

Conclusions

Media discourses are not monolithic. They construct identities from kaleidoscopic perspectives and in complex ways. During her first eleven months in office, the press demonstrated the transformations that gender discourses (and social structure) are experiencing in Spain.

My analysis reveals how Chacón's success as a politician seems to be proportionate to her closeness to the socially sanctioned feminine role of mother, or to the powerful social roles of minister and military officer performed from hybridly-gendered identities. It reveals as well that identities are fluid, and that a new way to be feminine is pushing its way into the new order. On later occasions Chacón will meet rigid, regulatory and coercive gender frames, and will find that the range of identities available to women in power is not as wide as they desire: in Author (forthcoming) I have described her first downfall in popularity when she tried to perform the role of a 'feminine' leader, grounding in 'feminine' communicative strategies. But the first eleven months media discourses show a (relative) fluidity of gendered subject positions and the great success of Chacón's hybrid performances. She won approval and great acceptance when she challenged existing gender constructs while simultaneously partially sustaining them by complying with certain gender norms.

Perhaps it is no longer anomalous for a woman to be in charge of a group of people, provided that she adopts one of the roles permitted to women in power: a motherly one, or a hybrid one. That entails women leaders having to face the obligation of expanding their identities and personae. This may be an interesting challenge in itself: because women can move away from old regulatory gender frames which constricted women's behaviour, and subvert categories, expand old 'feminine' repertoires into new ones still to be shaped.

But we should not build our hopes too high: choices and decisions are not free or unlimited. Women's performances have material consequences – women pay for their choices, as Chacón would painfully discover some months later.

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Appendix A



Photo 1. The minister mother: Chacón inspecting the troops. Madrid, April 2008
(Copyright: Reuters)



Photo 2. The hybridly-gendered minister/commander-in-chief (right). Women and men at the ceremony (Military Christmas), presided over by the King and Queen of Spain. January 2009
(Copyright: EFE)

Appendix B: Web addresses of the texts of my sample

1. <http://www.publico.es/070961/carme/chacon/escuece/medios/derecha>
2. <http://www.elperiodicoextremadura.com/noticias/noticia.asp?pkid=368394>
3. <http://www.elmundo.es/papel/2008/04/20/opinion/2373859.html>
4. <http://www.elmundo.es/papel/2008/04/15/opinion/2368988.html>
5. <http://www.antoniburgos.com/abc/2008/04/re041308.html>
6. <http://xornalgalicia.com/index.php?module=pnWebLogandfunc=viewanduid=385>
7. <http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2008/04/14/espana/1208154193.html>
8. http://www.laopinioncoruna.es/secciones/noticia.jsp?pRef=2009011300_5_251289_Opinion-guerra
9. http://www.diariodemallorca.es/secciones/noticia.jsp?pRef=2009021800_5_437220_Opinion-toque-suyo
10. <http://www.diariosur.es/prensa/20090118/opinion/cuestion-pantalones-20090118.html>
11. <http://www.publico.es/espana/188721/carmechacon/pascuamilitar/reyes/principes/esmoquin>
12. http://www.elperiodico.com/default.asp?idpublicacio_PK=46andidioma=CASandidnoticia_PK=576605andiseccio_PK=1006
13. <http://cordoba.abc.es/20090108/gente-famosos-latidos/esmoquin-chacon-20090108.html>
14. <http://diariovasco.hoymujer.com/trabajo/lideres/Chacon,moderna,casual,53705,04,2008.html>
15. <http://www.noticiasdegipuzkoa.com/ediciones/2008/04/18/opinion/lacontra.php>
16. http://www.elpais.com/articulo/gente/Carme/Chacon/apunta/moda/premama/elpepugen/20080123elpepuage_3/Tes
17. <http://www.eldia.es/2009-01-12/criterios/criterios10.htm>
18. <http://www.elmundo.es/papel/2009/01/07/espana/2572627.html>
19. <http://www.elmundo.es/papel/2009/01/07/opinion/2572612.html>
20. <http://www.elmundo.es/papel/2008/04/28/opinion/2380315.html>
21. <http://www.elmundo.es/yodona/2009/01/07/grandclass/1231326417.html>
22. http://www.elpais.com/articulo/portada/MADRE/MINISTRA/elpepusoeps/20080907elpepsor_5/Tes
23. <http://www.adn.es/blog/urnanimidad/politica/20080414/POS-0015-Mujeres-ministras-madres.html>
24. <http://www.abc.es/20090320/opinion-tercera/desercion-como-caracter-20090320.html>
25. http://www.farodevigo.es/secciones/noticia.jsp?pRef=2009032300_5_308913_Opinion-Tiroteo-sobre-superministra-Defensa
26. <http://www.diariovasco.com/20080420/politica/mujeres-ministras-20080420.html>
27. <http://www.lavanguardia.es/politica/noticias/20090108/53612854628/las-mujeres-defienden-el-esmoquin-de-chacon-purificacion-garcia-carme-chacon-yves-saint-laurent-espe.html>
28. <http://www.diarioya.es/content/editorial-chac%C3%B3n-y-zp>
29. <http://www.abc.es/20090324/opinion-firmas/kosovo-20090324.html>
30. <http://www.elperiodicodearagon.com/noticias/noticia.asp?pkid=388451>
31. <http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2009/03/22/opinion/2617124.html>

32. <http://www.xornal.com/artigo/2009/03/23/espana/chacon-descarta-errores-asegura-retirada-kosovo-consensuada/2009032313552355525.html>
33. <http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2009/03/25/espana/1237967533.html>
34. http://www.elperiodico.com/default.asp?idpublicacio_PK=46andidioma=CASanditipusr ecurs_PK=7andidnoticia_PK=597679
35. <http://www.elfarocentamelilla.es/content/view/30388/143/>
36. <http://www.lavozdesalamanca.com/article5561.html>
37. <http://www.elimparcial.es//carmen-chacon-sostenella-y-no-enmendalla-35982.html>
38. <http://www.nortecastilla.es/20090326/mas-actualidad/espana/chacon-reune-nuevo-secretario-200903260914.html>
39. http://www.laopiniondezamora.es/secciones/noticia.jsp?pRef=2009032400_7_343976_e_strella-Zapatero-eclipsa
40. <http://www.larazon.es/noticia/el-bailen-de-la-chacon>
41. <http://www.elmundo.es/opinion/columnas/raul-del-pozo/2009/03/2619289.html>
42. <http://www.larazon.es/noticia/madurez-por-favor>
43. <http://www.larazon.es/noticia/la-obscuridad-de-chacon>
44. <http://www.elmundo.es/opinion/columnas/luis-maria-anson/2009/03/2617143.html>
45. http://www.elpais.com/articulo/opinion/Kosovo/ministra/Chacon/elpepuopi/20090324elp epiopi_6/Tes
46. <http://www.elplural.com/opinion/detail.php?id=32112>
47. <http://www.elconfidencialdigital.com/Articulo.aspx?IdObjeto=20152>
48. http://www.elpais.com/articulo/opinion/Kosovo/dentro/elpepiopi/20090326elpepiopi_1/T es
49. http://www.elconfidencial.com/cache/2009/03/24/dos_palabras_8_hurras_carme_chacon_hurra_hurra_hurra.html
50. http://www.elpais.com/articulo/internacional/chapuzas/nacional/Afganistan/elpepiopi/2009 0327elpepiint_12/Tes/
51. <http://www.elconfidencialdigital.com/Articulo.aspx?IdObjeto=20120>
52. <http://www.hoymujer.com/trabajo/lideres/Carme,Chacon,superwoman,76745,03,2009.ht ml>
53. <http://www.abc.es/20090328/opinion-firmas/password-20090328.html>
54. http://www.odiainformacion.es/index.php?option=com_contentandtask=viewandid=4167 andItemid=843
55. <http://www.diariodelaltoaragon.com/NoticiasDetalle.aspx?Id=561913>
56. <http://www.diariosigloxxi.com/firmas/miguelmassanet>
57. <http://www.diariosigloxxi.com/texto-diario/mostrar/42275>
58. <http://www.abc.es/20090329/nacional-politica/tropiezo-chacon-20090329.html>
59. <http://www.estrelladigital.es/ED/diario/110924.asp>
60. <http://www.elmundo.es/opinion/columnas/pedro-j-ramirez/2009/03/2620862.html>
61. http://www.tiempodehoy.com/default.asp?idpublicacio_PK=50andidnoticia_PK=56034an didseccio_PK=630
62. http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5gU3s_xiYN2BY3p2xSJvEmgdK4FUw