

“Decades of machismo”: We female journalists need to shame and expose France’s sexist politicians

Saturday 14 May 2016, by [BREDOUX Lénaiq](#) (Date first published: 10 May 2015).

One of 40 signatories to an open letter details shocking levels of relentless, and sometimes violent, harassment.

There was the government minister who demanded to have a “pretty woman” opposite him during lunch. And another who would stop an interview to look at a young girl walking by and make comments about her appearance. Or the ministerial adviser who has never spoken to you but who’s desperately keen to get your telephone number so he can compliment you on what you’re wearing.

I’m a political journalist and I, too, have suffered these misplaced – at best – and blatantly sexist – at worst – remarks, often made under the pretext of humour or pseudo-seduction à la française. Sometimes they’re disguised as compliments, at which point I go as red as a poppy and wish the ground would open up and swallow me.

Such comments are mortifying and I feel put in my place: that of a woman who should remain inferior and silent. Sometimes, I’ve even avoided calling back sources because I’m afraid that my motives might seem ambiguous and misconstrued, and I don’t want to risk that. I’ve also avoided some late-night meetings with political contacts for the same reason.

No, it’s not “systemic”. No, nothing that I’ve suffered is illegal or could be the subject of a legal complaint, and no, it’s no different from what millions of women in France, many of them in a much more difficult situation than me, a staff journalist, suffer every day. Nor does it stop me doing my job. It does make me feel that it’s impossible for me to do my job in the same way as my male colleagues. It is always in my mind and it sometimes puts me in a weak position, which I resent.

This everyday sexism is the same for my female colleagues and we recently explained this in an open letter published by the daily newspaper *Libération*. It was titled “We are female political journalists and victims of sexism” and was signed by 40 journalists from different media.

We have talked about it for a long time. We’ve sighed, we’ve complained, but until now we have never crossed the line and expressed our complaints publicly and collectively.

The idea of the newspaper declaration came about this winter during a chance conversation, but more and more colleagues joined our cause and each would tell us another anecdote. The sexism came from across the political spectrum and at every level of power, from government minister to member of parliament. The accumulative effect of these stories of political sexism was astonishing, even to me. I knew that it was present in the political world but the constant, relentless and sometimes violent nature of what some of us have endured took my breath away.

It was proof that the problem is structural and not the work of a few vulgar males or isolated

incidents, as is often claimed.

In our *Libération* tribute, we told how one MP greeted a woman journalist at the Assemblée Nationale, with the words: “Ah, but you’re hustling ... are you waiting for a client?” Another journalist said an MP would pass his hand through her hair and make remarks about how he couldn’t wait for the return of spring. Some would only desist if threatened with a legal complaint of harassment. A colleague recalled that a candidate for the presidential primaries said he had agreed to answer her questions because “she was wearing a pretty dress”. During one very speedy visit to a factory where we were asked to wear blue overalls, one minister thought it funny to say: “It would be better if you weren’t wearing anything underneath.”

Another time, after the summer holidays, a ministerial adviser asked us if we were “tanned completely all over”. Several female colleagues told of the text messages proposing: “Info in exchange for apéro [a drink]”. During the last presidential campaign, some female reporters discovered that a political aide had photographed them asleep on a plane and had shared the picture with his colleagues. We know that not only journalists suffer. It exists everywhere in society. In the street, the Métro, at work. In politics, elected women suffer. Last year, in the Assemblée Nationale, a woman MP was interrupted by a male MP who made cluck-cluck noises like a chicken when she spoke. A female minister was whistled because she was wearing a flowery dress.

Women working at the Assemblée have told us – anonymously, because they are afraid of losing their jobs – that politicians have tried to seduce them, sometimes violently, in a lift or corridor. Others reported that when they turned up for a job interview in an MP’s office, he had set up a makeshift bed.

Of course, not all French MPs behave like this. Happily, some respect the rules of a working relationship, and even respect the understandable closeness that can exist between a politician, adviser or official, and a journalist. Across all political parties, younger MPs seem better educated in equality. Perhaps it’s a question of generations, but I’m ready to bet that if nothing changes in French political life that in a few years’ time, when these young men become ministers and intoxicated with power, they will repeat the behaviour of their elders. As long as women are very much in the minority in the Republic’s corridors of power and mostly white, heterosexual men, often in their sixties, dominate the two houses of parliament, they will continue to cultivate the behaviour and the sexist codes of an old boys’ club.

Unless. Well, unless the balance of power shifts. Four years ago, the Dominique Strauss-Kahn affair came as a shock to France [1], including in some newspaper offices, where stories emerged of female journalists who would try not to interview the head of the IMF alone. Suddenly, we were free to speak. But decades of machismo are not so easily or instantly crushed.

We have to continue to fight and go further. Female journalists must speak out, talk about how they are treated and shame those MPs who persist in their sexist behaviour. Like the German journalist from *Stern* who wrote in her profile of the liberal Rainer Brüderle that he had vaunted the merits of her décolletage [2]. Perhaps that’s our next step. Because in 2015, female journalists just want to get on with their jobs.

Lénaïg Bredoux

P.S.

* The Guardian.Sunday 10 May 2015 00.05 BST Last modified on Saturday 7 May 2016 16.28 BST : <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/may/10/french-politicians-will-only-stop-sexism-when-women-name-and-shame-them>

* L  na  g Bredoux is a journalist at the investigative website Mediapart and a signatory to the letter signed by 40 female political journalists in France published in Lib  ration on Tuesday. Available in French on ESSF (article 37911), [Harc  lement - « Nous, femmes journalistes politiques et victimes de sexisme... »](#).

Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF: [DSKcase](#).

[2] http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/29/world/europe/29iht-germany29.html?_r=0