

Global History and International Relations Master Thesis:

**The Female Condition of women in leadership positions through  
the lens of the European Parliament**

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## **I. Introduction**

Gender equality has been an issue of discussion in the western society ever since the end of the Second World War. With the rise of feminism and the widespread demand for equality between the sexes, this topic has been the moving mechanism for change and progress for women's rights to equal pay, vote, and representation. Despite that, there are still domains in which gender equality is under pursue and has not been fully reached. This research project will be focusing on one of these domains: women's representation within international politics. More particularly this MA thesis aims to shed a light on the first-hand experience of female Euro-politicians in the male-dominated space of European institutions. This year's election of the third ever female president of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola, opened up again the conversation regarding gender equality within the EU setting. Thus, this research aims - by using the European Parliament as an arena - to take a closer look at what hides behind the curtain of female leadership; the struggles women must overcome as well as the mechanisms installed to help them reach gender equality. Ultimately, this will be facilitated by the introduction of a comparative case study between the two women who have taken on the presidency of the European Parliament before Metsola: Simone Veil who was the first female president of the parliament (1979-1982) and Nicole Fontaine, who led the parliament during a crucial turning point for the EU (1999-2002).

### **i. Research Question and Sub Questions**

Overall, this MA thesis targets in providing its readers with an extensive and thorough response to the following research question of *-How has women's representation and experience in the world of politics changed between the 1970s to early 2000s, as seen through the political careers of Simone Veil and Nicole Fontaine?* In doing so this paper initially answers the question of which societal barriers do women who enter the scene of politics encounter? While it also aims at deciphering the various mechanisms that have been installed and used by women as a steppingstone to gain political power. Furthermore, this research dives into the presidencies of the two female presidents of the European Parliament, Simone Veil and Nicole Fontaine, with the aim to analyse the obstacles they faced to achieve power. Additionally, it looks into the ways their political agendas as presidents contributed towards the better recognition of women in politics as well as the legacy which they left behind for upcoming presidents. By comparing their political trajectories the present thesis will also discuss changes concerning

women's leadership within European politics over the span of twenty years, focusing on issues of gender equality as well as their representation in the media.

## **ii. Historiography**

The following section, introduces and conducts a brief overview of this paper's employed secondary sources in order to give a fitting response to the research question: *How has women's representation and experience in the world of politics changed between the 1970s to early 2000s, as seen through the political careers of Simone Veil and Nicole Fontaine?*

To better approach the relationship between these two female politicians and that of women, power, and politics I have distributed the literature overview of my research material into three major thematic angles. Starting from a general-to-specific approach, this section firstly gives some insight into the history of feminism within the EU, since it constitutes the backbone of this MA thesis. Next, the topic of women's representation in politics, in international institutions as well as in positions of power is discussed and paired with different perspectives voiced by theorists of the field. Finally, the third section zooms in on the thus far portrayed condition of women within the institutions of the European Union. By the end of this section, the reader will have been sufficiently introduced to the theoretical background of this thesis and obtained a clear perspective of the direction which it aims to follow.

### **a. Feminism in the Union**

The European Union has today become one of the world's most respected institutions which unites twenty-seven countries under the umbrella of economic and political collaboration. By looking within the structures of the EU and its institutions, one might find a reflection of the evolution of western society. In such way, for the purpose of this thesis I myself have chosen to look within the European Union in order to decipher the female experience of women within the political world and more particularly those occupying leadership positions.

Johanna Kantola through her article on 'Women's Political Representation in the European Union', gives an overview on the evolution of feminist ideals through time within the structures of the Union by targeting political representation, a field which she states to have been "neglected to date"<sup>1</sup> on the EU level. The author points out how initial talks within the European Union about breaking its male dominated environment are dated as early as the 1950s, while concrete steps did not appear until the Equal Treatment Directive of 1976 which

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<sup>1</sup> Johanna Kantola, "Women's Political Representation in the European Union," *The Journal of Legislative Studies* 15, no. 4 (November 6, 2009), 380.

allowed for the first feminist actors to be included in working groups within the Union<sup>2</sup>. Kantola continues by distinguishing three time periods in which monumental change took place within the Union on the case of women, with the initial two falling within the timeframe of discussion of this thesis. The first timeframe distinguished is between 1991 and 1995 when the union adopted the Third Action Programme on Equal Opportunities, which led to the establishment of ‘Women in Decision-Making’ network<sup>3</sup>. While the second one being from 1996 to 2000, when both the Fourth Framework Programme on Equal Opportunities and the “Council Recommendation on the promotion of positive action for achieving a gender balance”<sup>4</sup> were adopted by the Union and had been followed by the establishment of nine indicators “measuring progress in women’s participation in power structures”<sup>5</sup> by the Council. Lastly, through her text the author points out how important the 1990s had been for the solid emergence of the union’s feminist agenda, yet she still stresses that the way of pursuing this agenda had been through the application of ‘soft law’ from the European Union, which does not provide the most cohesive results<sup>6</sup>.

The early years of EU’s engagement with feminism were the focus of Catherine Hoskyns paper where she discusses how the European Community faced the second wave of feminism (1960-1980) and the steps it took to catch up with the changing of times. According to the author, feminists were uncertain during the early stages of the EC’s establishment in the 1980s due to its non-conventional structure, yet as the decade progressed the EC appeared to be helping in creating “transnational links among women in Europe”<sup>7</sup> which in return supported EC policy for women. Even as Hoskyns points out some of these emerging policies, which included policies on women’s rights, on fair competition, on equal treatment, as well as the passing of an anti-discrimination law<sup>8</sup>, she still does not hesitate in pointing out their flaws. Firstly, the author points out how the anti-discrimination law only regards the working place, and “therefore reinforces the public-private divide which has classically served to disadvantage women”<sup>9</sup>. Additionally, she places criticism on the laws about equality which perpetuate stereotypes and set the male dominance as the norm. One of Hoskyn’s conclusions in her text

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 383.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 384.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 398.

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Hoskyns, “Gender Issues in International Relations: The Case of the European Community,” *Review of International Studies* 20, no. 3 (July 1994), 233.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 351.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 227.

was to acknowledge the gender invincibility as a reoccurring phenomenon to international institutions during the 70s and the 80s and more precisely in an institution build on values of patriarchy as was the EC<sup>10</sup>.

A more extended overview on the implementation of feminist ideals within the European union in the 90s and onwards have established four authors in their chapter *Taming the Male Sovereign? Framing Gender Inequality in Politics in the European Union and the Member States*. The authors open their paper by emphasizing on how the entry of gender equality on the agenda of the EU during the 90s, led to the increase of feminist research and debates in both the European institutions as well as in the member states<sup>11</sup>. Furthermore, they recognise that a barrier to reaching equal gender representation in EU politics is the lack of a balanced physical presence of women in political decision-making, to which they suggest quotas, gender mainstreaming, progress monitoring and the mentoring of women as a solution<sup>12</sup>. The authors despite recognising the efforts of the EU to progress on gender equality, similarly to Kantola, find this approach to be too soft and not having enough concrete results, due to the lack of interinstitutional monitoring by the Union. Consequently, they interpret “women’s underrepresentation as a failure of democracy”<sup>13</sup> and they advocate the need to build velvet triangles between feminists, party women, and women’s movements as another solution which would enable the EU to get a step closer to achieving gender equality<sup>14</sup>.

#### **b. Women, Politics and Leadership:**

As established by the aforementioned publications, for decades now women have been fighting an ongoing battle for recognition and participation in the public life. The world of politics is one of the realms where discrimination against women has been more evident. Thus, discussed further below are publications relating to the challenges women face in the political realm, more particularly positions of power, and some of the ways which made their ascend less challenging.

Nancy Adler in her entry *Shaping History: Global Leadership in the 21st Century* in John Storey’s book *Human Resource Management - A Critical Text*, looks into the number of women in leading positions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Andler first observes a 300% increase of women

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>11</sup> Emanuela Lombardo, Maro Pantelidou Maloutas, and Birgit Sauer, “Taming the Male Sovereign?: Framing Gender Inequality in Politics in the European Union and the Member States,” in *Multiple Meanings of Gender Equality*, ed. Vlasta Jalušić (: Central European University Press, 2007), 79.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 88.

in leading positions from the 1950s to the 1990s<sup>15</sup>. While this is an outstanding increase, the actuality of the numbers according to the author is underwhelming with the percentage equating to only 78 women, but by observing the trends she makes it clear that “more women will be leading countries in the 21st century than have ever done so before”<sup>16</sup>. The author believes that the augmentation of the number of women in leadership positions, is a necessary condition for not only reaching equity, but also for introducing a new wave of leadership methods. Though Adler makes it clear that not all female leaders are by all means perfect, she does point out with examples how female leaders from around the world have perused a “new, more inclusive, trustworthy, and humanistic”<sup>17</sup> approach on leadership.

More in depth on women in leadership delves author Lesley Abdela with her paper on “Project Parity”, in which she looks into the challenges women have had to face on their way to claim leadership positions in politics, while also suggests ways in which the concepts of equity and parity can be reached. One of the most interesting points that Abdela makes is regarding the widespread fallacious presumption that the fault for women’s struggle to power is their own, and thus a problem that can be solved only by them. In more detail, the author makes it clear that there is a combination of personal and societal boundaries that hold women back and thus there is a need for a mixture of solutions<sup>18</sup>. Abdela thus makes clear that issues such as the misconception regarding female disinterest and lack of education can easily be eradicated by the traineeship and encouragement of women to enter the field of politics<sup>19</sup>. While issues regarding the absence of women from party lists and their media marginalization could be addressed by “changing the gender culture of the systems and structures in the political and public arenas”<sup>20</sup>, as well as with the gradual implementation of laws and quotas. In summary, the point the author wishes to pass is that training women as leaders is not enough if there is not a societal change accompanying it.

Furthermore, important points regarding the experiences of women in politics, also makes author Caroline Criado Perez in her book *Invisible Women*. The author instead of focusing on the path women take to enter into the political world, she chooses to focus on the

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<sup>15</sup> Nancy Adler, “Shaping History: Global Leadership in the Twenty-First Century,” in *International Human Resource Management: A Critical Text* (London: Macmillan Education, 2017), 465.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 470

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 474.

<sup>18</sup> Lesley Abdela, “From Palm Tree to Parliament: Training Women for Political Leadership and Public Life,” *Gender & Development* 8, no. 3 (2000), 20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615478911220091>.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

various ways women have been silenced and held back by marginalising practices. More particularly, she points out how the lack of gender equal political representation creates a biased and off-balanced democracy which benefits the male population more than the female<sup>21</sup>. More men being in charge of drafting and passing legislatures means that the female experience is not being taken under consideration, something which leads to the creation of a gender data gap in legislation and to the misrepresentation of female citizens from their governments<sup>22</sup>. Lastly, Perez in her book also looks into the experiences of female politicians, by highlighting the difficulties they face to get elected in office, but also the ones they face after that, which range from being victims of patronising behaviours from their male colleagues<sup>23</sup> to their “exclusion from male-dominated patronage networks”<sup>24</sup>, where the ‘real’ decisions are being made.

### **c. Women and European Institutions:**

Having established already the history of feminism in the European Union and the experience of women with politics and leadership on a general scale, this section combines the two thematic fields by looking into the literature on the female experience within the institutions of the Union.

To begin with, Yves Denéchère’s paper on ‘French feminists and the European Parliament in the 1990s’, offers a glimpse into the political life of feminist Frenchwomen within the parliament of the European Union. The author highlights how much had the environment of the Union has been marked by women between 1979 and the late 90s, and how the progress in female representation was a result of the tireless work of feminist politicians<sup>25</sup>. Denéchère starts by mentioning the inhospitable conditions which existed for women in the early eighties, when the European parliament had limited power, women had been doing thankless work and feminist expression was not even merely portrayed in electoral campaigns<sup>26</sup>. Nevertheless, the author pins down the year 1994, as the turning point towards a more women accepting Union. That was the year that feminism set down roots within the structures of the European Union, with the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 and the

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<sup>21</sup> Caroline Criado-Perez, *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* (New York: Abrams Press, 2021), 206.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>25</sup> Yves Denéchère. *Les féministes françaises et le Parlement européen dans les années 1990. Les féministes de la deuxième vague* (France, May 2010), 231.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*



launch of the fight for parity in politics, many candidates had appeared for the first time as feminists on the lists for the upcoming elections<sup>27</sup>. Moving forwards and ever since the elections of 1994, the European electoral campaigns had included feminist ideals within them thanks to the contributions of the French feminists' activists which had emerged from the second feminist wave<sup>28</sup>.

Christina Xydias, studies how the representation of women in positions of power within their countries reflects on their parallel representation on the European parliament and vice-versa. Through her research the author took notice of a conundrum circulating the election of women in politics, noticing "that most countries elect women to the EP at higher rates than to their national legislatures"<sup>29</sup>. The author has narrowed the reasons leading to this into electoral rules and the implementation of quota by the EU, political recruitment, and to the various perceptions towards the European Parliament<sup>30</sup>. Additionally, Xydias makes a note of the progress made to women's presence in the Parliament in the span of 30 years, climbing from "16 percent in 1979 to 35 percent in 2009"<sup>31</sup>. Overall, despite the obvious progress that was made in the European Parliament, the author does not hesitate in expressing a fourth controversial reasoning on why more and more women are finding a seat in the EP, and that revolves around the topic of power and to the notion that "where there is power there are no women and where there is no power there are women"<sup>32</sup> which is something worth taking into consideration in our efforts of establishing a more global view on the topic.

Finally, by looking within the briefing on the state of play of 'Women in politics in the EU', which was released by the members' research service of the European Parliament in 2019, we are able to link the present to the past and identify where the Union has not been able, after all these years, to close the gender gap in politics. Some of the mentioned obstacles to gender balance within the Parliament of the Union include the lack of inclusion of gender equality in the agendas of European political parties, as well as the disinterest the parties have shown in introducing aiding mechanisms such as gender quotas in their lists<sup>33</sup>. Additionally, the briefing

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Christina Xydias, "Discrepancies in Women's Presence between European National Legislatures and the European Parliament," *Political Research Quarterly* 69, no. 4 (December 28, 2016), 801. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912916663655>.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 802.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 803.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 809.

<sup>33</sup> Rosamund, Shreeves. Martina, Prpic. Eulalia, Claros. State of play: Women in politics in the EU. European Parliament Members' Research Service. PE 635.548 – March 2019, 7.

also looks into the composition of the Union's institutions and their progress in reaching gender parity. While the European Parliament demonstrates according to statistics a consistent rise on the percentage of women with each election cycle, the same cannot be said for the Commission which out of its 28 members in 2019, only nine had been women<sup>34</sup>.

Having thus established an overview of the main ideas on topics which lay the base structure of this thesis, ranging from feminism in the European union to women in positions of power and to their contact with the world of European politics and the EU institutions, I aspire to utilise these accumulated research results to deepen my own.

### **iii. Methodology and Source criticism**

In my effort to give a methodical response to the research question of this thesis, I have utilised a plethora of qualitative primary sources to shed a light on the state of play regarding women in politics and positions of power, as well as provide the reader with a well-rounded perspective of what being a woman in a leading position entailed of during the years of Veil's and Fontaine's presidencies. More particularly these sources are composed by two autobiographies, by digitised newspaper article clippings, digital newspaper articles, and speech transcripts dated from the late 1970s to the early 2000s.

Starting from the biographical publications, I have chosen to focus on the ones which have been written directly by the two subjects of my research, Simone Veil, and Nicole Fontaine, because in my opinion women for the longest of times have had their own voices silenced by third parties, and I do not wish to contribute to that. In such way, the two autobiographies which have been used to perpetuate a comparative case study between the two presidents have been read and analysed in an along the grain fashion. Moreover, important for this thesis was the correct periodisation of these publications since the time period which I wish to zoom in was the years leading to Veil's and Fontaine's presidencies of the European Parliament, as well as the presidency itself. Therefore, another reason for choosing these two books was due to their ability to provide with an insight to these women's path in entering politics as well as to the struggles and pivotal for their careers decisions they have had to face as presidents. In navigating through contents of the autobiographies, I have done so through the lens of feminism and the topics of patriarchy, equality, stereotyping, as well as the themes of female empowerment, the glass ceiling, and gender invisibility.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 3.

Looking at each publication individually, Simone Veil's autobiography titled *Simone Veil: A Life*<sup>35</sup>, which its original version was published in 2007, was written well after the end of her political career, at the age of 80, and offers the life story of the author, from her childhood to her entry into the workplace, and her transition from national politics to European politics and back to national politics. While it manages to capture the essence of who Simone Veil was as a person and a politician, it still comes from the subjective point of view of the author who in telling her life story might have opted out from including the full scope of her experiences. Overall, it still remains pivotal for this thesis which aims in highlighting the former president's journey without erasing her struggles as a woman in a man ruled realm.

Nicole Fontaine's autobiographical publication: *Mes Combats à la présidence du Parlement européen*<sup>36</sup> originally published in 2002, comes closer to a memoir since it was written right after the end of the politician's parliamentary presidency and only focuses on that specific timeslot of her life as a president of the European Parliament. I chose this book because the author lets the reader into the everyday life of being a president of a European institution without hesitating in including into her narrative on how her gender had affected not only the way she experienced being in a position of power but also the different ways the system, her colleagues and the public opinion viewed her. Additionally, the time period which this book was written, during the years of Fontaine's presidency, allows for the events and experiences of the writer to be fresher in her memory and thus much closer to the truth, offering a different kind of authenticity to the source's materials. Despite that, the subjectivity of this source needs to be noted especially because Fontaine at the time was an active politician with a political agenda in mind and thus would not have included in her book any image damaging details.

Moving to the second category of primary source material, the use of newspaper articles goes hand in hand with that of the autobiographies, but instead of providing with a personal view on the presidencies of the aforementioned women, they offer a glimpse into how they have been portrayed by the media of the time.

In general, I have utilised nineteen different articles, eleven regarding Simone Veil and eight Nicole Fontaine, with my research for them being determined by three factors, origin, timeframe, and availability. Regarding Origin, I chose to focus on international newspapers rather than looking into French ones, in order to establish the image the international scene had for the two women without any national biases coming into question. Therefore, I narrowed

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<sup>35</sup> Simone Veil, *Simone Veil: A Life* (Haus Publishing, 2018).

<sup>36</sup> Nicole Fontaine, *Mes Combats: À La présidence Du Parlement européen*, (Plon, 2002).

down my research by focusing on the digital databases of *The Times*, *The Financial Times* and *The Economist* as well as the digital newspaper *Politico*. The aforementioned are prestigious and serious newspapers published in the English language, which subscribe to western concepts and perpetuate western biases, something which compliments the approach of this thesis in staying within the barriers of the international European scene. Moving to the second factor timeframe, for the case of Simone Veil I have chosen to focus my research between the years of 1978 to 1994 as a way of obtaining an overview of the media representation from before, during, and after her presidency. The same approach was pursued for the case of Nicole Fontaine as well, yet due to the lack of relative article publications from before and after her presidential run, my research in articles publications was limited between the corresponding years of her presidency which were from 1999 to 2002. Finally, the third factor being availability, since after applying origin and timeframe, the articles which gave solid input on the two women had been scarce and are the ones which were used in my research, with the rest of them either being too vague in including only limited amounts of information on the politicians or having only a mention of their name.

Moreover, regarding the analysis of the newspaper publications, it was done in against-the-grain fashion and through the lens of the feminist branch focusing on media representation and by the application of themes such as gender invincibility and stereotyping which authors Irina Zamfirache and Caroline Criado-Perez respectfully establish in their works. In the case of Simone Veil, the subjects of focus varied, from disputes Veil has had as a president<sup>37</sup>, to the ways in which she has handled moments of crisis<sup>38</sup>, to opinion<sup>39</sup> and criticism<sup>40</sup> columns, offering thus an amalgam of perspectives on the French female politician captured by the media of the time while also shining a light on the former president's political agenda and presidency style. Similarly, the newspaper article clippings regarding Nicole Fontaine's political career,

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<sup>37</sup> Charles Hargrove, "Mme Veil in dispute with Paris over rise in EEC budget." *Times*, 27 December 1980, p. 3. *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>38</sup> Fred Emery, "EEC leaders reject demand for British withdrawal." *Times*, November 7, 1980, 5. *The Times Digital Archive*.

<sup>39</sup> "Supergran." *Economist*, December 30, 1978, 27. *The Economist Historical Archive*.

<sup>40</sup> "Letting Them Know the Secret Code." *Financial Times*, February 5, 1994, XIV. *Financial Times Historical Archive*.

the thematical fields which they fall within, concern the politician's election<sup>41</sup>, her portfolio and leadership skills<sup>42</sup>, as well as some criticism pieces<sup>43</sup>.

Lastly, in my analysis I will be looking into two transcripts of speeches given by Veil and Fontaine during their presidencies, in order to introduce their political agendas more clearly, as well as the different discourses each of the presidents subscribe to. While there was an abundance of speech transcripts to pick from, given out by the two women in the duration of their political careers, available both through printed publications as well as through the archives of the European Union, I have chosen to focus only on the inaugural speeches of Veil and Fontaine in Parliament. That is due to the significance these speeches held in the introduction of women into a leadership position which had been a predominant male environment up until then, creating in such way an ideal setting for exploring the female condition through their interaction. The reading of these speeches, similarly to the newspaper publications, was done in an against-the-grain method so that we get a clearer perception of the speakers' initiatives and goals. The first speech concerns the inaugural speech of Mme Simone Veil, given out after her historic election as the president to the European Parliament on the 17<sup>th</sup> of July 1979, found in the appendix of her autobiography<sup>44</sup>. While the second speech being the inaugural speech which newly elected president of the European Parliament Nicole Fontaine gave out on the 21st of July 1999, at the formal opening sitting of the new Parliament in Strasbourg, retrieved from the digital Speech archives of the European Parliament<sup>45</sup>. In a speech like this, the speakers aim to inspire their audience and assure them they've made the correct decision in electing them, while at the same time taking the opportunity to introduce the focus of their political agenda as president. Thus, the analysis of these two speeches will help in better understanding each president's leadership style as well as pinpoint the discourses which they subscribe to.

Overall, through my research I have noticed that despite the existence of enough research regarding the conditions for women in the realm of politics and in positions of power and despite the plethora of publications regarding women's individual struggles with climbing

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<sup>41</sup> "President Wanted Who Will Pep up Parliament." *Financial Times*, January 14, 2002, 6. *Financial Times Historical Archive*.

<sup>42</sup> Nell Buckley, "Parliament Flexes Its Muscles before Quizzing Commissioners." *Financial Times*, July 21, 1999, 2. *Financial Times Historical Archive*.

<sup>43</sup> "Nicole Fontaine: a European conciliator-general." *Economist*, August 28, 1999, 34. *The Economist Historical Archive*.

<sup>44</sup> Simone Veil, *Simone Veil: A Life* (Haus Publishing, 2018), p.270-282.

<sup>45</sup> Nicole, Fontaine. "Formal Opening Sitting of the new European Parliament." Transcript of speech delivered at the European Parliament, Strasbourg, France, July 21, 1999.

up the ladder of success, I have noticed a gap in combining the two and especially when it comes to the case of European female leaders. Thus, through this research paper I not only wish to establish the hurdles women in European politics have had to overcome on their way to the top, but I aim in doing so through the analysis of the individual interactions of Simone Veil and Nicole Fontaine with the political field.

## **II. Feminism: women, power & EU politics**

What we call Feminism has taken different meanings and shapes through the years as it evolved from being an ideological concept which appeared only on paper, to taking form and shaping itself into a socio-political movement which went down in history. Women have broadcasted their voice and have used all means available to them in order to make their demands for equality heard. From the demand to full citizenship and the right to vote in the 19<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>46</sup> to the demand for equal pay most prominent in the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>47</sup>, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century women seek, amongst the aforementioned demands which have still yet to be globally met, equal representation in the workspace and more particularly in higher positions of power. Despite these demands being more prominent during the past twenty years,

The first steps towards equal representation for women have started from the 1970s and 1980s<sup>48</sup>. Why then have we not yet reached gender equality in European Politics in this span of fifty years? The answer to this I aim to provide through this first chapter by looking into the different agents restricting women from reaching equal representation, while also by looking into the various mechanisms installed in the EU to combat inequality and aid the fight towards gender equality.

### **i. Societal Barriers**

Author Monique Leyenaar in her article regarding women's political representation in Europe, points out how "women's lack of political power appeared to stem from exclusion and discrimination"<sup>49</sup>. Thus, in order to more deeply analyse the validity of the above statement, in this section I will be introducing three factors which stem from or even enable the gendered discrimination of women in the political scene: the glass ceiling, patriarchy, and gender invincibility.

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<sup>46</sup> Amelia Valcárcel, *"The Collective Memory and Challenges of Feminism"* § (2002), 18.

<sup>47</sup> Christina Hughes, *Key Concepts in Feminist Theory and Research* (London: SAGE Publications, 2009), 35

<sup>48</sup> Monique Leyenaar, "Challenges to Women's Political Representation in Europe," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 34, no. 1 (2008), 3.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 2

### a. The glass ceiling

Almost all women today have at least once heard about the invincible ceiling made of glass bound to restrict them in one or more ways from reaching their full potential in their workplace. Even those who have not heard about it, are bound to have faced it at least once in their working environment. But what really is this glass ceiling, and how hard is it really for a woman to break through it? Professor Irina Zamfirache defines the glass ceiling as the barriers holding back women from reaching the top of the pyramid of power in a working environment, while also constitutes it as “the reason why the arenas of power were dominated by men”<sup>50</sup>. Others, like Spanish feminist philosopher Amelia Valcárcel blame this metaphorical barrier for the low number of women in working positions on the higher levels of command<sup>51</sup>. However, in reality this concept of an invincible plafond was created in order to conceal how the main stopping mechanism to women’s advancement essentially falls on discriminatory practices.

One of the main reasons why women have not been yet able to break through the executive “glass ceiling” despite the decades of efforts and the multitude of initiatives and legislations which have been launched, is due to their unchanged “responsibilities in terms of the family”<sup>52</sup>. The majority of women are faced with a choice between private and public realm, either forsake the idea of a family and devote all your time to work in order to climb up the ladder of success or start dividing your time and compromising your position in your workplace enough to make time for family life<sup>53</sup>. In both cases women are the ones compromising, while their male counterparts are left unbothered and free to put more time into their work and more easily advance the ladder of success. The issue thus is the lack of equal responsibility regarding family life, and it stems from within the societal structures for hundreds of years now. The introduction of policies such as: “childcare facilities, maternity and paternity leave, flexible working hours”<sup>54</sup>, could help women better balance the two spheres with the help of their partners, and in that way avoid sacrificing their careers. Enablers of the glass ceiling could also be the misrepresentation of women by the media, since journalist have shown to pay more focus on the appearance of women rather than their opinions and beliefs rendering them thus as less intellectual sexual objects to the outside world <sup>55</sup>.

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<sup>50</sup> Irina, Zamfirache. “Women and politics – the glass ceiling.” *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology* (2010), 176.

<sup>51</sup> Amelia Valcárcel, “*The Collective Memory and Challenges of Feminism*,” 28

<sup>52</sup> Christina Hughes, *Key Concepts in Feminist Theory and Research*, 32

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 34

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Irina, Zamfirache. “Women and politics – the glass ceiling.” *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology*. 180-181.

Overall, while the term glass ceiling has been used to characterise the invisible barriers existing in society for women who wish to climb up the executive ladder and reach higher positions of power, these barriers are more than invisible. Women come face to face with these challenges throughout their careers and despite the fact that more women today than ever before are starting to break through this glass barrier, men still dominate the higher grades of the workplace and especially in the realm of politics.<sup>56</sup>

### **b. Patriarchy**

The term patriarchy has been given a variety of definitions through the years in which the main constant variants concern male dominance, women's oppression, and societal control. Author Christina Hughes in her book *Key Concepts in Feminist Theory and Research*, provides her readers with a definition of patriarchy which describes it as the "male dominance of all women or the dominance of older men over women and younger men"<sup>57</sup>. While this definition is quite vague in explaining the depth of patriarchy, it holds all the necessary information for one to understand that its roots lie with gender relations and power dynamics. Another definition which goes into more detail comes from philosopher Amelia Valcárcel, who defines patriarchy as a "social, moral and political order maintained and perpetuated by the male hierarchy"<sup>58</sup>, while also enacting as an "economic and ideological order that sustained itself by self-supporting practices" while completely disregarding the rightfully earned rights of women<sup>59</sup>. Valcárcel's definition introduces some of the main categories which patriarchy affects.

For the purpose of this research, I aim to restrict the term's use on its relationship with women and its effects on their lives and the following section will introduce how two of the main branches of feminist scholars, radical and socialists, identify patriarchy. For radical feminists, patriarchy is the reason behind female oppression, while they describe it as a system "rooted in the biological inequality between the sexes and in women's reproductive roles"<sup>60</sup>. In that way radical feminists focus on the systematic oppression of women by patriarchal values within the premises of the private realm. On the other hand, "socialist feminists have claimed that patriarchy has a material base that is expressed in men's control over women's labour

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<sup>56</sup> Farida Jalalzai, *Shattered, Cracked or Firmly Intact?: Women and the Executive Glass Ceiling Worldwide*, 4

<sup>57</sup> Christina Hughes, *Key Concepts in Feminist Theory and Research*, 114

<sup>58</sup> Amelia Valcárcel, "The Collective Memory and Challenges of Feminism," 23

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> J. Ann Tickner, *Gendering World Politics: Issues and Approaches in the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 13.



power”<sup>61</sup>, meaning that its responsible for making women economically dependent and essentially being the propeller to the existing wage gap. Consequently, the radical and socialist view on patriarchy play around the realms of the private and the public, while one focuses on the effects of patriarchy on women’s position in the family, the other on their positionality at work.

Yet, patriarchy’s influence does not stop on family and market structures, according to Zamfirache, patriarchy creates “unequal relation between the sexes”<sup>62</sup> in the realm of politics as well. While theorists love to dispute which political system is more patriarchal, they miss the overall issue which is that “patriarchal structures are deeply embedded in most types of political regimes”<sup>63</sup>. The biases of electoral systems, the scrutinization of female politicians, even the low participation of women in the mainstream forms of politics all relate back to patriarchal notions. Finally, the institutionalisation of patriarchy also comes into play within the political realm, as it appears within some of the world’s largest institutions such as the European Union and the United Nations. For the EU, from its birth can be characterised as an institution “deeply entrenched in patriarchy”<sup>64</sup>. The EU was created by men and has been man ruled for many years, with only a scarce number of women appearing on higher positions in the past few decades. Even during the drafting of EU policies regarding equal pay between genders in the 50s, there was not one woman in the room<sup>65</sup>. Regarding the UN, despite having a high number of women in staff, in 1989 only 22.3% of them held professional international civil-service posts, while the rest 83% was appointed secretarial jobs<sup>66</sup>; Not only that but, from the “thirty-five undersecretaries running arms of the UN worldwide...only three were women”<sup>67</sup>. Therefore, by understanding how strong the grips of patriarchy on society are, helps us better comprehend and piece together the reasons behind the creation of aiding mechanisms to combat it.

### c. Gender Invisibility

Women are the largest marginalised group of society, and this section will be making this statement as evident as possible by looking into the different aspects of society which have

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.,16

<sup>62</sup> Irina, Zamfirache. “Women and politics – the glass ceiling.”, 180

<sup>63</sup>J. Ann Tickner, *Gendering World Politics: Issues and Approaches in the Post-Cold War Era*, 110

<sup>64</sup> Catherine Hoskyns, “Gender Issues in International Relations: The Case of the European Community,” *Review of International Studies*, 234

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Cynthia H. Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014), 121.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

been ‘disregarding’ women. In the words of Caroline Criado Perez in her book *Invisible Women*: “women are set up to be forgettable. Ignorable. Dispensable – from culture, from history, from data. And so, women become invisible”<sup>68</sup>. The most prominent area affected by female invisibility is that of data collection, which stands as the most important one. From the lack of data concerning academic jobs, to healthcare, or even to data on cases of sexual harassment<sup>69</sup>, women’s achievements and struggles stay unreported. The exclusion of women from history itself also acts as a form of cloaking women’s achievements and directing the spotlight to the male soldiers, kings, and heroes. In her text Perez gives an array of examples where women have been side-lined by men in history books, textbooks, historical retellings and even in newspapers across the world<sup>70</sup>. Yet women have been there since forever, despite the lack of data or mainstream representation, their efforts just went unnoticed. Even the recognised definition of employment in itself, enables for a huge part of female labour to go unnoticed despite women being large contributors to the global economy<sup>71</sup>. Overall, the aforementioned consists of only a sample of how women have been rendered unseen from the world of the public eye.

I have chosen to focus on the sector of politics in overseeing more closely the impacts of female invisibility on women and more particularly female politicians. To begin with, even from the start of their careers as politicians, women are faced with the impacts of their invisibility and under-representation. For example, in both the media as well as in school curriculums there has been for years a lack of representation of “female politicians, female activists, female writers, artists, lawyers, CEOs”<sup>72</sup>, which builds a hesitance in picturing women in such positions and thus a reluctance in voting them as presidents, representatives, or party leaders. Moreover, because of this lack of representation women who seek to demonstrate admission and reach higher position of power end up being the targets of harsh scrutinization, in particular “a 2010 study found that both male and female politicians are seen as power-seeking, but that this is only a problem for female politicians”<sup>73</sup>. Furthermore, even when female politicians manage to ascend in a position of power either in the parliament or as part of a cabinet, they still have to face marginalisation and even being silenced by their male counterparts. Lastly, the world of politics for women can become a cruel setting where

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<sup>68</sup> Caroline Criado-Perez, *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* (New York: Abrams Press, 2021), 29

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 19

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 5

<sup>72</sup> Caroline Criado-Perez, *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*, 204

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

patronisation as well as both verbal and sexual abuse become a common phenomenon. Intimidation practices like “shushing”, “closing off of the mic”, and even sexual propositions have been some of the experiences female politicians have faced in both national and international settings<sup>74</sup>, while the IPU has reported that “66% of female parliamentarians were regularly subjected to misogynistic remarks”<sup>75</sup>. The list of examples of the marginalisation of female politicians does not stop there but the aforementioned paint a clear enough picture of what happens in the shadows.

## **ii. Aiding Mechanisms**

In the previous segment of this chapter, we have explored the array of obstacles women have faced in order to advance both socially as well as professionally. These obstacles have grave consequences for women, which make the concept of gender equity seem further than ever before. Nevertheless, this issue has not remained unnoticed since through the years various initiatives and groups have been emerging to aid the amplification of female voices. Therefore, within the following subsections I will be introducing aiding mechanisms which have been already set into place in order to take women a step closer in reaching a state of equity.

### **a. Velvet Triangles:**

Before diving into what exactly are velvet triangles and how they have helped women in the political world, there is a need to first understand the bases which they were born, those of the European Union. The Treaty of Amsterdam which came into action in 1999, established the gender equality policy as an EU decision making strategy, an event which paved the way for the EU to be nowadays considered as “one of the more gender-friendly governance bodies of the early twenty-first century”<sup>76</sup>. That being the case, the EU has shown a heightened interest in supporting gender studies networks by not only funding them, but also through the support which EU policy makers themselves have shown to the gender equality ambitions of networks such as ATHENA and ATGENDER<sup>77</sup>. Therefore, we understand that the EU has been an outspoken advocate for the “development of equality policy ideas and networks of scholars”<sup>78</sup>,

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 212

<sup>76</sup> Sabine, Lang. "Chapter 10. Women's Advocacy Networks: The European Union, Women's NGOs, and the Velvet Triangle" In *Theorizing NGOs: States, Feminisms, and Neoliberalism* edited by Victoria Bernal and Inderpal Grewal, 266-284. New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2014. 266

<sup>77</sup> Alison E. Woodward, “Travels, Triangles and Transformations,” *Tijdschrift Voor Genderstudies* 18, no. 1 (January 2015): pp. 5-18, <https://doi.org/10.5117/tvgn2015.1.wood>. 7

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 6

allowing for the collaboration of scholars and policy makers and setting the foundations for the creation of Velvet Triangles.

So, to what does the term velvet triangle refer exactly? According to the political scientist Alison Woodland, who was the one who coined the term in the early 2000s, velvet triangles is a “heuristic concept designed to describe interactions between policy makers and politicians, feminist academics and experts, and the women’s movement in European Union policy making”<sup>79</sup>. In other words, a velvet triangle is a collaborative scheme which allows the exchange of knowledge between its members as a way of progressing their common agenda which in itself aims in making the European decision-making scene more inclusive and equal<sup>80</sup>. The three corners of the triangle, include firstly the euro-politicians of the commission and the parliament who hold feminist agendas, otherwise known as femocrats, the feminist scholars, and the organised women’s movements, all working together in unison to progress women related agendas. To be exact, with the use of Velvet Triangles women have managed to challenge “gender dimensions within institutions”<sup>81</sup>, “create new opportunity structures”<sup>82</sup>, as well as help “advancing gender politics”<sup>83</sup>.

In more detail, gender triangle coalitions have created an environment in which feminists can feel more confident in and rely on, since the political opportunities which arise by having a representative figure within the political realm, allow for a more efficient approach to issues regarding the female experience without the risk of being easily shut down<sup>84</sup>. Successful examples of the effectiveness of women’s political organisations have been observed in the Nordic countries and especially in Finland, “which has been suggested to have had particularly well-resourced women’s organizations of political parties since the 1980s”<sup>85</sup>. More particularly, women’s organisations existing within political parties alongside with other women’s movement organisations worked together within a cross-party organization

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 5

<sup>80</sup> Sabine, Lang. "Chapter 10. Women’s Advocacy Networks: The European Union, Women’s NGOs, and the Velvet Triangle" In *Theorizing NGOs: States, Feminisms, and Neoliberalism* edited by Victoria Bernal and Inderpal Grewal. 267

<sup>81</sup> Giovanna Vingelli, “Gender Mainstreaming as Institutional Innovation? Gender Budgeting, Velvet Triangles, and (Good) Practices,” *Clepsydra* 13 (2014): pp. 9-22, 16.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p.17

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p.19

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p.16

<sup>85</sup> Johanna Kantola, “Women’s Organizations of Political Parties: Formal Possibilities, Informal Challenges and Discursive Controversies,” *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 27, no. 1 (February 2019), 5

(Coalition of Finnish Women’s Association) in advancing the stance on gender equality in the country from within the government<sup>86</sup>.

Overall, in order for women’s political causes to advance a need for the creation of female coalitions has emerged and has been flourishing especially within the walls of the European Union. The support which velvet triangles have given to women both within the political world and beyond is immense, and if male politicians are still willing to challenge and silence their female colleagues, the use of velvet triangles are set in place to give them their voices back.

**b. Female Empowerment:**

For a person to reach the state of empowerment, it firstly needs to start from a place of disempowerment, since the concept plays on the idea of regaining an ability which was either not offered or taken from you.<sup>87</sup> Now in the case of women, who have been for centuries muted and dulled out by the devices of patriarchy, empowerment speaks of the “enhancement of assets and capabilities...to engage, influence and hold accountable the institutions which affect them”<sup>88</sup>; while female empowerment takes this enhancement and places it in the hands of women themselves. Thus, when we talk about political female empowerment, we are referring to the “enhancement of assets, capabilities, and achievements of women to gain equality to men in influencing and exercising political authority worldwide.”<sup>89</sup>

The gender affinity effect is a great starting point in understanding female empowerment and how has it been used as an aiding mechanism for women’s advancement in the political world. Dolan describes this effect as the belief that “women voters are the most likely source of support for female candidates”<sup>90</sup>, yet however true this statement might be being a female politician does not guarantee one the vote from all women. In that way, female empowerment may have its roots in gender empathy, but it does not rely on it, other factors also come into play like that of shared experiences, political affiliations, institutional structures, and female activism<sup>91</sup>.

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 9

<sup>87</sup> Amy C. Alexander, Catherine Bolzendahl, and Farida Jalalzai, “Defining Women's Global Political Empowerment: Theories and Evidence,” *Sociology Compass* 10, no. 6 (2016), 432

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 433

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Kathleen Dolan, “Is There a ‘Gender Affinity Effect’ in American Politics?” *Political Research Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2008), 79.

<sup>91</sup> Irina, Zamfirache. “Women and politics – the glass ceiling.” *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology* (2010), 183.

Thus, some of the initial effects which female empowerment can have on women's position in the political world have been made most evident after the increase in female political representation. More particularly Angela High-Pippert and John Comer through their research paper prove that after the election of women in a positions of power other women felt more competent, displayed greater political concern, had more confidence to take political actions, were more likely to engage in political life and were more likely to vote<sup>92</sup>. While the elevation of women in positions of power can significantly influence other women's interest and participation in politics, female political empowerment is not limited to that and can take up different shapes. For example, female empowerment can also stem from the actors who challenge the political elites, varying from NGOs to female movements. Their influence on women's place in politics derives from initiatives in which they partake such as "demonstrations, petitions, and boycotts"<sup>93</sup>, while literature and research point out how the initiatives of such groups offer the largest amounts of influence in the enforcement of policies regarding women's interests<sup>94</sup>. Finally, political female empowerment can also stem from citizens of the state as well, since their involvement in the political scene whether that takes the form of voting, campaigning, or sparking politically driven conversations has proven to have a respectable influence.<sup>95</sup> If the numbers of women who participate in politics either by exercising the right to vote or their right to be voted show significant increase, then the political scene just might start catering more and including in its agendas the topics which concern the female audience as well.

All in all, female empowerment as an aiding mechanism for women acts as the string which connects women, politics, and equality together, since its various forms and shapes make it impossible for a woman to be left without a helping hand especially when it comes to the world of politics. Velvet triangles at the end of the day are a form of female empowerment which might offer different kinds of help but still has as a common objective to give women what has been stripped from them: power.

Having arrived at the end of this chapter, I aim to have established a better understanding of the state of women in the world of politics by pinpointing the main hurdles which they have had to face, while also introducing some of the mechanisms which they have had to establish

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<sup>92</sup>Angela High-Pippert and John Comer, "Female Empowerment," *Women & Politics* 19, no. 4 (February 1998), 60-61.

<sup>93</sup> Amy C. Alexander, Catherine Bolzendahl, and Farida Jalalzai, "Defining Women's Global Political Empowerment: Theories and Evidence," 434

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

in order to not lose the already difficult to gain grip in the political world. As demonstrated, both the barriers, and the mechanisms are interrelated and connected to each other. One element would not have existed without the existence of the other, the glass ceiling metaphor feeds off of the patriarchal structures while gender invisibility can be both associated to patriarchy as well as the glass ceiling. The aiding mechanisms were created to combat the effects of the barriers and would not have existed or have had a need to exist without them. Having in this way grasped the co-dependency which exists between the aforementioned concepts and themes, the next two chapters will analyse these obstacles and mechanisms through real-life settings; the political careers of two well renowned Frenchwomen politicians and leaders, Simone Veil and Nicole Fontaine.

### **III. Presidency of Simone Veil (1979-1982)**

In this analytical chapter I will be focusing on the first ever female president of a European Institution madame Simone Veil. Long after her passing, Veil still remains an inspirational figure for women, but even more for those women who aspire to break through the mould and take on the world of politics. That being the case, further bellow and with the application of the themes which have been introduced in the previous chapter, I aim in pinpointing how Simone Veil navigated through the political world as a woman. I will be doing so by exploring her early career in France, her entry into the national government and later on into the European Parliament as a president, while also highlighting her impact and the legacy left behind.

#### **i. The climb to president**

Simone Veil, having lived as a Jew through the horrors of WWII has had a scarring upbringing<sup>96</sup>. Therefore, it is important to highlight even briefly Veil's past, and that is because it is where her path derived and broke off from that of other Frenchwomen, since her war experiences had in many ways shaped her political agenda. As one of the "two thousand and five hundred survivors out of 78,000 deported French Jews"<sup>97</sup>, she carried the weight of her past along her career and, as we will see, especially through her climb to the seat of the European Parliament. In this section thus I will be looking into the journey of Simone Veil to president and in more detail, I will be focusing on the ways which she has dealt with and overcame the hurdles of patriarchy and manage to break through the ceiling of power.

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<sup>96</sup> Simone Veil, *Simone Veil: A Life* (Haus Publishing, 2018), 72

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

Veil had been fortunate enough to have passed her baccalaureate exams during the war, and shortly before the deportation, in 1944. After the war ended, she commenced her studies in law to become a barrister<sup>98</sup>. Ambitious as she was, having ambition was not enough for women in the late 1940's, since from Veil's entry into the Sciences-Po' institute she had faced the judging eyes of her male peers, who as she herself recollects, had scrutinized her not for have been deported, but for being a girl<sup>99</sup>. Being a woman in the legal world was not such an outlandish move especially since it had been almost half a century since the first women were admitted to the bar in France, but a woman roaming in the halls of the new Institute of Political Science was still uncommon at the time. That had been the first experience of Simone Veil with the political realm, which had been distasteful enough so to create a barrier between her and politics. This experience described is one of the many manifestations of gender invisibility: the possibility of Veil having an earlier start into the world of politics gets erased when the scrutinization and marginalisation of her environment leads her in distancing herself, both mentally and physically, from the Science-Po students<sup>100</sup>.

Despite having taken a step back from dealing with politics, Veil's interest in it did not subside. More particularly her marriage to Antoine Veil allowed her to take a closer look, through the eyes of her husband, into the world of French politics since he had found himself early on with positions within the council of the republic<sup>101</sup>. Nevertheless, while reading through Veil's autobiography one might come to realise how the expectations which were placed upon her as a woman, had put a halt into her career plans and where nonetheless embedded in the notions of patriarchy and the separation between the private and public realm. A great example of such an occurrence comes up in page 92 of her autobiography where she admits that her husband had been against her decision to train for the Bar exam, Veil recalls that he felt embarrassed by her ambitions, claiming: "We don't mix with barristers, It's not a career for women"<sup>102</sup>. This situation reflects how the glass ceiling works and how it can result from the recurring clash between the private and the public realm. Veil by putting her career prospects on hold, to please her husband and to raise her three children, decided to let the private realm overtake, pressured by the expectations which society was placing on women. Even when the time came to follow her career prospects through, as just observed Veil had faced restrictions. Despite that, Veil's determination managed to defend her earlier choice,

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 79

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 92.



something which wouldn't have been possible without the female empowerment she had received. In detail, a male senior judge had gone out of his way to defend the choice of women in taking the judiciary exam to Veil's husband<sup>103</sup>, something which had been enough to convince him. This illustrates the importance empowerment can have for women, especially at times when patriarchal notions outweigh.

After having a successful career in the judiciary system as a magistrate, Veil got closer to the political world by her appointment at the French Ministry of Justice. In this role she had demonstrated her potential as an activist for minority women's rights<sup>104</sup>. Her official step in the political world though had happened in 1974, when then Prime Minister Jacques Chirac asked Veil to be part of the Giscardian government and take on the ministry of Health.<sup>105</sup> That position had placed a new weight on Veil's shoulders since she had been the first and only female minister and thus responsible not only to represent the nation, but especially the French women whose demands so far were not being heard. Becoming a female minister was an enormous success for Veil and the French women as such, one ought to question, however, whether that position was offered to Veil in good faith, or just an opportunistic move to please the growing feminist movement. Was it only symbol politics in the eyes of her male colleagues?

Similarly, Veil's candidacy for the presidency of the European Parliament could also be put under scrutiny of having rather more of a symbolic value rather than a practical one. Veil herself mentions how French president Valery Giscard d'Estaing had told her that he regards her candidacy "as a symbol of Franco-German reunification"<sup>106</sup>. This symbolisation, which comes up more than once, derives from her past as a Jewish deportee, and was used to signify that her election would mean "turning the page to world wars forever"<sup>107</sup>. In addressing the possibility that Madam Veil's positions might have been mainly superficial, I will be doing so through the lens of female representation. Veil herself had become aware of her image as one of the few women in politics, but instead of going along the narrative which was laid down for her to follow she had chosen to use the power, even if it was given to her under symbolic premises, was still power. Veil took upon herself to become a symbol of female representation and surpass the expectations her environment had placed on her.

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, 108.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

Overall, we understand that Veil's ascent to power has not been an easy one, she had managed to deal in both her private and public circles with the pre-established structures of patriarchy, she had made contact with the glass ceiling, and she managed to reach through it.

## **ii. Veil and the feminist agenda**

As can be thus understood, Simone Veil had not been a woman ready to conform to the patriarchal society and despite having feminist beliefs, she did not consider herself to be an activist of feminism. Nevertheless, having her career grow parallel to the rise of the third feminist wave was something which was reflected in both her national and international political and social moves. Further below and within the premises of this sub-section, I will be elaborating on the involvement of Simone Veil with the feminist agenda which had led the way towards women's emancipation both in France and in Europe.

Even before becoming the first president of the EU parliament, Veil had already left her mark within the French feminist charters. On numerous occasions, Veil had declared her sensitivity on issues dealing with human rights violations and injustices inflicted towards marginalised social groups. So, when she has been appointed to the Directorate of the National Prison Service from 1957 to 1964, she took it upon herself to become a prison activist<sup>108</sup>. From this position Veil, as a survivor of a concentration camp herself who knew what it felt like being imprisoned away from your home-country, had sympathised with the foreign female prisoners. She thus fought and advocated for the conditions of imprisonment of these women, she had made tangible improvements and if her limitations of power did not allow her to intervene in certain cases, she opted to investigate and educate herself on them<sup>109</sup>. One of her most rememberable achievements during those years, as she herself describes, had been in relation to the conditions of female Algerian prisoners. More precisely, during the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962), Veil managed to transfer to France female prisoners, of whom she knew they are in danger of widespread abuse and rape<sup>110</sup>, while also she had managed to bring them together in the same prison and enabled them to continue their education in imprisonment<sup>111</sup>. In such way we see how Veil prompted by her own past, advocated and became the voice these women did not have.

The extend of Veil's reach in the case of women did not stop within the prison system, more precisely the most recognised achievement of her career had been her fight for French

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.,105.

<sup>110</sup> Benjamin Dodman, "Simone Veil, French Holocaust Survivor Who Championed Women's Rights," Simone Veil - Holocaust survivor who championed women's rights (France 24, September 20, 2016)

<sup>111</sup> Simone Veil, *Simone Veil: A Life*, 105

women's rights to legal abortion. When Simone Veil was appointed to the ministry of Health in 1976, she became the "first female to be a full minister in the Fifth Republic"<sup>112</sup> and on the top of her agenda sat the legalisation of abortion for women. Veil had become in that way a very important piece of the velvet triangle puzzle regarding the de-penalisation of abortion. On one end of said triangle were the feminist movements, which were responsible for starting the conversation on this topic in 1970<sup>113</sup>. On the second end, had been academics from feminism to religion and medicine<sup>114</sup>, acting as consultants. While on the third end had been Simone Veil the only female minister able to be the political voice needed for change to happen. Having been successful in passing the bill regarding extending the use of contraception in 1974, Veil took it upon herself and had devoted months of research, consultations, and meetings in order to also pass the bill depanelizing abortion through the assembly<sup>115</sup>. Regardless, her fight to legalize abortion opened her into a world of scrutiny and judgment, from being shouted at and insulted in the streets, to antisemitic symbols being tagged on the walls of her own house, Veil encountered a huge backlash.<sup>116</sup> An example of such experience happened when Veil had to face a debate in November of 1974, unceremoniously broadcasted to national tv, at the national assembly regarding the possibility of an abortion law<sup>117</sup>. In that chamber Veil came face to face with a male dominated assembly which didn't hesitate in making sexist remarks, antisemitic comments, and insults severe enough to have driven the politician at a state of distress<sup>118</sup>, including a painful and shocking suggestion from her opponent, an anti-abortion deputy who accused Veil of "sending unborn babies to the ovens"<sup>119</sup>. Nevertheless, Veil's efforts were not in vain since later that year she was successful in passing the law with the majority of 284 votes to 189<sup>120</sup>. From the 17<sup>th</sup> of January 1975, when the Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy Act was set in place, most commonly known as the Veil law, millions of French women have gained the right of having control of their own body<sup>121</sup>.

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<sup>112</sup> Charles Barthold and Hervé Corvellec, "« For the Women » - in Memoriam Simone Veil (1927-2017)," *Gender, Work & Organization* 25, no. 6 (March 2018), 594.

<sup>113</sup> Elsa Desmoulins, "L'Anniversaire De La Loi Veil, Ou La Commémoration d'Une Histoire sans Lutte," *Nouvelles Questions Féministes* 34, no. 2 (2015), 116.

<sup>114</sup> Simone Veil, *Simone Veil: A Life*, 137

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 133

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 141

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 142

<sup>118</sup> Elsa Desmoulins, "L'Anniversaire De La Loi Veil, Ou La Commémoration d'Une Histoire sans Lutte", 116

<sup>119</sup> "Supergran." *Economist*, December 30, 1978, 27. *The Economist Historical Archive* (accessed April 14, 2022). <https://link-gale-com.eur.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/GP4100118685/ECON?u=erasmus&sid=bookmark-ECON&xid=d526116e>.

<sup>120</sup> Simone Veil, *Simone Veil: A Life*, 144.

<sup>121</sup> Elsa Desmoulins, "L'Anniversaire De La Loi Veil, Ou La Commémoration d'Une Histoire sans Lutte", 116

Veil's contributions towards the feminist movement had followed her to the chair of the European Parliament as well. From day one of taking up the reigns of the European institution Simone Veil had made clear that her ideological approaches would be the ones guiding her way in leadership, something that was made more clear through her inauguration speech given out in Strasbourg on the 17<sup>th</sup> of July 1979. Veil through her speech paid respect and tribute to French euro-politician Louise Weiss, a symbol of the European cause and the feminist movement. More precisely Veil chose to commemorate Weiss and her "outstanding contribution to the struggle waged in the cause of the emancipation of women"<sup>122</sup>, establishing in that way the importance of the fight for equality to her peers from the start of her presidency. Moreover, in her speech she addressed the representatives of 260 million European citizens and requested them to join her in the journey of achieving peace, freedom, but above all solidarity in "promoting European progress"<sup>123</sup>, all topics which relate back to the equal treatment of sexes, races, and humans in general. Nevertheless, important to mention is that Veil's speech did not make any explicit promises or referrals on topics relating directly with the feminist agenda. She had remained unbiased and talked from a universal point, either that was in fear of the implications it would have, as she was the first female president, or due to her respect towards the presidential impartiality, that is not entirely clear, but it is a very reflective point of the way she led as a President of the European Parliament.

Furthermore, it is important to mention that Veil throughout her political career had held immense respect for her female peers, while she had always made sure to acknowledge their positions and works as a way of solidarity and empowerment. More precisely, on numerous occasions Veil made active efforts in collaborating with women, who similarly to her held positions of power, so to aid in the enhancement of issues regarding the female condition which had been disregarded in most political decisions. In her autobiography Veil recounts several instances where she relied on other women for their aid and input. One of whom was Françoise Giroud, who was in charge of the department of Women's Condition during Veil's appointment as the Minister of Health, who Veil approached to join forces for the collection of the demands of women<sup>124</sup>. Another instance of Veil's efforts in acknowledging and uplifting women can be observed through the way she speaks in her autobiography about her diplomatic meetings with the female leaders of national governments during her European presidency. In more detail, Veil talks on her meeting with the then British prime minister

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<sup>122</sup> Simone Veil, *Simone Veil: A Life*, 171.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>124</sup> Simone Veil, *Simone Veil: A Life*, 128.

Margaret Thatcher, and how unbending yet immensely knowledgeable she had found her<sup>125</sup>, while also mentions how impactful her meeting with the former President of Latvia Mme Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, had been and how she had been one of the few people to ever leave an impression on her<sup>126</sup>. Lastly, the most interesting in my view, is the way she remembers her encounter with the Clintons. Veil not once does she mention the then Governor Bill Clinton; she extensively focuses on Hilary Clinton describing her as “stunningly intelligent”, while adding how impressed she was by the way Hilary had outlined with “perfect ease” and efficacy her arguments<sup>127</sup>.

Lastly, Simone Veil during her presidency had continued to raise awareness on social issues and did not hesitate to criticize international organisations for their lack of budgetary support devoted in combatting them<sup>128</sup>. Likewise, even after stepping down from the European Parliament Veil spoke on the issue of the discrimination of the sexes within the political world and had advocated on the use of “all methods of positive discrimination” aimed in reducing the inequalities from which women suffer<sup>129</sup>.

All in all, Veil throughout her political career, from her active participation in velvet triangles, to the advocacy of positive discrimination practices, and to the empowerment of other women, she contributed immensely towards the emancipation of women both nationally and internationally.

### **iii. Veil and media representations**

This sub-section will analyse media utterance which surround Simone Veil’s rise to president of the European Parliament, as well as her overall presidency with the aim to uncover both how she was portrayed by the media, as well as the hidden, often stereotypical, and patriarchal views and prejudices about female leaders in the late 70s and early 80s.

At first glance the articles published during the years of Veil’s presidency, seemingly offer a positive representation since they are littered with adjectives which can only portray a loved politician. More particularly adjectives such as “warm”<sup>130</sup>, “compassionate”<sup>131</sup>,

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid.,193.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.,194

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.,193

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 195

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 222-223

<sup>130</sup> "Supergran." *Economist*, December 30, 1978, 27. *The Economist Historical Archive* (accessed April 14, 2022).

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

“human”<sup>132</sup>, “determent”<sup>133</sup>, and “sincere”<sup>134</sup>, appear in multiple articles published by both *The Economist*, as well as by *The Financial Times*. Nevertheless, on a second glance these adjectives are coming across more as stereotypical and biased rather than representative and is a reoccurring issue which I have noticed within almost all articles referencing the female politician. As Van der Pas and Aaldering establish in their paper on ‘Gender Differences in Political Media Coverage’, while male politicians are most commonly described in the press as having agentic qualities “such as being aggressive, dominant, ambitious, independent, decisive, and self-confident”<sup>135</sup>, female politicians are “thought to embody communal qualities, such as being affectionate, emotional, friendly, helpful, warm, and nurturant”<sup>136</sup>. We understand in this way how the same stereotypes come into play for the case of Simone Veil and that is not the only kind of stereotypical representation which has been noticed in articles regarding the politician.

As established in the first chapter, women have for decades now been stereotypically associated with the private sector of life<sup>137</sup>, they have been associated with the care taking of their children and that of their partner, an experience which is even more prominent for women in politics. Veil, as discussed above, had to make sacrifices and prioritise her private life before devoting herself to her career, which is a decision many women had to make at that time. But even after entering the working environment and start to focus on their career, women do not seem to escape the constant association with their private lives, and that is due to the patriarchal and stereotypical values on which western society is based upon. The news media especially when covering female politicians tend to pay more focus on their personal background and physical appearance rather than their portfolios<sup>138</sup>. Coincidentally, an array of the articles regarding Simone Veil, tend to bring up the age and marital status of the politician before even mentioning her name. By using titles such as Supergran”<sup>139</sup> and descriptions as “Super Mum”<sup>140</sup>, or with the repetitive mention of her age either directly, or indirectly with statements

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<sup>132</sup> Robert, Mauthner. "Veil: Hard Taskmaster of Moderate Views." *Financial Times*, July 18, 1979, 2. *Financial Times Historical Archive* (accessed April 14, 2022).

<sup>133</sup> "Supergran." *Economist*, December 30, 1978, 27.

<sup>134</sup> Robert, Mauthner. "Veil: Hard Taskmaster of Moderate Views." *Financial Times*.

<sup>135</sup> Daphne Joanna Van der Pas and Loes Aaldering, “Gender Differences in Political Media Coverage: A Meta-Analysis,” *Journal of Communication* 70, no. 1 (2020), 117

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 118

<sup>139</sup> "Supergran." *Economist*, December 30, 1978, 27. *The Economist Historical Archive*.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

such as “whatever her age”<sup>141</sup> and “senior woman”<sup>142</sup> to be apparent in the press. Additionally, mentions of the politician’s spouse as well as his occupation<sup>143</sup>, is information which would not have been disclosed if the politician in question had been male.

Moreover, when it comes to the representation of Simone Veil withing the printed media, I have noticed a repetitive usage of the word ‘popular’ especially in the publications printed during her run for president of the European parliament. The words “favourite”<sup>144</sup> or “popular”<sup>145</sup>, on one hand indeed might highlight the politician’s likability which comes across as a positive portrayal, but on the other hand looking at it from a more critical stance it has more of a defensive connotation. In more detail, more than half of the articles which I have selected in analysing for the premise of this thesis, mention Mme Veil’s popularity amongst the political circles as well as the French public, yet do not mention any of her achievements which led her in gaining said “popularity”. In such way the word popular is not used as a way for the public to better get to know the politician, rather more as a justification for if and when the politician ends up being elected. This phenomenon can fall under the umbrella of masculine stereotypes of leadership, which tend to push journalists in reporting “more on the viability of women candidates; by focusing more strongly on the question of whether a woman candidate can stay in the race and what her chances are of winning the elections”<sup>146</sup> or as most commonly known as ‘horse race journalism’ easily evident in *The Economist*’s article about Simone Veil: ‘Supergran’<sup>147</sup>.

The gender biases towards Veil do not stop there. One of the most important observations which I have made while analysing the excerpts, concerns the constant association of the female politician with a male political figure. In greater detail the examples of such association fall under one of two categories, they are either being made as a way adding relevance and worth to the politician’s name because her candidacy on its own would not have been presumably ‘enough’ without any political backing by a well-established male politician,

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<sup>141</sup> "Letting Them Know the Secret Code." *Financial Times*, February 5, 1994, XIV. *Financial Times Historical Archive* (accessed April 14, 2022).

<sup>142</sup> Robert, Mauthner. "Veil: Hard Taskmaster of Moderate Views." *Financial Times*, July 18, 1979, 2. *Financial Times Historical Archive*.

<sup>143</sup> "Supergran." *Economist*, December 30, 1978, 27. *The Economist Historical Archive*.

<sup>144</sup> "Meet the Europoliticians." *Economist*, June 16, 1979, 29. *The Economist Historical Archive* (accessed April 14, 2022). <https://link-gale-com.eur.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/GP4100122775/ECON?u=erasmus&sid=bookmark-ECON&xid=5fd0d695>.

<sup>145</sup> "Europa was a Woman." *Economist*, July 14, 1979, 14. *The Economist Historical Archive* (accessed April 14, 2022).

<sup>146</sup> Daphne Joanna Van der Pas and Loes Aaldering, “Gender Differences in Political Media Coverage: A Meta-Analysis”, 118

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

or as a way of applying judgment or suspicion regarding the ways she had managed to rise in the ranks of the political world. Regarding the first category, politicians like PM Raymond Barre<sup>148</sup> as well as then French President Giscard d'Estaing<sup>149</sup>, are mentioned along with Veil's name as her supporters on the European elections, while for her male competitors for the post had not been a need of mentioning any endorsements. While by looking at the examples which fall under the second category, the suggestive statements such as "close friendship"<sup>150</sup>, "too close friend"<sup>151</sup>, "extremely close"<sup>152</sup> appear in the articles when talking about Simone Veil's relationship with both the President d'Estaing as well as with political rival Jaques Chirac. The purpose of such statements could only have been as a way to spark judgment and suspicion in the minds of their readers regarding the politician's credibility and impartiality. Overall, in both cases the press seems to have either consciously or unconsciously applied a gender biased image on the female politician, which mostly centres around the male political connections in her life.

Nonetheless, within the articles I have personally observed a slight shift in the way Simone Veil had been presumed by the journalistic audience. While not entirely evident, the newspaper articles which were published after Veil's election as the president of the European Parliament and during the years of her presidency, had been less prejudiced. This could be associated to the success of Veil to push through the glass ceiling despite the distorted image which had been created for her in the media and advance on in occupying a highly respected position. In particular, there is a shift of focus from the politician's private sector of life and more towards her political moves as a president. For example in articles such as "Will Europe ever learn?" published in 1981 by the *Economist*, Veil is praised for her determination and bravery in declaring the EEC budget as adopted<sup>153</sup>, while in *The Times's* (issue from 27 December 1980) Simone Veil is even quoted multiple of times in regard to her clash with the French government's refusal of rising the EEC budget<sup>154</sup>, which is a surprise novelty since

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<sup>148</sup>Adrian, Dicks. "Show Biz Opening for Christian Democrat Campaign." *Financial Times*, May 21, 1979, 2. *Financial Times Historical Archive* (accessed April 14, 2022). <https://link-gale-com.eur.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/HS2303861821/FTHA?u=erasmus&sid=bookmark-FTHA&xid=f0671b09>.

<sup>149</sup>"Europa was a Woman." *Economist*, July 14, 1979, 14. *The Economist Historical Archive*

<sup>150</sup>"Supergran." *Economist*, December 30, 1978, 27. *The Economist Historical Archive*.

<sup>151</sup>"Europa was a Woman." *Economist*.

<sup>152</sup>"Number 10 Goes for Veil." *Financial Times*, June 20, 1979, 18. *Financial Times Historical Archive* (accessed April 14, 2022). <https://link-gale-com.eur.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/HS2304873652/FTHA?u=erasmus&sid=bookmark-FTHA&xid=7e68b2ed>.

<sup>153</sup>"Will Europe ever learn?" *Economist*, January 10, 1981, 16. *The Economist Historical Archive* (accessed April 14, 2022). <https://link-gale-com.eur.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/GP4100135045/ECON?u=erasmus&sid=bookmark-ECON&xid=55c7ee23>.

<sup>154</sup>Charles, Hargrove. "Mme Veil in dispute with Paris over rise in EEC budget." *Times*, December 27, 1980, 3. *The Times Digital Archive*.



before her election her citations did not appear in the international papers. Thus, we understand how Veil's breaking of the political glass ceiling which occurred after being elected to president, was what opened the path for a less prejudiced, more honest, and equal representation of her as a politician.

To sum up, through this sub-section we were allowed to explore the opposite side of the coin, by stepping away from Simone Veil's personal view on her rise and years as a president and by looking at it through her representation by the media. This change in perspective has allowed us to understand the full extent of prejudices against women in the world of politics as perpetuated by the media. From sexist and stereotypical characterisations of Veil and her character to the focus on her private life rather than her career achievements, and to her constant association with male political figures, the female politician clearly offers a great example of how women had been treated within the media in the 70s and 80s. Nevertheless, through this sub-section we have also established that by Veil proving her competence and being elected to president has given the prejudiced media stance the ability to shift and transform into a more equal and let us say 'closer to how male politicians had always been treated' stance. Overall, we understand that the media offer smaller in scale reflection of the patriarchal society which Veil alluded through her autobiography, but as with society, room for change still exists and Simone Veil had been one of the first ones to witness it.

#### **iv. Legacy**

Having looked within Mme Simone Veil's political life, from her journey in reaching the position of president of one the European Union's largest institution, to the struggles she had to overcome in a society build on male privilege, and to the criticism which she had received for standing up for women's rights, we can safely build a reliable portrait of her career as a female politician in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, equally important to Veil's journey through the political realm, is the legacy she left behind. Therefore, this final sub-section is dedicated to in exploring the legacy Veil had left behind in both the political realm as well as in regard to gender equality.

##### **a. Political Realm**

From her election into Parliament, Simone Veil had already left a mark in the books of European history by being not only the first female President of the EU Parliament, but also the first ever president directly elected by citizens<sup>155</sup>. Not only that, but her election as a

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<sup>155</sup> Philippe Perchoc. "En Bref - Juillet 2017: Simone Veil, Pionnière Politique Européenne." Brussels: European Parliament, July 2017.

president had been a “flagship of diversity”<sup>156</sup> for the EU, since Veil unlike her predecessors, was neither a man, nor politically affiliated with either the left or the right, and also not a Christian<sup>157</sup>. Thus, Veil had already set the bar high when it came to representation, and symbolisation. Not only had she been described by her peers as a symbol of Franco-German reunification and the safeguard of peace<sup>158</sup>, but her election also allowed her to become a symbol for all the women who aspired to enter the world of politics.

Having previously looked into some of Simone Veil’s achievements in the French political scene, the politician had a remarkable political career in the European Union as well. More specifically, Simone Veil not only had been a strong activist for the European cause, but she also fought to prove that she didn’t see the Union as a last resort, something which was common practice especially amongst the French politicians<sup>159</sup>. Testament to her dedication and commitment to the Union, had also been her active participation in the plenary sessions; in particular during her time in office Simone Veil had intervened two hundred and fifty times during the parliament’s sessions<sup>160</sup>. Therefore, ever since her election, Veil had become an apostle of the European cause and by the end of her presidency she had managed to raise the status of the European Parliament internationally. In more detail, Mr Piet Dunkert, Veil’s successor in the presidency of the parliament, in his inaugural speech had paid a generous tribute to Veil by appraising her success in “getting the Parliament accepted as a presence if not a power, in international relations”<sup>161</sup>. Moreover, Veil’s legacy as a female politician had followed her even after having stepped down from president, since the endorsement and support of fellow female politicians didn’t go unnoticed<sup>162</sup>. Despite having taken a step back from the political scene Veil still used the influence she had acquired to support and empower other women, great example of that is the case of Christiane Scrivener, who she supported in becoming Claude Cheysson’s replacement as France’s Second European Commissioner<sup>163</sup>.

Lastly, Veil’s imprint on the political world is even today echoing through her place of rest. A year after she had passed away in 2017 at the age of 89, she made history in being one

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<sup>156</sup> Pelle Christy Geertsen, “Sexism and the Selection of the European Parliament President,” EUobserver, September 24, 2021, <https://euobserver.com/opinion/152968>.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Simone Veil, *Simone Veil: A Life* (Haus Publishing, 2018), 155.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>160</sup> Aurélie Éliisa Gfeller, “Une Militante Du Parlementarisme Européen: Simone Veil,” *Journal of European Integration History* 17, no. 1 (2011), 62.

<sup>161</sup> George, Clark. "Dankert to fight EEC establishment." *Times*, January 21, 1982, 7. *The Times Digital Archive*. <https://link-gale-com.eur.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/CS117672501/TTDA?u=erasmus&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=14d392fa>.

<sup>162</sup> “Women for Brussels,” *Financial Times*, October 31, 1988, p. 16

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

of only five women which ever to have been buried in the Parisian Pantheon. As opposed to the 73 men which had been honoured with their burial in the Pantheon, some of them buried along their wives, Veil's burial had reversed the roles, as "is Simone Veil's own achievements that are recognised, and her husband who joins her at the family's request", as mentioned by Camille Froidevaux-Metterie<sup>164</sup>. In that way, Veil's legacy as a politician will forever be remembered by those who walk amongst the Pantheon's walls, and her achievements will never be forgotten.

### **b. Gender Equality**

Through her political career the French politician had managed to not only become an advocate for the European cause but also an advocate for women, and their rights to equal treatment. She became an admirable figure and role model for not only Frenchwomen, but also for all the women of Europe. One of the biggest impacts which she has had on gender equality is none other than her fight for the depenalisation of abortion, and the popularisation of the use of contraceptives which we have touched upon earlier on. More precisely, with the 'loi Veil', the politician "contributed to the establishment of a new 'regime of truth' for French women"<sup>165</sup> and had major societal impacts both in their private and public spheres, which led to women taking back control of their bodies and their future<sup>166</sup>.

Despite having left her political career in the closing days of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Simone Veil's impact for women and especially women who aspire to enter the political world, continues on today. More particularly, today there are two European initiatives which are being carried out in Simone Veil's name and in relation to gender equality. Firstly, the Simone Veil Programme which was set into place in late 2020 by the European Parliament, aimed in "promoting women's participation in politics"<sup>167</sup> by offering a platform for female politicians and MEPs to "discuss best practices to enhance women's participation in politics, make legislation gender-sensitive, and monitor the budgetary process in terms of gender"<sup>168</sup>. Thus, naming the programme after the late politician does not come as a surprise since the issues which touches upon go along with the principles Veil herself had established during her run as

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<sup>164</sup> Benjamin Dodman, "At Mausoleum for France's 'Great Men', Simone Veil Burial Is Most Revolutionary Yet," France 24, <https://www.france24.com/en/20180630-france-simone-veil-burial-pantheon-women-rights-abortion-europe-holocaust>.

<sup>165</sup> Charles Barthold and Hervé Corvellec, "« For the Women » - in Memoriam Simone Veil (1927-2017)," *Gender, Work & Amp*; Organization 25, no. 6 (March 2018), 598

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>167</sup> "Women: Civil Society & Human Rights: Global Democracy Support: European Parliament," Civil society & human rights | Global democracy support | European Parliament, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/globaldemocracysupport/en/civil-society-and-human-rights/women>.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

a president of the institution, which include female empowerment, the challenge of stereotypes, as well as the promotion of women-centered legislations<sup>169</sup>. The second initiative under Veil's name, is a pact regarding gender equality which was initiated by the European political group Renew Europe, and which is currently being defended by the ALDE political party<sup>170</sup>. The aim of this pact is to “preserve, promote and strengthen the rights of all women at all levels, European, national and local, in all areas, public and private, for all generations”<sup>171</sup>. Whereas the signatories of said pact subscribe to feminist principles such as: equality at work, sexual and reproductive rights, and political representation,<sup>172</sup> principles which Veil herself had promoted. Overall, it is clear that Simone Veil's legacy, even forty years after the end of her presidency, still remains prominent in both the world of politics and around the topic of gender equality.

Having reached the end of this chapter on the political career of Frenchwoman politician Simone Veil, we understand how deeply impactful she had been as a politician, a president, and as a woman. Veil's experience in the world of politics was not easy, and hurdles such as the patriarchal state of society and the prejudices which surrounded her even in the media had stood in her path. Regardless, she succeeded in overstepping them and had become a representative figure for women in Europe. She advocated for women's rights in prison, for women's rights to their own bodies, and through her presidency in the European Parliament she advocated for female representation in the political world. Lastly, Veil through her presidency proved how one's gender does not affect one's ability in leadership but is the experiences of each person which they do.

Therefore, having analysed multiple aspects of Simone Veil's political career, I aspire that I have created a general image of the struggles women in leadership have to deal with, as well as highlighted their influence in the political world and the female condition. So, in order to better solidify the validity of this image, within the following chapter I intend on extending my research study by looking into the political career of the second ever female president of the European Parliament, Frenchwoman politician Nicole Fontaine.

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> “The Simone Veil Pact for Gender Equality,” Renew Europe, accessed April 12, 2022, <https://www.simoneveilpact.eu/>.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

#### IV. Presidency of Nicole Fontaine (1999-2002)

Similarly, to the chapter concerning Veil's presidency, within this chapter I aim to look into Fontaine's rise to the presidential seat of the parliament while pinpointing the difficulties she has had to encounter, always by applying the themes introduced in the second chapter of this research paper. Additionally, I will be looking into the effects of her presidency on the European institution, by highlighting her leadership style while also looking into how she as a president advocated for gender equality and what have been her contributions. This chapter will close with the analysis of printed media portrayal of the second female president of the EU Parliament.

##### i. Long road to the top

To some extent, Nicole Fontaine had a similar path to her female predecessor Simone Veil: both being of French origin, having similar education, and pursuing a similar career path into the European corridors of political power, yet each person's path differs from another and that also applies for Fontaine. Twenty years separate the presidencies of both these women and within this section we will notice how while some of the boundaries have stayed the same for women who aspire to reach a position of leadership, others have changed and opened up making the journey to the top smoother.

While the gaping divide between the private and public sector of life still was a struggle for many women propelled by the patriarchal expectations society, Fontaine was not affected in the same degree as Veil had been. Fontaine studied law and became a member of the bar of the department of Hauts-de-Sein at the age of 20, while her political career was set in motion at the age of thirty<sup>173</sup>. In the meantime, Fontaine had already established a family of her own without that restricting neither her academic accomplishments, nor her career path. Her ambitions are reflected in her rich career paths through the education sector of the French government. More specifically, her first venture into the political world had been in the position of Catholic Education Secretariat in 1972 where she acted as the liaison of the private educational sector with the public one, in which she has had a major role in shaping legal framework<sup>174</sup>. Between 1975 and 1984, despite the female politician having held exceptional positions in both the French National Education Council, as well as Economic and Social

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<sup>173</sup> "President of the European Parliament - Biography," President of the European Parliament - Curriculum vitae (Europa, December 28, 1999)

<sup>174</sup> "Nicole Fontaine: Politician and Educator (1942-2018)," EU Pioneers (European Commission), [https://european-union.europa.eu/system/files/2021-06/eu-pioneers-nicole-fontaine\\_en.pdf](https://european-union.europa.eu/system/files/2021-06/eu-pioneers-nicole-fontaine_en.pdf).

Council which were the reason that prompted her candidacy as an MP in the European elections of 1984<sup>175</sup>, her national political career stayed overlooked. As it was expressed in an article published in *The Economist* in 1999 regarding Fontaine, “almost nobody in her home country, France, has ever heard of her; and almost everybody in Brussels have”<sup>176</sup>, therefore the rest of this chapter will be focusing on the politician’s detachment from the national political scene and her steppingstone into the European one.

While Simone Veil’s ascend to the seat of president of the European Parliament had been rapid and instant, similarly to her entry into the European political scene, Fontaine’s journey had been longer and more diverse. The politician before being elected to president had spent 15 years of her career as an active member of the European Parliament, both as an MP representative, as well as a Vice-President. As she recounts in her autobiographical memoir, she had completed three parliamentary terms before her election into president, the two of which she had been elected to the position of Vice President<sup>177</sup>. During these three terms her political agenda became visible through her participation in various parliamentary committees, such as the ‘Committee on Legal Affairs and Citizens' Rights’, the ‘Committee on Youth, Culture, Education, Information and Sport’, as well as the ‘Committee on Women's Rights’<sup>178</sup>. Moreover, as a parliamentarian and a Vice President, the politician’s diplomatic skills had been widely recognised as she successfully “brokered agreements between the European Parliament and the Member States on key legislation, including two EU youth programmes (Socrates and Youth for Europe)”<sup>179</sup>. In addition to that, Fontaine was also part of Citizens for Europe, a networking organisation which was built on the foundations of empowering civil actors, where she focused on projects regarding youth education, women’s rights, and gender equality<sup>180</sup>.

During the politician’s candidacy period for the presidential elections of the European Parliament, she had experienced both rejection but also immense support by her fellow peers. Many were the instances, as Fontaine herself recounts in her memoir, when others had doubted her candidacy and more specifically when her own people, Frenchmen and Frenchwomen

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> "Nicole Fontaine: a European conciliator-general." *Economist*, August 28, 1999, 34. *The Economist Historical Archive*.<https://link-gale-com.eur.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/GP4100305321/ECON?u=erasmus&sid=bookmark-ECON&xid=a0ff3ad3>.

<sup>177</sup> Nicole Fontaine, *Mes Combats: À La présidence Du Parlement européen*, (Plon, 2002), p.32.

<sup>178</sup> “2nd Parliamentary Term: Nicole Fontaine: Meps: European Parliament,” 2nd parliamentary term | Nicole FONTAINE | MEPs | European Parliament (European Parliament), accessed June 23, 2022, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/945/NICOLE\\_FONTAINE/history/2#detailedcardmep](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/945/NICOLE_FONTAINE/history/2#detailedcardmep).

<sup>179</sup> “Nicole Fontaine: Politician and Educator (1942-2018),” EU Pioneers (European Commission).

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

politicians, had refused to support her. An example of such instance which she recounts, was with French MEP Mr Michel Rocard, who confided in her that it is not in his nature to vote more French than socialist<sup>181</sup>, making it obvious that he will not be supporting her in the upcoming elections. Fontaine with obvious disheartenment recounts more examples of French politicians who had declared either to her face, to the press, or to third parties, of their intentions on not supporting her in the elections. Some of the names she mentions include Gerard Caudron, Charles Pasqua, Philippe de Villiers, and even female politician Pervenche Berès, while some of them went as far as calling her the enemy due to the difference in political views<sup>182</sup>. From the tone she uses to describe this lack of support, it becomes apparent that Fontaine had been affected by it, as she expected at least her own country to have come together to support her like the Germans or the Spanish had done in previous European elections, but with no avail. Nevertheless, despite being let down by her own country, she had enough support to get elected. For example, politicians like Christian Poncelet openly declared his support for Fontaine and of what she represented as the second ever potential Frenchwoman president of such an immense institution<sup>183</sup>. Furthermore, François Bayrou had expressed his amazement towards Fontaine moments after the casting of the votes<sup>184</sup>, and countless of female politicians of the parliament who despite having different political beliefs they had backed her up<sup>185</sup>. The candidate felt not only empowered but also wildly accepted and validated despite having faced unsolicited rejection<sup>186</sup>.

In such way, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of July 1999, Nicole Fontaine won the presidential elections of the European parliament, with 306 votes overpassing the absolute majority of 277, and made history by becoming the second ever female president of the institution<sup>187</sup>. From the hour of her election the politician had recognised the immense responsibility which she held as a representative of 380 million European citizens, a leadership figure of an institution which after the Treaty of Amsterdam was of emerging power, and face to face to other women as a figure of representation. Fontaine didn't underestimate or took the power she gained for granted. This stance is evident in her maiden speech to the parliament, when before outlining her goals and portfolio as a president, she made sure to highlight the importance of this victory for women.

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<sup>181</sup> Nicole Fontaine, *Mes Combats: À La présidence Du Parlement européen*, (Plon, 2002), p.28.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid, 13.

More precisely, in her speech she not only paid respect to Mme Simone Veil and the precedent which she had set for female politicians, but also, she dedicated her victory to her female peers in stating: “I should like to say to the other women Members of the European Parliament that my promotion is also theirs”<sup>188</sup>. In addition to that, Fontaine acknowledged the increasing presence of women in the chamber, which had risen from the 23% of female EMP’s of the last parliament to 30% female EMP’s during her presidency<sup>189</sup>. Moreover, through her speech she asserted her agenda as a president which included the modernisation of the parliament’s work methods, its deeper involvement in the enlargement process, the reapprochement of the institution to the European citizens, as well as the establishment of a common statute for its members “on a basis of transparency and equity”<sup>190</sup>. Thus, Fontaine expressed through her inaugural speech a determination in leading, but especially concerning the female agenda something which might have lacked for the case of Veil, who as previously observed, kept a level of modesty when it came to addressing the female condition in politics.

## **ii. New air of change in the chamber**

The presidential run of Nicole Fontaine can be deemed as one of the most important ones in the history of the institution, mostly because it would have been the first term during which the European Parliament would be working under the newly signed clauses of the historic Treaty of Amsterdam. One of the main targets of this treaty, was the enhancement of democracy amongst the Union’s institutions by providing the parliament with a more substantial and vis-à-vis role with the Commission<sup>191</sup>. It fell thus on the shoulders of Fontaine as a newly elected president, to navigate and take on leading the institution through a time of changes and reform. Something which she was determined to do, as she indicated in her opening speech as a president<sup>192</sup>. While the treaty offered fundamental changes to the functions of the institution through legislation, Fontaine had the opportunity with this presidency to introduce changes concerning the status quo of leadership and bring a new air of change which as we will explore further bellow, she successfully did.

Going from a scale of smaller to larger moves which the new president introduced as part of her leadership, we ought to mention the way she led from inside the ‘house’, in this case

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<sup>188</sup> Nicole, Fontaine. “Formal Opening Sitting of the new European Parliament.” Transcript of speech delivered at the European Parliament, Strasbourg, France, July 21, 1999.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> European Union: Council of the European Union, Treaty of Amsterdam Amending the Treaty on European Union, The Treaties Establishing the European Communities and Related Acts, 10 November 1997.

<sup>192</sup> Nicole, Fontaine. “Formal Opening Sitting of the new European Parliament.” Transcript of speech delivered at the European Parliament, Strasbourg, France, July 21, 1999.



her office. During the early days of her presidency, issues regarding the new parliamentary building of Strasbourg begun to rise regarding its safety, with various concerns about it having been voiced during the parliament's sessions<sup>193</sup>. During one of said sessions Fontaine found out that letters addressed to her by her colleagues, have not been delivered to her hands but rather to the director's general of administration, who responded in her place<sup>194</sup>. Fontaine had immediately taken matters in her own hands and made sure that from that point onwards she will be responsible for her own correspondence<sup>195</sup>. Moreover, the president surprised not only her colleagues but also the public opinion by her willingness in involvement regarding the safety issues of the new offices, since she spent a large portion of "her first day in office listening to plumbers, architects and caretakers", in order to work with them in finding better solutions to the issues<sup>196</sup>. Fontaine in that way demonstrated a more approachable and connected with her peers, style of leadership from the very beginning,

Despite administration being an important part of presidential duties, Fontaine extended the switch of leadership towards political vocality as well. Thus far, the parliament's president had rarely intervened, objected or took part in political debates, due to fear of breaking their expected impartiality, yet Fontaine had different plans. As to enhance the Parliament's visibility to the Union, the new president not only insisted on sitting in and expressing when needed an opinion, during the sessions of the European Council<sup>197</sup>, but she also made sure to have been the first ever president of the parliament to be included in the Council's annual photo which had ceremoniously been taken amongst the heads of states and the ministers of foreign affairs<sup>198</sup>. Additionally, and on the premises of vocality, Fontaine did not hesitate even when advised against it to express her worry and stand in opposition to the potential entry of far-right Austrian politician Jörg Haider's party into the Austrian Government<sup>199</sup>. In a press release she said that Haider's party "serves as a vehicle for an ideology that is at the antipodes of the humanist values that are the foundation of any democratic society"<sup>200</sup>, a statement of which she

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<sup>193</sup> Nicole Fontaine, *Mes Combats: À La présidence Du Parlement européen*, (Plon, 2002), 45.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 46

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>196</sup> "Queen of Compromise," *Politico*, September 8, 1999, <https://www.politico.eu/article/queen-of-compromise/>.

<sup>197</sup> Nicole Fontaine, *Mes Combats: À La présidence Du Parlement européen*, 85.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>200</sup> "Fontaine Worried about a Government with Haider," *Agence Europe-Europe Daily Bulletin No. 7643*, January 28, 2000, <https://agenceurope-eu.eur.idm.oclc.org/en/bulletin/article/7643/5>.

knew would cause a stir, she saw it as her duty to defend the democratic ideals of the Union in the face of xenophobia<sup>201</sup>.

Some of Nicole Fontaine's most significant political moves during her years as a president have to do with both the internal as well as with the external affairs of the Union. On the internal spectrum of command, Fontaine as well as the rest of the MEP's had been tasked with applying the prerogatives of control concerning the election of the new commissioners, as appointed to them by the treaties<sup>202</sup>. Fontaine utilised this occasion to pay once again tribute to the democratic process and demonstrate the unbiased stance a proper president of an international institution is expected to have. During this process, and from the first parliamentary report on the commission's mismanagement, 20 commissioners were led to resignation<sup>203</sup>, in such way the president had managed to not only reenforce the need for a stronger and more reliable commission but also to enhance the parliament's position as a determined supervisor. When it came to the external affairs of the Union, Fontaine did not hold back on her involvement, as the parliaments representator, in raising awareness and speaking out on a variety of issues, most of them concerning the topic of human rights. During her presidency, the female politician was responsible for many historic moments including bringing together "the Presidents of the Israeli and Palestinian parliaments for a historic handshake in Strasbourg in 2000"<sup>204</sup>, while also the invitation and first ever visit of the Vice President of Afghanistan Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud in Europe in April of 2001<sup>205</sup>. Both visits successfully took place in the name of sparking a dialogue centered around peace or the achievement of peace for the two territories, while also the contentment of human rights violations which the Afghan people have been suffering from especially in the case of women which will be discussed in more detail further bellow. Lastly, and once again on the basis of human rights, worth mentioning is Nicole Fontaine's courageous open letter to the American public in September of 2000, regarding the condemnation of the death penalty which had been punishment still practiced in several U.S states<sup>206</sup>. Through her open letter, she talked about the ineffectiveness of said penalty, bringing up issues of wrongful conviction, as well as, comparing it to similarly cruel US laws, regarding slavery and segregation, which have been

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<sup>201</sup> Nicole Fontaine, *Mes Combats: À La présidence Du Parlement européen*, 95

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 70

<sup>203</sup> Nell, Buckley. "Parliament Flexes Its Muscles before Quizzing Commissioners." *Financial Times*, July 21, 1999, 2. *Financial Times Historical Archive*. <https://link-gale-com.eur.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/HS2303325995/FTHA?u=erasmus&sid=bookmark-FTHA&xid=9a7711d3>.

<sup>204</sup> "Nicole Fontaine: Politician and Educator (1942-2018)," EU Pioneers (European Commission).

<sup>205</sup> Nicole Fontaine, *Mes Combats: À La présidence Du Parlement européen*, 161.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 155

abolished successfully long ago for being outdated and vile<sup>207</sup>. Even though the US media refused to publish Fontaine's letter, her decision to take a stance and speak out while holding a highly regarded position of European leadership, set an example for leaders around the world who had chosen silence instead.

Overall, the new leadership style of President Nicole Fontaine helped her to shine through and bring to the parliament an air of change and progress. From establishing a more down to earth and approachable stance towards her peers while dealing with administrative issues, to still demonstrating enough authority to keep both the MEP's and the Commissioners on check while remaining unbiased, and through her defence of human rights with her extensive presence in the external's politics of the parliament, the second ever female president showed zero signs of hesitation in leading.

### **iii. Contributions towards gender equality**

Both the first as well as the second female presidents of the European Parliament have through their political agendas either knowingly, or unbeknownst to them contributed towards the female cause. This subsection will explore the multiplicity of ways president Nicole Fontaine contributed to women's status through active political decisions while also through her stance she herself took in the face of gender biases.

As discussed, the French politician had made clear that her election to the presidency of the parliament would encompass a win for all women and especially for female politicians. On that account, it does not come as a surprise that through her presidency she became an emblem of female empowerment for her fellow colleagues. In particular, by looking into her own cabinet as a president<sup>208</sup> we can see how out of the 30 members of staff she had in her disposal, 18 of them had been women<sup>209</sup>, and in that way surpassing the 50% margin of representation, which had yet to be established as common practice especially in the world of politics. Moreover, and as I have observed through the autobiographical narrations of her presidency, Fontaine had by her side in various diplomatic visits a reliable arsenal of euro-politicians, which amongst them had been women. On one specific occasion particularly, during the president's visit to the countries of the Near-East region, she took a moment to praise and uphold her colleagues without whom it wouldn't have had been a successful visit, one of

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 156

<sup>208</sup> "Members of the Private Office- President Nicole Fontaine," The president of the European Parliament - Private Office (European Parliament, January 31, 2000), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/former\\_ep\\_presidents/president-fontaine/office/en/default.htm](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/former_ep_presidents/president-fontaine/office/en/default.htm).

<sup>209</sup> Christian, Hartmann. *Cabinet De La Présidente*, photograph, *Mes Combats: À La présidence Du Parlement européen* (Paris: Plon, 2002), 118.

them being the Italian President of the European Parliamentary delegation to the Palestinian Legislative Council Luisa Motgantini<sup>210</sup>. In such way, we recognise here Fontaine's efforts in building around her a stable corner of a velvet triangle, one which includes women in both diplomatic and administrative positions of power, offering in that way the opportunity for more female voices to be heard.

Fontaine's reach on the fight for women's representation was not restricted only to EU politics, as seen by her dedication towards the women of Afghanistan. After the invasion of the U.S army in 2001, following the events of the 9/11 terrorist attack, the European institutions had worked tirelessly and in collaboration to adhere to the new international status following a series of initiatives, one of them being held under the auspices of then president of the European Parliament Nicole Fontaine. In early December of 2001, while the Bonn Conference for the future of Afghanistan had already been underway in Germany<sup>211</sup>, President Fontaine had collaborated with the chief editor of the women's lifestyle magazine *Elle*, Marie-Françoise Colombani, to help propagate the voice of Afghan Women and their demands for a more equal and democratic country<sup>212</sup>. Fontaine accepted to host three Afghan women who had successfully escaped from Kabul under the auspices of the parliament and listen to their testimony, a meeting which she had later described as "among the 'most moving moments' of her Presidency"<sup>213</sup>. In a press release following both the meeting as well as the successful continuation of the Bonn conference, Fontaine expressed the need for the future "interim government" of Afghanistan to be more inclusive towards women and guarantying them the right to education, vote, and election<sup>214</sup>. Overall, Fontaine's collaborative efforts had helped to shine a light on the condition of women at a time when it was most needed, while it is important to point out that even after the conclusion of the meeting the politician had still kept close ties with the president of "Free Afghanistan" association<sup>215</sup>.

Being one of the first women to have occupied the position of president did not always work on Fontaine's favour and that is something she expresses throughout her memoir while

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<sup>210</sup> Nicole Fontaine, *Mes Combats: À La présidence Du Parlement européen*, 180.

<sup>211</sup> United Nations, Security Council. Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-establishment of Permanent Government Institutions. Afghanistan, December 5, 2001. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Afgh%20S2001%201154.pdf>

<sup>212</sup> Nicole Fontaine, *Mes Combats: À La présidence Du Parlement européen*, 164.

<sup>213</sup> "Nicole Fontaine: Politician and Educator (1942-2018)," EU Pioneers (European Commission).

<sup>214</sup> Jacques, Nancy. "Afghanistan: Nicole Fontaine Expresses Herself 'Relieved by and Pleased at the Prospects Opened up by the Bonn Conference,'" The president of the European Parliament - Press releases, December 28, 1999, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/former\\_ep\\_presidents/president-fontaine/press/en/cp0196.htm](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/former_ep_presidents/president-fontaine/press/en/cp0196.htm).

<sup>215</sup> Nicole, Fontaine. *Mes Combats: À La présidence Du Parlement européen*, 195.

recounting events and encounters which had been discriminatory and laced with sexist commentary<sup>216</sup>. One of said occasions happened in July of 1999 during her first visit abroad in representing the parliament as a president<sup>217</sup>. The occasion being the funeral of the King of Morocco, Hassan II, the politician instead of being treated equally as the other heads of states in attendance, she was denied entry at the funeral and was invited to instead have tea along the wives of the representatives instead as was the tradition for women.<sup>218</sup> This kind of treatment is a very common example of how gender invisibility becomes a boundary in female politicians paths, and how they lead to discriminatory practices. Nevertheless, Fontaine refused to comply with this treatment and had on her own accord made the decision to attend the funeral<sup>219</sup>. In that way, she did not allow sexist norms to trump the purpose of her journey, she did not allow her sex to overpower her function, and as she declared, at the end of the day she represented 380 million Europeans<sup>220</sup>. Thus, the politician effectively stood up to patriarchal norms and had done it in a way which sparked conversations around the gendering of politics and the consequences of gender invisibility.

Be as it may, Fontaine through her presidency had managed to demonstrate what a gender equal political environment could look like. From her gender equal cabinet to her collaborative efforts with other women in the political world, it becomes evident that the female president aimed in bringing a degree of change to the parliamentary chambers. Not only that but Fontaine had also managed to utilise the power she had as a president to reach out, help and amplify the voices of women outside the Union who needed to be heard, such as in the case of Afghan women. Additionally, this passion in defending women's condition was evident even after the end of her presidential term, since Fontaine had participated in euro-parliamentary debates concerning women's sex trafficking as part of the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality<sup>221</sup>. Overall, we can say with confidence that Fontaine had managed through her presidency to not only challenge the withstanding patriarchal norms but also to establish herself as a defender of gender equality either that being deliberate or not.

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>221</sup> "Debates - Combating the Trafficking of Women and Children - Monday, 16 January 2006," europarl.europa.eu (European Parliament, January 16, 2006), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-6-2006-01-16-INT-1-105\\_EN.html?redirect](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-6-2006-01-16-INT-1-105_EN.html?redirect).

#### iv. Media criticism and commentary

By looking at the image which was portrayed of the female politician by the media we are able to better comprehend the gender biases that press articles and opinion pieces published in the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, did or did not implement. Moreover, this section will also be touching on how the media perspective shifted regarding the depiction of female politicians in the 20 years which separated Veil's and Fontaine's presidency; as well as unearthing the difference between conspicuous and inconspicuous sexist commentary.

While looking into the press articles, one would have hoped that the twenty years that passed from Veil's presidency to Fontaine's one would have been productive in reducing or even eradicating the gender biases which had been applied in the portrayal of female politicians during the early 80s. Despite that, by analysing the articles published during Fontaine's presidency, the opposite has been observed; not only did the prejudiced commentary did not subside, but it seems to have become even bolder than before. Particularly, from the eight article publications which has been selected, four have upfront applied a sexist narrative while addressing the then President of the EU parliament Nicole Fontaine. To begin with, in their efforts to portray the politician, instead of bringing up her political and academic background, the articles have chosen to focus on her day-to-day outerwear. A huge amount of attention seems to have fallen on the presidents' suits since they have been granted with adjectives such as "brightly coloured"<sup>222</sup> and "impeccable"<sup>223</sup>, while an article in *The Economist* went as far as to use Fontaine's "classically cut tangerine two-piece suites"<sup>224</sup> as a gateway into talking about her economic status. We see thus how more prone to media scrutiny female politicians are, in comparison with their male counterparts which have the liberty to "'get away' with more things that women do, starting with the way they dress"<sup>225</sup>.

Moreover, the focus on the Frenchwoman's dressing habits was not the only gender targeted scrutiny which Fontaine have had to face by the media. Similarly, to Veil's treatment, the choice of wording used by journalists while talking about the President, demonstrated a lack of respect and had even been received with a hint of sexualisation in some cases. Some

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<sup>222</sup>David, Lister. "Gaffe-prone leader gets it right." *Times*, June 16, 2001, 2. *The Times Digital Archive*. <https://link-gale-com.eur.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/IF0501444645/TTDA?u=erasmus&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=aa6945ee>.

<sup>223</sup>"Queen of Compromise," *Politico*, September 8, 1999, <https://www.politico.eu/article/queen-of-compromise/>.

<sup>224</sup>"Nicole Fontaine: a European conciliator-general." *Economist*, August 28, 1999, 34. *The Economist Historical Archive*.

<sup>225</sup>Irina, Zamfirache. "Women and politics – the glass ceiling." *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology*. 181.



examples of such treatment can be found in articles published in *Politico*'s website, one of them characterising Fontaine's stance towards a far-right Austrian representative as "someone addressing a naughty schoolboy"<sup>226</sup>, while another pointed out that the politician had been viewed as a "political lightweight", while it didn't hesitate in using the nickname 'Barbie'<sup>227</sup> which had been appointed to her within the parliamentary chambers. Such crude commentary coming from international press, not only manages to diminish the image of the female politician but also perpetuates the spread of gendered stereotypes and sexism towards any woman in the political field, despite their status.

Nonetheless, it is imperative to mention that during Nicole Fontaine's presidency there has been a significant increase in the number of articles focused on her political moves rather than her private life. This can be considered as another example of the emergence of a divide between private and public realm for women, which did not exist in the case of Veil. More particularly, I am recalling two articles found in both *The Times* and *The Financial Times*, which better demonstrate how a political figure deserves to be portrayed in the media. While still applying constructed criticism when needed, the context of these articles was solely focused on Fontaine's political moves, one zooming in on the President's decisions regarding the election process of the new Commission<sup>228</sup>, and the other elaborating on Fontaine's first reactions regarding the new parliamentary building in Strasbourg<sup>229</sup>. Both articles avoided the use of gender-specific connotations. That being said, amongst these politically oriented articles, also exist the ones which despite their context, still manage to be laced with condescending and patronising commentary. A paradigm of such can be found in an article published in *The Economist*, which aimed to criticise the leadership style of Nicole Fontaine. Throughout the article the journalist uses phrases such as "she purrs", "talks tough", "talks grandly", in order to address the politician's political agenda, while they also use a blatant condescending tone in addressing her ambitious political stance which they try to undermine by bringing focus once again to the way she dresses<sup>230</sup>. Another article which falls within this category comes from *The Financial Times*. The journalist's critic on Fontain's leadership style is done very

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<sup>226</sup> "Fontaine under Fire for Frosty Reception," *Politico*, April 19, 2000, <https://www.politico.eu/article/fontaine-under-fire-for-frosty-reception/>.

<sup>227</sup> "Queen of Compromise," *Politico*, September 8, 1999.

<sup>228</sup> Nell, Buckley. "Parliament Flexes Its Muscles before Quizzing Commissioners." *Financial Times*, July 21, 1999, 2. *Financial Times Historical Archive*.

<sup>229</sup> Charles, Bremner. "Welcome to parliament - please use the stairs." *Times*, July 21, 1999, 18. *The Times Digital Archive*. <https://link-gale-com.eur.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/IF0500237745/TTDA?u=erasmus&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=fd68e8fb>.

<sup>230</sup> "Nicole Fontaine: a European conciliator-general." *Economist*, August 28, 1999, 34. *The Economist Historical Archive*.

suggestively and talks about the “fondness”<sup>231</sup> the politician demonstrated for her official visits abroad and her coldness when it came to her interactions within the parliament. This stance fits in with what Zamfirache’s observation regarding the media treatment of female politicians which revolved around the principle that “If women are feminine they are weak and untrusting, if they are too aggressive, they stir up negative reactions”<sup>232</sup>

Two decades after Simone Veil’s presidency, the stance traditional media held towards women seemed to have not changed much. For the case of Veil, we observed how prejudiced the media representation had been, especially during her campaign to president, with commentary focusing largely on her appearance and familial status rather than her portfolio. While after her election to president the politician had faced less bias with more focus being shifted towards her political decisions, it constituted only a small step towards the right direction. Now after looking into the case of Nicole Fontaine, we can see how twenty years might have done more harm than good for women’s media representation. While the press which the politician received was increased and more targeted towards her political endeavours, the quality of context and the representation which was projected had been hurtful, diminishing her political career to nicknames and colour-matching suits. As with Veil, so with Fontaine, we understand that the media representation of women in the political world has been making slow advancements which do not consider neither a politician’s capabilities nor their rank, since their gender seemingly is an enough indication for the journalists.

Having arrived on the seat of president at the turn of the century, Fontaine faced a rocky path littered with challenges. For this chapter I chose to focus on those challenges which would not have been there if the politician was a man. Varying from the still existing societal expectations placed upon women, to the rejections and the multiple “you’ll never gonna make it”, which Fontaine received before becoming a president. While also highlighting the gender prejudiced welcomings and the sexist treatment of the media, which she became the target of as the President of the European Parliament. Yet and despite all this pushback, we have observed how Fontaine held her ground, she advanced on the political ladder, and she broke through the glass ceiling, managing to implement a successful on many occasions’ leadership. As can concluded from this chapter, Nicole Fontaine’s leadership is illustrated by the approachable and hands-on stance which she held towards her colleagues, by the determined and loyal to the democratic

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<sup>231</sup> "President Wanted Who Will Pep up Parliament." *Financial Times*, January 14, 2002, 6.

<sup>232</sup> Irina, Zamfirache. “Women and politics – the glass ceiling.” *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology* (2010), 181.



cause view she has had on a plethora of occasions and by her undeniable dedication towards the fight for women's equality. All in all, Fontaine had set through her presidency a new precedence of command, an image of a president who does not act on a decorative manner, who does not go along with the given narrative, as well an example of a President dedicated to candour, to democracy and one who is not afraid to stand up for who she represents.

## **V. Conclusions**

Having arrived at the end of this research paper, what remains is to introduce the conclusions which have emerged in the process. Based on the principals of gender equality this paper took a closer look into the female condition of women entering the world of politics. The research introduced and analysed the societal barriers which restrict female politicians from climbing up the ladder of success in an equal pace as their male counterparts, while I also elaborated on the aiding mechanisms women resulted in using so to 'catch up'. Moreover, a comparative case study on the journey, to and through the political world, of the two female presidents of the European Parliament: Simone Veil and Nicole Fontaine, illustrated how these barriers and mechanisms manifested and affected their careers and the overall female experience.

First of all, the lack of separation between the public and private realms, was a theme early on introduced by the articles of Hoskyns, Hughes, and Tickner, is something women regularly face, and an issue which as we've seen negatively affected both euro-politicians yet on different levels. Veil had experienced this private-public divide early on, created by the societal expectations women had in the 60s to postpone their pursue of a career and prioritize their family, while also by the patriarchal beliefs her husband demonstrated. In addition, even after her entry into politics Veil had to deal with the media focus on her private life, which at times were more concerned about her position as a wife, mother, and grandmother rather than a presidential candidate. On the other hand, regarding Fontaine's experience with this divide we can detect some type of progress, since despite having to deal with similar societal expectations, the media had showcased interest in her political decisions leaving her private life private.

Secondly, the analysis of newspaper publications unearthed the harmful side of media representation. As established by Zamfirache, the perception of women in politics as diffused by the media acts as an enabler of the glass ceiling, since it distributes misogynistic stereotypes

which become ossified with the passing of time<sup>233</sup>. This statement becomes even more evident when looking into the media representation of Veil and Fontaine. The media instead of showcasing a parallel progress with that of society's regarding the advancements in gender equality which took place in the 20 years between the two presidencies, have instead demonstrated a digress. While Veil's stereotypical media representation through newspaper publications focused on her personal appearance and her familial status, paired also with elusive statements regarding her relationships with other men and with indirect judgment on her leadership; Fontaine's ones can only be compared as severely crueller and more straightforward. Despite the advancements in gender equality which took place at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially in EU politics with the Amsterdam Treaty, Nicole Fontaine had been more openly scrutinized on her appearance and leadership style, ranging from degrading and stereotypical nicknames to the diminishment of her political abilities to superficial adjectives.

Moreover, the two case studies of this research have also allowed for a closer look into how gender invisibility is expressed within the realm of politics. More precisely we've seen both in the cases of Fontaine and Veil that in one way or another there have been attempts to silence them or control their narratives. With Veil, her portrayal as a symbol of Franco-German reunification promoted by Valéry Giscard, in a way was used without her own consultation, something which was clear through the politician's tone of resignation when talking about it. While Fontaine, not only had encountered gender invisibility by her peers but also by the outside world, from the lack of support she received from fellow politicians and even to her marginalisation from official ceremonies because of her gender.

As established, Velvet triangles have become means for women to work together in advancing the female agenda in a political, social, or legislative settings, and has been a tool which both Veil and Fontaine either been part of or have tried to construct themselves. Starting from the biggest achievement of Simone Veil's career, the de-penalisation of abortion, only became possible because of this mechanism. Occupying one corner of the triangle as a 'femocrat', Veil boosted by the voices of the other two corners occupied by feminist academics and women's movements, was able to stand before the French parliamentary assembly, defend and claim the right to abortion for all Frenchwomen. Fontaine's encounter with velvet triangles after becoming a president allowed her to peruse an agenda which didn't ignore the female

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experience. More particularly, the politician built an inner circle for herself which was able to support her feminist agenda when time came, which it did in the case of the Afghan Women. By having a supportive inner circle, she managed to successfully raise quick enough awareness and offer a platform so the women of Afghanistan could express their demands, a project which could not have happened without her imperative contribution to a velvet triangle.

Moving to the affectability of female empowerment, the two case studies provide with an inside on how women use this mechanism to personally advance, while also how they may utilise it to help others. Veil had been on both the receiving and giving ends of female empowerment, since without the advocacy of a senior judge which she encountered early on in her life she wouldn't have had a career in law. Furthermore, Veil's path in national politics had been laced with examples of female empowerment which manifested in both her fight for the Abortion Act as well as for the future of the Algerian female prisoners. While as a president of the European Parliament, in a world where female politicians had been scrutinized, she made effort in uplifting them, evident through her autobiographical recounting of her meetings. Lastly, the cause behind female empowerment stuck with Veil's name even after her passing, through the Simone Veil Programme, which could be described as an initiative implementing both velvet triangles and female empowerment into one. Similarly to Veil, Fontaine also had been on both ends of female empowerment. Her election as a president was marked by the immense support politicians like Poncelet and Bayrou demonstrated during her campaign while also by the female politicians who went against their party's beliefs to vote for her. The empowerment she received, she later passed on as a president from her equally gendered balanced cabinet, to her declarations regarding the situation of women in Afghanistan. On that account, while looking at both Veil's and Fontain's encounters, we can make the deduction that having themselves been helped by female empowerment might have made them more willing and eager to be on the 'giving end' and continue thus the cycle.

Gender does not define one's style of leadership, and one must avoid applying generalisations when it comes to women and leadership, either for or against them. Meaning that, being a woman does not make you either a bad or a good leader, what shapes a person's leadership is their experiences. Having said that, in looking into Veil's and Fontain's leadership of the parliament we can establish a blueprint of how their experience as women in the world of politics have impacted it.

Both women before their election as presidents have had successful careers which gave them a substantial arsenal of knowledge and experience. Veil had a long career in the national legislative and political world of France while Fontaine had an extensive career within the European Parliament as an EMP and a Vice-president. One could see this as a reason these politicians succeeded as presidents, but it could also act as testament to the ‘hoops’ women have to ‘jump through’ so to be considered capable enough to lead, something that still can be debated since as previously illustrated the media still manage to question said capabilities. Moreover, through the case studies we can depict a similar approach to leadership pursued by the two presidents which can be described as trustworthy, humanistic, and more inclusive. Both Veil and Fontaine showed a sensitivity towards issues regarding human rights and aimed in amplifying the voice of marginalised groups. This approach could be attributed to the personal experiences both women have gone through in their past, Veil being a survivor of the holocaust and growing up in an environment where women were still fighting for equality. While Fontaine grew up at a time when gender equality progress was just starting to show its effects and the rise of the media allowed for the spread of stereotypical misogynistic commentary faster than ever before. Despite the similarities which Veil and Fontaine have had as presidents, Fontaine’s style of leading an institution differs in one important aspect from Veil’s, that of confidence. Veil’s style can be described as more reserved when it came to being explicit on issues of gender equality and going against the norm, probably due to the responsibility she felt as the first ever EU female president, and not wanting to risk compromising the outside perspective. Fontaine by not having the same burden and with Veil as a role-model to look up to, she had showed conviction and relentlessness in leading, accompanied by the air of change she brought to the presidency.

Overall, the careers of Simone Veil and Nicole Fontaine helped illustrate what has been the experience of female euro-politicians and how has it changed, in the span of 25 or so years, in a European setting within the lens of gender equality. Through the above conclusions we establish how some aspects of the female political experience demonstrated positive progress both during Veil’s and Fontaine’s presidencies and that includes the impacts of velvet triangles and female empowerment. Other aspects have shown us how progress comes with time, for instance when it comes to the separation of private and public life of women, as well as with the confidence in leadership. While some conclusions depicted a stagnation in progress, as we’ve seen with gender invisibility, an issue which equally affected both women twenty years apart. Lastly, a digress has been established regarding Veil’s and Fontaine’s experience with

the media, since Fontaine had been in the receiving end of more cruel and unsolicited sexist commentary than her predecessor Simone Veil.

All in all, through this academic research I aspire to have contributed to the gap which I noticed in research, regarding the first-hand experience of female politicians within the institutions of the European Union, and more particularly that of the European Parliament. I was surprised to find less primary sourced material than expected on the contributions and presidential careers of the two euro-politicians despite them being the only female presidents which the European Parliament have had up until 2021. Thus, with the election of the third female president of the European Parliament Roberta Metsola, more than twenty years after Fontaine and over forty years after Veil, I hope that this gap of data can shift. Personally, I look forward and I hope that in future research, papers like this one can be used as a basis or even be extended to include the presidential run of the new president, as a way of charting the progress or digress in the female political experience. Finally, I would like to end this paper on a question mark since despite being two decades into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and despite the efforts which have been made by great figures the past 100 years, women have still yet to achieve gender equality and especially within the political world, so the question is what is stopping us or what does it take to get us there?

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