Austerity Policies and the Strategic Silencing of Their Gendered Effects: Evidence from Spain

My Rafstedt

Austerity measures are commonly adopted to address economic crises. Such measures have particularly adverse effects for women, but studies have found these consequences to be strategically silenced. I explore the conditions under which the gendered effects of austerity are silenced, and by whom. Drawing on an original dataset of 9,420 newspaper articles (2010–2020) addressing austerity measures introduced in Spain, I find that politicians from left parties critique the labor reforms for negatively affecting women’s working conditions, while conservative politicians rarely address the reforms from a gender perspective. The party political difference is conditioned by government–opposition dynamics, and the salience of gender perspectives varies with election cycles. These findings suggest that a gender lens is more likely to be present in the public debate on economic policy-making when it is strategically beneficial for garnering political support.

Introduction

Had you read the Spanish newspaper El País on February 23, 2012, in the middle of the economic crisis in Spain, you would have come across an article titled “PSOE fears ‘lethal’ effect of labor reform on female workers”. In the article, the Deputy Secretary General of the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE), Elena Valenciano, is quoted reacting to the conservative government’s proposed labor reform: “The crisis is serving as a great alibi,” she says. “It is a setback of more than 30 years, and Spanish women are not willing to go back 30 years” (Gutiérrez Calvo 2012). Like many other European governments, Spanish governments adopted severe austerity measures, such as labor reforms, in response to the economic crisis that started in 2008. Austerity policies have gendered effects, meaning that women are particularly affected by labor market deregulation and public budget cuts, given their higher care...
burden and more precarious employment compared with men. Existing literature argues that the silencing of austerity’s gendered effects is central to the legitimacy of austerity (Emejulu and Bassel 2015, 2018; O’Dwyer 2018; Rubery 2013, 2015). However, as the quote above indicates, gender perspectives also appear in the debate. Under what conditions have gender perspectives, such as that presented by Valenciano, been part of the public debate about austerity?

In this article, I explore the role of three different factors that, I argue, play an important role in gendering austerity in the public debate: party political ideology, government–opposition dynamics, and the occurrence of important political events such as elections. I test this argument in the context of the news media debate about the labor reforms introduced in Spain, one of the European countries most severely hit by the economic crisis. I draw on an original dataset comprising 9,420 articles published between 2010 and 2020 in two of Spain’s largest newspapers, *El País* and *El Mundo*, that address these contentious labor reforms. This dataset provides a comprehensive overview of the development of the debate about these austerity measures over an entire decade. It allows me to combine the mapping of when the reforms and their gendered effects are discussed in relation to significant political events in Spain—such as elections, strikes, and votes of no confidence in the prime minister—with a systematic collection of representative samples of articles for in-depth analysis of the debate.

I find that the gendered effects of austerity often are silenced in the public debate, but that how political actors from the left and right portray these effects vary considerably when they appear in the media. First, politicians from left parties and trade union representatives are the most important critics of the gendered effects of the labor reforms, which, they argue, hinder women’s work–life balance. Conservative politicians rarely address the gendered effects of the reforms in the newspaper articles. Second, however, this party political difference varies depending on whether the respective party is in government or opposition. Politicians from the center-left address the negative implications of the conservative government’s labor reform on women’s work, but they rarely reflect on the gendered effects of their own reforms, meaning that their incumbency status also matters. Third, newspaper articles containing a gender perspective are more likely to be published during important political events, suggesting that gender perspectives gain importance during moments that are strategically important for politicians, and when the media may have heightened attention to political decision-making. The findings suggest that elite actors primarily address how austerity policies may affect women and men differently when it is politically advantageous for them, indicating the importance of efforts by nonpolitical actors in keeping gender perspectives on the agenda in the public debate.
The Silencing of Austerity Policies’ Gendered Effects

Gender equality must often yield to other policy priorities, and this happens despite decision-makers expressing wholehearted commitment to the principle of gender equality (Skjeie and Teigen 2003, 209). Gender equality is even more likely to be relegated to the margins during events that are constructed as crises, a tendency that legitimizes the use of exceptional measures regardless of their gendered effects (Griffin 2015, 109). During the deep recession following the economic crisis that began in 2008, European institutions and governments adopted austerity measures with gendered effects (Brah, Szeman, and Gedalof 2015; Hall 2020; Karamessini and Rubery 2013). Cuts in public spending affect women more than men because women have a greater care burden, they make up the majority of the public sector workforce and the users of public sector programs, and the deregulation of the labor market requires more flexibility from workers, which is particularly challenging for those with caring responsibilities (Elomäki 2012; Lombardo 2017; O’Dwyer 2018). Minority women are disproportionally affected by government cuts, and their experiences were silenced during the economic crisis while those of the white working- and middle-class were privileged (Emejulu and Bassel 2015, 88; Emejulu and Bassel, 2018; Sandhu and Stephenson 2015).

An extensive literature argues that the gendered effects of restructuring economic policy reforms, such as austerity, are silenced (Bakker 1994; O’Dwyer 2018; Rubery 2013, 2015, 734). This silencing takes various forms, including absence, contradictions, and instrumentalization. It may refer to both the framing—the definition of the problem—and the salience—the relative importance of gendered perspectives on austerity. The austerity measures introduced in response to the economic crisis were often not assessed for their gendered effects (Conley and Page 2018, 793–4; Rubery 2013), “in part because any evaluation would point to their strong and negative gender equality implications” (Rubery 2015, 734). When reflections on gender equality feature in proposals for austerity policies, they play a contradictory role whereby an increased female labor force participation and greater investment in childcare are encouraged in order to boost economic growth, despite the proposed cuts in public spending and deregulation of the labor market deterring more female employment (Chieregato 2021; O’Dwyer 2018). Chieregato (2021) finds that in Italy gender equality was instrumentalized to promote labor market deregulation, something Verloo (2005, 359) has called “strategical framing”, a process whereby gender equality is stretched to fit with actors’ preexisting interests. The gender knowledge that is present in economic policy-making—such as perceptions of differences between the sexes, the significance of such differences, and the experiences and evidence that inform such knowledge (Cavaghan 2017, 72)—rarely recognizes unpaid reproductive labor as a macroeconomic input that is important for our societies to function and tend to prioritize salaried work (Cavaghan and Elomäki 2021, 6).
Labor market deregulation relies on the idea that the unemployment caused by austerity is mitigated by “flexibility”, meaning increased freedom for employers to change working conditions, a concept that “is gendered both in that it relies on a feminization of labor, and is gendered in its impacts” and that obscures austerity’s contradiction between promoting women’s work and introducing measures that hamper it (O’Dwyer 2018, 754–5). The term “strategic silencing” has been used to denote how political actors “actively maintained” these silences (Bakker 1994; Cavaghan and O’Dwyer 2018; Elomäki 2021, 8; O’Dwyer 2018). Elomäki (2021) finds that political groups have excluded considerations of gender equality from economic policymaking in the European Parliament both because they do not consider this an area where gendered considerations should be incorporated, and because they prioritize other concerns more.

Factors Influencing How Political Actors Gender Austerity Policies in the News

Existing literature provides crucial unpacking of the gendered nature of austerity and the exclusion or instrumentalization of gender equality in the political debate. We have more limited understanding of the variations in how, when, and by whom gender equality is addressed in the context of austerity. Building on earlier research, there are at least three factors that can be associated with such variation. The first factor I consider to be important is party political ideology. This is used to primarily predict whether political parties address gender equality, but it can also help us understand how parties address the issue (O’Brien 2018; Weeks et al. 2022). Left-wing political parties in Europe have a longer track record of commitment to gender equality than conservative parties, but the latter have over time become increasingly concerned with it (Campbell and Childs 2015a; Celis and Childs 2018; Evans 2015; Ruiz Jiménez 2009). Whereas left parties have often incorporated the demands of women’s movements and share a concern for structural inequalities between classes and genders, conservatives and liberals focus more on women’s traditional gender roles and individual agency.

A second factor is that politicians attempt to influence the political agenda differently depending on whether their party is in opposition or in government (incumbency status) (Elmelund-Præstekær 2010; Vliegenthart et al. 2016). Thesen (2013) finds that in the Danish context, the opposition is more likely to respond to bad news that the governing parties can be held responsible for, while the government is more likely to respond to good news that can be used to demonstrate policy success or, if forced to by the news cycle, to events that highlight the government’s responsibility. He concludes that “parties use news of social problems in their competition with each other and that differences in policy responsibility direct opposition and government
attention to different news tones in political communication” (Thesen 2013, 381). It is likely that opposition politicians are more eager to attack unpopular austerity policies proposed by the government.

Third, gender equality policy has become an important electoral issue for political parties during the last decades, as they compete for women’s votes (Campbell and Childs 2015b; León et al. 2019). Parties are more prone to attempt to attract female votes by supporting gender equality initiatives, such as gender quota laws, when faced with electoral uncertainty, particularly if there is competition from an emerging left-wing party (Weeks 2018, 1937). Although the dominant argument in the literature is that austerity’s gendered effects have been silenced, some authors also argue that a gendered critique is still present in political discourse during election campaigns (Kantola 2018), and in news coverage (Budgeon 2019). We would therefore expect to see political parties and news media pay more attention to gender equality during elections.

A Volatile Decade in Spanish Politics

Spain was severely affected by the economic crises that started in 2008, and experienced significant changes to its party political system and society during the following decade. It saw new political parties enter the national stage, such as radical left party Podemos and center-right Ciudadanos, it went from a biparty to multiparty system at the national level, experienced massive social mobilization by the Indignados and feminist movements, and underwent significant electoral instability with five national elections in ten years. This section provides a brief overview of this context.

Austerity and Labor Reforms

Spanish governments adopted drastic measures to address the economic crisis and were strongly encouraged by the European Union, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund to pursue austerity policies. Among these measures were significant reforms of the Workers’ Statute, the most important source of labor law in Spain. After initially resisting to adopt austerity policies, the PSOE government led by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero changed course in 2010 and adopted budget cuts and labor reforms in 2010 and 2011. However, the most contentious and debated labor reform was introduced in 2012 under the conservative government of Mariano Rajoy. More minor changes have been introduced in the decade since (Branco et al. 2019, 216), but the center of academic and public debate has been the 2012 reform.

The reforms adopted in 2010 and 2011 eased the requirements for legitimate dismissals, reduced redundancy pay, and gave more priority to firm-level collective agreements, but also made the regulation of temporary contracts slightly stricter (Picot and Tassinari 2017, 470–3). The conservative
reform adopted in 2012 is considered significantly more deregulatory in comparison, and has been criticized for representing a neoliberal commodification of the worker (Amorós 2013; Cos Egea 2018, 66; Lafuente Pastor 2016; Martínez Veiga 2016; Pérez Infante 2015, 280).\(^1\) The 2012 reform provided employers with more freedom to make changes to working conditions, further reduced the costs and requirements for legitimate firing, also for collective dismissals, and permitted successive fixed-term contracts with the same employer (Pérez Infante 2015, 253–5; Picot and Tassinari 2017, 471). It made important changes to the conditions for collective bargaining, including establishing the priority of negotiations in the workplace over sector-wide bargaining and abolishing the practice whereby collective agreements are extended until a new agreement has been reached (Pérez Infante 2015, 253–5; Picot and Tassinari 2017, 471).

Legal scholars have criticized this labor market deregulation for disadvantaging women. They argue that the increased prerogative of employers to change their employees’ working conditions will particularly affect women because they bear the brunt of caring responsibilities, and that the general weakening of employment security will affect populations that already have a more precarious position in the labor market, such as women (Ballester-Pastor 2012; Guamán Hernández 2015; Miñarro Yanini 2013). The conservative government argued that the 2012 reform also aimed to support female employment (Guamán Hernández 2015), but although legal scholars identify some measures that may support gender equality such as specifying that fathers can take nursing leave and that work–family measures should be promoted, Miñarro Yanini (2013, 1243) argues that this “cannot compensate the adverse effects of other measures adopted” by the labor reforms and the public spending cuts.

The Spanish Party Political System and Gender Equality Policy

The PSOE has historically been the primary driver behind gender equality policies in Spain, but during recent decades the competition over the female vote has increased (León et al. 2019; Ruiz Jiménez 2009; Valiente 2013). The incentive for the conservative Popular Party (PP) to engage with gender equality has therefore risen, and the PP has increasingly converged toward the PSOE’s care and family policies with an emphasis on promoting female employment (León et al. 2019; Peterson 2011). Both the PSOE and PP have, however, been found to pay limited attention to how gender intersects with other social structures such as class, race, and sexuality (Kvist and Peterson 2010; Lombardo and Bustelo 2012; Peterson 2007, 2011). The competition has also increased significantly from the left, following the founding of the radical left party Podemos, which first participated in a national general election in December 2015. Podemos has been an active promoter of a “feminization of politics” and has a feminist profile (Caravantes 2019, 8–10).
In 2015, Spain went from having a bi-party system with a “stable institutionalized equilibrium” in which the PSOE and PP, the two largest parties, had alternated in central government since the 1980s, to having an unstable multi-party system in which the political parties have struggled to form governments, resulting in four elections being held between 2015 and 2019 (Falcó-Gimeno and Verge 2013, 389–90; Simón 2016, 493; 2020, 28). The PSOE led the government during two terms, from 2004 to 2011, when the conservative PP won the election. Conservative Prime Minister Rajoy led the Spanish government until 2018, when a vote of no confidence against the government succeeded and the leader of the PSOE, Pedro Sánchez, became prime minister. Following the election in November 2019, the leftist coalition government composed of the PSOE, Podemos, and the United Left took power early January 2020, led by Prime Minister Sánchez.

During periods of electoral uncertainty, particularly if there is competition from an emerging left-wing party, political parties are increasingly eager to attract female votes by focusing on gender equality (Weeks 2018, 1937). This change in the party political system took place in the context of a significant mobilization of social movements deeply concerned with austerity policies and gender equality: the Indignados movement, which Podemos springs from, and the women’s movement. These social movements have undoubtedly contributed to shining a light on the effects of austerity, and on gender equality, but although they are likely to have affected trends in the public debate, I do not focus on these movements in this article given my theoretical interest in the relationship between election cycles, government–opposition dynamics, and the gendering of austerity by policy-makers.

**Data and Research Design**

The data material I analyze in this article consists of 9,420 articles published between January 2010 and December 2020 in two of the Spain’s most read newspapers, *El País* and *El Mundo*. I chose this time frame to cover the debate from the adoption of the 2010 labor reform through the multiple election cycles until 2020, the first year of the leftist coalition government. The Spanish media system has a high degree of political parallelism, meaning that media outlets often are ideologically linked to political parties (Vliegenthart and Mena Montes 2014). I therefore analyze two widely read newspapers with different editorial lines to reduce bias in how policy initiatives are presented by the newspapers depending on which political party promotes the initiative. *El País* has a center-left and *El Mundo* a center-right editorial line, and they have been found to act as “strategic allies” of the PSOE and PP, respectively (Valera-Ordaz 2015, 118). Álvarez Sánchez (2019, 590) finds significant overlap between the conservative government and *El Mundo’s* portrayal of the...
conservative reform from 2012, while *El País* was critical of many of the proposed measures.

I focus on how political actors inform the public debate about the gendered effects of austerity in the news media because it is a forum that the public is more likely to engage with compared to electoral programs, parliamentary debates, and policy documents. Political discourse in the news media is a co-production, and elite actors, journalists, and editors together engage in “frame building” (Cheng et al. 2014, 5), which informs how people perceive and feel about a particular issue (Entman 2007, 164). Spanish political parties use “the media as a space for political confrontation” (Chauses-Bonafont, Palau, and Baumgartner 2015, 136), and I treat the newspapers as a stage where political actors attempt to present their perspectives on the labor reforms.

Journalists and editors may limit the attention given to the gendered effects of austerity by not addressing this in their reporting. Between 2010 and 2020 the economic section in *El Mundo* has been led by three male editors, whereas two male and one female editor have headed *El País*’s economic section. None of the editors make explicit references to courses or degrees focused on gender equality in their professional profiles on LinkedIn. Earlier research on both *El País* and *El Mundo* found that their reporting tends to underrepresent women, to conform to gender stereotypes in their presentation of women and men, and to cite women less frequently as sources (Creighton 2013; Matud Aznar et al. 2017). I treat the limited formal gender expertise among the editors of the economic sections in *El Mundo* and *El País* as a filter that is likely to reduce how much gender perspectives are addressed in their economic reporting. We should, however, still be able to observe interesting variation between how and when political elites address the gendered effects of the labor reforms in the news media, and it is this variation that my work attempts to explain.

I selected the articles by web scraping the webpages of *El País* and *El Mundo*, which ensures that the corpus is as complete a compilation as possible of newspaper articles published between 2010 and 2020 mentioning labor reforms. I included all articles published on the newspapers’ online sites, including articles authored by Spanish news agencies such as EFE and Europa Press. This systematic selection allows me to first look at publication patterns in the aggregate data against the timing of political events, and then to conduct an in-depth analysis of a smaller sample of representative articles. After cleaning the data, I was left with 9,420 articles from the initial 10,947 article URLs identified in my webpage searches. Figure 1 provides an overview of the number of newspaper articles published per quarter that mention the labor reforms, mapped against general elections, general strikes, and votes of no confidence.

Figure 1 indicates an overlap between periods of increase in the rate of articles mentioning the labor reforms, and important political events such as the 2015 and 2016 elections, and illustrates periods of heightened attention to the reforms. Given the large amount of data, I choose to target my in-depth
reading on the periods where the public debate on the reforms is most salient. These time periods are outlined in Table 1. Of the 9,420 articles in the total corpus, 8110 were published during these periods (see Table 2).

I read 257 newspaper articles closely. To determine which articles to read, I used two different selection strategies. The aim was to read articles that were likely to contain gender perspectives, to examine the framing of austerity and gender in the debate, as well as articles that represent the debate at large and the role of gender perspectives in it, to study the salience of gender perspectives. I randomly sampled 1 percent of the articles published during the selected time periods, which totaled eighty-five articles. To capture articles that
explicitly addressed gender, equality, and women, I identified articles that contained one or more of the following terms: equality (igualdad), gender (género), woman/en (mujer/es), female worker (trabajadora), female employee (empleada), and female (femenino). In the entire corpus, 2,116 articles mentioned one of these terms. I randomly selected 10 percent of those articles, published during my specified time periods, which came to 172 articles.

I read these articles in-depth and created broad codes to capture how the labor reforms were framed, such as “Effect of reforms on women”. The thematic codes were divided into a second level of codes that specified the type of actor that presented a given perspective. I paid attention to statements about the effects of the labor reforms and gender equality in the labor market, with a focus on the actors who appeared most frequently such as politicians, and representatives for trade unions, employer organizations, and financial institutions. I counted the number of articles that included gendered perspectives on the reforms, defined as mentions of how the reforms may affect women and men differently, either negatively or positively. I did not include articles that discussed the effects of the reforms on female workers if their gender was provided merely as a piece of descriptive information and not accorded importance in relation to their experience of the reforms. The mentions ranged from brief statements to more extensive analyses. I re-read the data, now sorted into thematic codes, and organized the coded article excerpts into narrower themes.

My research design allows me to ask questions about the role of electoral incentives and government–opposition dynamics in the gendering of the debate on austerity policies, questions that are less explored in the existing literature, but it also places limitations on my findings. I cannot determine the degree to which politicians, other elite actors, journalists, and editors are...
responsible for how the gendered effects of austerity are presented in the media. My theoretical framework aims to describe how political actors address labor reforms in the news media, and the article rests on the assumption that the newspaper articles result from a co-production by political and media actors. The corpus also has a larger presence of politicians from the traditionally dominant PSOE and PP because a large portion of the newspaper articles were published in 2012, before Spain changed from being a bi-party to a multi-party political system.

**Political Actors Gendering the Labor Reforms in the News Media**

The articles published on *El Mundo’s* or *El País’s* webpages addressing the labor reforms rarely mention the potentially gendered effects of the reforms. Among the random selection of 1 percent of the articles published during one of the five time intervals when the publication rate was elevated, only one out of thirty-nine (*El Mundo*) and one out of forty-six (*El País*) include reflections on the gendered effects of the labor reforms (see Europa Press 2012b; Gozzer 2014). Of the 10 percent of the articles randomly selected for close reading from the chosen time periods, fifteen out of ninety-six articles in *El País* and seven out of seventy-six articles in *El Mundo* include a gender perspective on the labor reforms. When gender perspectives do feature in the news reporting, what perspectives are readers likely to come across and how do political actors feature in these articles?

The main theme of the reflections on the gendered effects of the labor reforms is that they have a negative effect on female employment because they make the reconciliation of salaried work and caring responsibilities more difficult (Efe 2012; *El País* 2014; Gutiérrez Calvo 2012; Sanz 2019). Most of the critique in the newspaper articles is made by politicians from the PSOE, some politicians further to the left, and union representatives, against the 2012 conservative reform. In an article covering a meeting between PSOE politicians and women’s organizations following the law proposal by the conservative PP, the PSOE’s Deputy Secretary General Elena Valenciano is quoted as claiming that the reform will have a “lethal” effect on women given that they have the lowest salaries, the most precarious employment, and are “the easiest to dismiss” (Gutiérrez Calvo 2012). The greater prerogative given to employers to modify employees’ working hours, and their use of leave policies to care for children, and the weakening of collective bargaining—which Valenciano argues will hamper the implementation of gender equality policies—are presented as damaging to women workers and gender equality in the labor market.

In coverage of Ximo Puig’s campaign to become the next secretary general of the PSOE in the Valencian Community, he is quoted arguing that the 2012
reform “is above all a labor reform against women” that will “allow many women to remain outside the labor market” (Europa Press 2012a). Yolanda Díaz, then spokesperson for a regional coalition of Galician leftist parties and Minister of Labor since January 2020, is quoted in an article on a press conference ahead of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women as saying that the policies of the conservative government “mistreat women” as exemplified by the labor reform and its effect on the work–life balance (El País 2012). Trade union representatives appear in the articles as critics of both the reforms introduced by the PSOE and PP for deregulating working conditions, resulting in many women being “forced to give up their jobs and take care of children and dependents” as well as in lower salaries, which particularly affect groups that earn less, such as women and young adults (Efe 2011; El País 2014; Gualtieri 2016). This corresponds with Álvarez Sánchez’s (2019, 585) finding that in political communication during 2012 regarding the conservative labor reform, the PSOE and the trade unions CCOO and UGT most frequently addressed women’s working situation, despite it not being a dominant theme in the debate.

The political actors who are cited commenting on the gendered effects of the reforms in these newspaper articles are often politicians and trade union representatives with female names, some of whom also work as gender equality advisors within their organizations (Aldaz 2015; El País 2012, 2014; Europa Press 2010a; Gualtieri 2016). Other actors who are quoted in articles with a gendered lens are the director of the Basque Women’s Institute Emakunde (Europa Press 2012b) and María Luisa Balaguer, Magistrate of the Spanish Constitutional Court. Balaguer is cited criticizing the court’s judgment on the constitutionality of a labor reform amendment to an article in the Workers’ Statute on the grounds that it indirectly discriminates against women. She argues that it “affects women to a greater extent, due to the negative consequences of their double working day, i.e., their greater dedication to caring for children, the disabled and dependents (the elderly and children), together with their working day, which also affects their health” (Missé 2019). The few reports and opinion pieces where gender perspectives are central to the story, rather than briefly mentioned, are often authored by journalists with female names, in the instances where the name of the journalist is given (Aldaz 2015; Gutiérrez Calvo 2012; Pérez Oliva 2018; Sanz 2019). This suggests that the presence of a gendered lens on the labor reforms is more likely when either journalists or the people quoted in the articles are female.

The news articles rarely address how gender intersects with other social structures such as income and educational level, race, or citizenship. Among the 257 articles that I read in-depth, there are only two mentions of how the reforms may affect groups of women differently. One is an opinion piece by a journalist discussing how the organization Las Kellys is working to make visible the precarious working conditions of hotel cleaners that, the journalist argues, have worsened following the 2012 reform (Pérez Oliva 2018). The
second is a critique of the PSOE’s 2010 reform by the secretary of Equality and Social Politics at the trade union UGT in Cataluña (Europa Press 2010a). At a presentation of the union’s report on how immigrant women suffer from double discrimination in the labor market, the union representative argues that the reform will worsen immigrant women’s already precarious work situation, which is characterized by higher rates of temporary work and unemployment (Europa Press 2010a). By the end of the article, however, immigrant women are given the role of the canary in the coal mine: “the labor reform is a step backward in terms of acquired rights’, states [the union representative], who has expressed her fear that in the coming months the precarity of immigrant women will deepen and extend to the Catalan women.” The economic difficulties experienced by minority women have received limited attention both before and during the economic crisis, not only in mainstream policy discussions, but also among white feminists critiquing austerity (Cavaghan 2021; Emejulu and Bassel 2018). Even when the particularly difficult economic situation of immigrant women is acknowledged, the likelihood that “Catalan women” will also be soon affected is used to bring home the severity of the situation.

Conservative politicians are close to invisible in the newspaper articles that address the gendered effects of the reforms. Among the articles I read closely, I only found one in which a politician from the conservative government reflects on this. The article is titled “Fátima Báñez: ‘My intention is to end discrimination against women’” and is published in El Mundo’s supplement targeted at female readers, Yo Dona, which features sections on “Fashion” and “Influential Women”. Báñez, Minister of Employment and Social Security at the time, is quoted saying that “a lot of progress has been made on what is fundamental for women: that they should have jobs, because that is the element of freedom of life for us” (Aldaz 2015). As an example of how her government has worked to improve the work–life balance, she mentions legislating teleworking and extending the right to reduce one’s workday for childcare purposes to include parents of children up to the age of twelve years, increased from eight years, the latter change adopted in 2013. The article presents her as an assertive stateswoman who “got down to work, signed a labor reform and now speaks, proudly, of other figures. . . Women have been in her sights, and she is happy to leave them a legacy.”

The article about the minister illustrates how the co-production of news by politicians, journalists, and editors can work to exclude gender perspectives from the mainstream debate on austerity policies. By locating one of few stories featuring conservative politicians’ take on the gendered effects of the labor reforms in a supplement aimed at female readers, away from the newspaper’s economic pages, El Mundo ensures that these reflections will not reach a substantial part of their readership. It is a favorable setting for the female Minister of Employment to appear in, a flattering profile published less than a
month before the 2015 general election, in which a commitment to gender equality is instrumentalized to promote the government’s economic policies.

The debate about the labor reforms in *El Mundo* and *El País* is largely focused on the quality of employment and the functioning of the Spanish labor market. A common argument in favor of the reforms—often presented by conservative politicians, employer representatives, and economic organizations—is that by reducing labor costs and increasing flexibility for business owners, businesses can adapt to the difficult economic situation and keep their employees by making internal changes rather than firing them (Cruz 2014; Europa Press 2010b; Laborda 2012; Negre 2012). Flexibility is a concept with a long history in Spanish debates about labor market policies, but it is also a gendered concept that plays a central role in upholding the underlying logic of labor market deregulation (O’Dwyer 2018, 754–5). O’Dwyer argues that the idea—that by increasing employers’ freedom to change working conditions unemployment will be mitigated—is gendered both in its effects and in that it rests on an increased feminization of work whereby irregular working conditions become increasingly common for men as well as women. The gendered implications of flexibility lie at the heart of the critique against increased deregulation. At the same time, the concept of greater labor market flexibility plays an important role in the defense of labor market reform.

**The Timing of Gendering the Debate**

The political actors’ framing of the labor reforms in the newspaper articles seems to be affected by whether their party is in government or opposition. Magdalena Valerio, the Minister of Labor in the PSOE government that took over following the vote of no confidence in conservative Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy in 2018, puts her finger on the importance of government–opposition dynamics. Reflecting on the PSOE government’s weak parliamentary support and the impact on its ability to deliver an earlier promise to change the 2012 labor reform (Gorospe 2015; Tirado 2015), Valerio explains that “[I]t is different being the opposition. We have a greater dose of pragmatism.” She argues that partial changes to the labor reform require dialog with social partners and the political groups in parliament (Gómez 2018). Both conservative and social-democratic politicians call the labor reforms of the opposing party “the law of dismissal” when in opposition, and accuse the opposition of being irresponsible and of not having done enough to address the economic crisis when in office (Efe | Europa Press 2010; Europa Press 2012c; Negre 2012).

The relationship between government–opposition dynamics and the likelihood that the reforms are analyzed with a gendered perspective in mind is reflected in how rarely PSOE politicians are quoted addressing the gendered effects of their own reforms, whereas they are prominent critics of the gendered effects of the 2012 reform introduced by the conservative government. Only one
of the 257 articles I read in-depth presents a positive evaluation of the gendered effects of the PSOE’s 2010 reform, listing changes such as increasing the bonus for companies that hire women, older workers, and groups that struggle to get jobs, but PSOE politicians are not quoted in the article. Although the conservative PP and the leftist party Izquierda Unida berate the reforms introduced by the PSOE for making working conditions more precarious, they do not address gender perspectives in their critiques in the media (El País 2011; Yanel 2011).

Politicians in opposition are more likely to respond to bad news for which the governing parties can be held responsible (Elmelund-Praestekær 2010; Thesen 2013; Vliegenthart et al. 2016). My data suggest that whether and how politicians address gender perspectives when they are quoted in the Spanish news media is affected by their positioning in the political system as well as by their party affiliation. To examine whether gender perspectives on austerity policies are more likely to be addressed during moments of heightened political tension, such as elections, strikes, and votes of no confidence, I look at the publication pattern of the 2,116 articles that mention both the reforms and a gender or equality term. The publication rate of articles mentioning the labor reforms varies significantly between 2010 and 2020, and although the labor reforms receive the most attention during 2012 (see figure 1), the publication pattern from 2015 onward also suggests that there is more interest in discussing them at election time.

Figure 2 illustrates the percentage of articles mentioning a gender or equality term from the total number of published articles mentioning labor reforms in the given quarter. The dotted line represents El Mundo and the full line represents El País. The events are represented by the same symbols as in figure 1 (filled rhombus: general election; inverted triangle: vote of no confidence; cross: general strike). Number of articles per quarter is marked at the end of each quarter.
We observe that from 2015 onward, articles that mention the labor reforms are more likely to also mention a gender or equality term if the article is published around the time of elections, strikes, and the votes of no confidence, taking into consideration the overall publication rate. These articles do not necessarily include reflections on the gendered effects of the reforms. My selection criterion is that words related to the reforms and to gender or equality appear in the same article. Nevertheless, these articles are significantly more likely to include a gender perspective on the reforms compared to the overall corpus. From my in-depth reading of a sample of the articles published during my chosen time periods, I found that 13 percent of the articles mentioning a gender or equality term contain a gender perspective on the reforms. In the sample of general articles, only 2 percent present a gender perspective on the reforms.

The labor reforms tend to be addressed more briefly in the articles published during the latter stages of the time frame, often in the context of electoral promises by the PSOE and Podemos (Caravajal 2018; Gonzalez Ivars 2016; Manetto 2016; Santaeulalia 2019), as compared to when the reforms were adopted. Nevertheless, I find some articles published from 2015 onwards that provide a gendered lens on the reforms, not just cursory mentions (Aldaz 2015; Gualtieri 2016). I therefore consider it reasonable to interpret the increases in the percentage of articles with gender or equality terms as an indication that articles addressing the gendered effects of the reforms are more likely to be published when important political events are taking place. Whereas earlier literature has focused on how these gender perspectives have been strategically silenced in the debate about austerity, my data suggest that gender perspectives may nevertheless gain in importance during moments that are strategically important for politicians, and when the media pay particularly close attention to political discourse and decision-making.

Conclusions

An extensive literature on the role played by gender perspectives in economic policy-making argues that such perspectives tend to be silenced, either through their absence or instrumentalization (Bakker 1994; Cavaghan and O’Dwyer 2018; Chieregato 2021; O’Dwyer 2018). This article contributes to existing debates by identifying three conditions that help us understand variations in how political actors engage with gender perspectives in their media appearances when discussing austerity policies: party political ideology, government–opposition dynamics, and the timing of major political events. I also propose that the likelihood that the gendered effects of austerity become part of the media debate increases when it is strategically beneficial to political actors.
To my knowledge, this is the most comprehensive empirical examination of the gendering of austerity in the news media. Relying on an original dataset containing all articles that mention labor reforms between 2010 and 2020 in two of Spain’s most read newspapers, the article provides extensive empirical data to support the commonly made argument that gender perspectives are rarely part of the debate on austerity measures. These data allow me to ask new questions about the silencing of gender perspectives in debates about austerity because they allow for a descriptive overview of publication trends with an in-depth reading of a representative selection of newspaper articles in a context of multiple elections and austerity policies introduced by both center-left and conservative governments.

My analysis suggests that there is a structure and logic to when gender perspectives occur in the public debate about austerity policies. Existing literature tends to conceptually unpack austerity and its gendered assumptions (Bakker 1994; O’Dwyer 2018) or to examine rich empirical data that cover a shorter timeframe (Álvarez Sánchez 2019; Budgeon 2019; Elomäki 2021; Kantola 2018). While some of this work addresses party political variations in how politicians reflect on gender equality in the context of economic policymaking, my work highlights how this factor is moderated by whether politicians are in opposition or government and by the timing of political events. When quoted in the news media, politicians from the left are more likely to employ a gender perspective than their conservative counterparts. However, when conservative and left-leaning politicians discuss their own labor reforms in the media, gender perspectives rarely form part of their supportive arguments. Although politicians from the left are more attentive to how the conservative 2012 reform may affect women negatively, they also seem more strategic than their conservative opponents in their use of gender perspectives to critique austerity, given that their gendering of the reforms varies significantly depending on whether they reflect on their own reforms or that of the conservative government. The gender knowledge that dominates the debate is focused on the importance of salaried work and how to ensure women’s labor market participation. Intersectional perspectives appear infrequently in the articles, which reflects a wider European trend whereby white middle- and working-class experiences of the economic crisis were prioritized (Emejulu and Bassel 2018).

The idea that gender perspectives are strategically silenced in debates about austerity policies and economic policy-making is used to denote an active exclusion of considerations for gender and reproductive labor. This can take place either through the absence of reflections on the relationship between economic policy-making and gender equality, or the instrumentalization of ideas about gender equality to support economic goals that are given greater priority (Elomäki 2021; O’Dwyer 2018). My work brings a third dimension to strategic silencing focused on when gender perspectives are considered politically useful. In the co-production of the public debate between politicians and
the media about austerity, I argue that gender perspectives are more likely to be recognized as relevant contributions when they are beneficial for attracting political support. The long timeframe of my data allows me to examine whether gendered concerns are addressed during moments when we might expect political competition to be particularly high and I find that attention to the reforms, and their gendered effects, increase during important political events, such as elections and strikes. The significant variation in when politicians are quoted addressing gender perspectives on the reforms—depending on whether they are in opposition critiquing the government’s initiative or whether they are supporting their own reforms—suggests that gender perspectives are not only strategically excluded or molded to support overarching economic policy goals, but also that these perspectives are more likely to be addressed in the public debate when it is politically advantageous.

Notes

1. See overview of legal scholars’ critique against the reforms in Pérez Infante (2015, 252–53).
2. *El País* has come to be considered less left-oriented during the past decade, whereas *eldiario.es* and *Público* have a stronger leftist editorial line. I discarded these newspapers given their comparatively small readership (elDiario.es 2020) and because they are newly founded (2012 and 2007).
3. I used the following search terms: “reforma laboral”, “reformas laborales”, and “ley reforma laboral”.
4. The populist right party Vox presented a vote of no confidence against Prime Minister Sánchez in September 2020, which I have not included because it failed with 52 votes in favor and 298 votes against.
5. The search picks up any word that contains these words, meaning that ‘igualdad’ also picks up ‘desigualdad’.
6. See Álvarez Sánchez (2019) for an extensive coverage over the main themes in the debate during the year of 2012.

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