

Resisting the Boys' Club: Tactical Agency, Gendered Performances, and Professional Survival in Czech Political Journalism

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Abstract

In the still masculinized “boys’ club” of political journalism, women are frequently cast as passive subjects of systemic exclusion. This article subverts that narrative, moving beyond traditional victim-centric frameworks to explore the granular, everyday navigation of female and male journalists within gendered professional structures. Leveraging a robust longitudinal dataset of 139 interviews across three iterative waves, we reveal how and why political journalists deploy complex strategies and tactics to secure professional survival and visibility. This approach demonstrates how specific situational triggers fluidly shape these choices in daily practice. Ultimately, this study highlights the profound ambivalence of individual agency: While these highly restricted tactical choices enable daily survival within a hostile reporting environment, they temporarily accommodate, rather than dismantle, the underlying status quo, directly underscoring an urgent need for institutional and structural evolution.

Keywords

Czech Republic; female journalists; gendered agency; media landscape; political journalism; professional resistance

1. Introduction

Feminist media scholarship has long demonstrated that public spheres are deeply gendered, reflecting and reproducing unequal power relations in politics and media (North, 2016b). Research on women in journalism specifically documents a landscape marked by systemic exclusion from leadership positions (i.e., vertical segregation), the concentration of women in particular journalistic beats and professional roles (i.e., horizontal segregation), and persistent pay inequity (Baloch et al., 2025; Kim, 2006; Urbániková &

Čaladi, 2026). Within this environment, both female and male journalists must navigate masculinized newsroom cultures that often result in the institutional dismissal of complaints and the assignment of female reporters to lower-status beats (Melek, 2024). Furthermore, pervasive harassment and abuse, alongside heightened safety risks and psychological harm, often foster self-censorship and withdrawal (Baloch et al., 2025; Sbaraini Fontes et al., 2024).

While structural barriers in political journalism are well-documented (e.g., Baloch et al., 2025; Pain, 2017), existing literature focuses predominantly on the descriptive mapping of female exclusion, which provides limited insight into how these conditions are navigated in everyday practice. This article addresses this gap by examining the everyday professional practices of political journalists in the Czech context—a setting marked by deeply entrenched masculinized newsroom cultures and demanding interactions with predominantly male politicians (Urbániková & Čaladi, 2026). To analyze these dynamics, we adopt a feminist lens to professional agency, conceptualizing these practices as inherently bounded, contextualized, and embedded within existing power structures (Gill, 2007; McNay, 2000). Specifically, we draw on a modified reading of de Certeau (1984), applying “strategies” not to institutional power but to journalists’ overarching orientations toward gendered norms and using “tactics” during daily interactions. Through this framework, we address the following research question: How do female political journalists enact agency through everyday professional practices within the masculinized environment of Czech political journalism?

By answering this question, we move beyond the general existence of agency to a granular understanding of its relational execution within the broader political journalism environment. To investigate these dynamics, we draw on a three-wave longitudinal dataset of 139 semi-structured interviews that track a core cohort of 50 female and male political journalists and politicians across local, regional, and national contexts. Thematically analyzing these accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2022) allows us to unpack the subtle intersections of gender and power. While our empirical focus remains centered on individual navigation, we explicitly recognize that the structural constraints of this environment remain immensely restrictive. Rather than documenting systemic change, this research illuminates subtle, constrained acts of individual agency within a deeply unequal system. We argue that capturing these micro-level practices is a critical prerequisite to identifying the precise pressure points where urgent, macro-level structural changes are required.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Gendered Inequalities in Political Journalism*

Despite the increasing participation of women in journalism, gendered inequalities persist in the profession (North, 2016b; Steiner, 2012). Political reporting thus remains notably male-dominated: Globally, women accounted for only 39% of journalists featured in political news stories in 2025 and remain underrepresented in senior and high-status reporting positions (Macharia et al., 2025).

Beyond numbers, inequalities manifest in everyday reporting dynamics and structural constraints. Political journalism relies heavily on informal, off-the-record relationship-building in settings like bars or sporting events (Kim, 2006; Lachover, 2005; Voronova, 2014). These homosocial spaces foster bonding between male journalists and political actors, often excluding women from these “gentlemen’s clubs” (Voronova, 2014), “old boys’ networks” (van Zoonen, 1998), and “brothers-in-arms” camaraderie (Lachover, 2005).

Similar patterns of exclusion have been documented in other male-dominated areas of journalism, including sports journalism (Genovese, 2015; Hardin et al., 2008) and war journalism (Palmer & Melki, 2018).

These interactional inequalities are reinforced by cultural norms that shape our understandings of journalistic expertise and authority. Political reporting is associated with rational, objective expertise historically aligned with masculine identities (Reich et al., 2026; Ross, 2001; Ross & Carter, 2011; van Zoonen, 1998), sustaining a masculinized culture that shapes source access and credibility. Additionally, everyday hostility within journalistic work environments polices female and male journalists' relational boundaries. Female journalists report experiences such as being interrupted, undermined, and subjected to sexualized comments or behavior from sources and colleagues (Lachover, 2005; Melki & Mallat, 2016; Rodny-Gumede, 2015). They also face disproportionate public backlash, including targeted online and offline harassment aimed at delegitimizing their presence in political discourse (Chen et al., 2020; Posetti et al., 2020; Sarikakis et al., 2023).

Finally, these interactional inequalities are embedded in broader structural conditions that shape women's participation and career trajectories. Political journalism is characterized by long and irregular working hours, expectations of constant availability, and norms that privilege uninterrupted career paths—conditions that often conflict with caregiving responsibilities, which continue to fall disproportionately on women (De Vuyst & Raeymaeckers, 2019; Urbániková & Čaladi, 2026). Over time, these factors contribute to cumulative disadvantages, including slower career progression, reduced access to leadership positions, and, in some cases, exit from the profession.

2.2. Navigating Masculinized Journalistic Environments

While scholarship on gender and journalism has been instrumental in documenting persistent systemic barriers and inequalities (Byerly, 2013; Macharia et al., 2025; Steiner, 2012), the micro-level practices through which women navigate and respond to these conditions remain comparatively underexamined.

The relatively small body of qualitative studies on journalists' experiences and professional practice indicates that traits associated with femininity may, in specific contexts, be mobilized as resources in journalistic practice, even though their availability and effectiveness remain conditioned by existing gendered power relations. Bals et al. (2026) show that female journalists may gain increased recognition because of their gender, while Somerstein (2021), Genovese (2015), and Palmer and Melki (2018) suggest that gendered perceptions of women as non-threatening and approachable may facilitate entry into particular communities and private spaces and encourage interviewees to open up in ways that may not occur with male journalists.

Despite exclusion and discrimination, female journalists rarely view themselves as victims (Genovese, 2015; Lachover, 2005; Robinson, 2004; Voronova, 2014). Rather, they emphasize their capacity to decide whether to confront, accommodate, or ignore such behavior, as well as their ability to exploit stereotypical attitudes held by male sources. As Robinson (2004, p. 187) notes, female journalists working in male-dominated contexts “use their gender strategically.” Importantly, these responses unfold within structural constraints and existing gendered power relations. They should not be understood as evidence of unconstrained choice or straightforward empowerment.

Based on prior research (Genovese, 2015; Hardin et al., 2008; Lachover, 2005; Pain, 2017; Palmer & Melki, 2018; Robinson, 2004; Voronova, 2014), three recurring tactics can be identified that female journalists may adopt when navigating interactions with male sources. The first is the “help me” tactic, where journalists present themselves as deferential, less knowledgeable, non-threatening, and in need of guidance to encourage source engagement (Genovese, 2015; Lachover, 2005)—a dynamic echoed among war correspondents who strategically accept male protection to navigate hazardous access (Palmer & Melki, 2018).

The second tactic entails using flirtation or coquetry to leverage male sources’ sexualized perceptions (Genovese, 2015; Lachover, 2005; Voronova, 2014). In such cases, female journalists may leverage sexual tension (typically initiated by the source) to encourage the disclosure of information, often as the source seeks to impress them or anticipates some form of personal reward (Lachover, 2005). Newsroom management may also reinforce these dynamics by assigning women to roles in which their attractiveness is presumed to be advantageous (Lachover, 2005; Voronova, 2014).

The third tactic involves bracketing difference and downplaying femininity. Some journalists avoid attire that may be perceived as overly feminine to reduce the risk that male sources misinterpret their intentions (Lachover, 2005; Pain, 2017). Others deliberately limit efforts to build rapport with sources due to concerns that such interactions could be read as flirtatious (Genovese, 2015; Lachover, 2005; Voronova, 2014). Female journalists may also downplay femininity and accentuate qualities associated with dominant masculine journalistic norms, adopting more aggressive or competitive styles of interaction to assert their authority (Palmer & Melki, 2018).

These empirically observed tactics point to broader patterns in how female journalists navigate masculinized professional environments, yet they remain insufficiently theorized in existing research. The following section addresses this gap by drawing on feminist scholarship to conceptualize how such practices may be understood as situated forms of agency embedded within unequal power relations.

2.3. Towards a Feminist Conceptualization of Agency in Journalism

Feminist scholarship provides a useful framework for addressing this gap by reconceptualizing agency as situated, relational, and embedded within power structures (Gill, 2007; McNay, 2000). Following McNay (2000), agency is conceptualized not solely in terms of resistance or the dislocation of dominant norms, but as the capacity for reflection and action through which individuals navigate complex social relations in diverse ways, including accommodation, adaptation, negotiation, and, at times, transformation. Individuals act within structured environments, drawing on embodied dispositions, internalized norms, and unequal access to resources that both enable and limit their scope for action, while these environments are reproduced and negotiated through everyday practices.

These dynamics can be further illuminated with Michel de Certeau’s (1984) distinction between “strategies” and “tactics.” While dominant actors shape the strategies of the field—its formal rules, hierarchies, and norms—those operating from less powerful positions rely on tactics to navigate these structures in situ. Such tactics are typically situational, flexible, and opportunistic, and involve subtle adjustments in behavior and interaction.

Although de Certeau (1984) associates “strategies” with more powerful actors, we use the term to denote the broader orientations through which female journalists navigate dominant gendered norms, while reserving “tactics” for their situated enactment in everyday interactions. With respect to dominant gendered norms in journalism, three such strategies employed by female journalists can be distinguished: adaptation, negotiation, and resistance.

Adaptation refers to efforts to fit into existing professional cultures by aligning oneself with dominant norms and expectations. Tactics associated with adaptation may include adopting communication styles, behaviors, or professional identities that are coded as masculine (e.g., becoming “one of the boys,” as put by van Zoonen, 1998).

Negotiation differs from adaptation in that it does not entail conformity to dominant gender norms, but rather their selective mobilization or reinterpretation to advance professional goals. Tactics associated with negotiation may include selectively presenting oneself as non-threatening, employing the “help me” tactic, or drawing on stereotypical assumptions and expectations held by sources, including flirtatious interactions (Genovese, 2015; Robinson, 2004; Voronova, 2014).

Resistance involves attempts to challenge, reject, or redraw the boundaries of dominant norms and expectations. Tactics of resistance may include establishing limits in interactions, confronting inappropriate behavior, building support networks, and participating in collective initiatives aimed at addressing inequality (Figuerola & Baines, 2024; North, 2016a).

These strategies and tactics illustrate how agency is enacted in everyday professional life through situated responses to unequal conditions. However, agency does not come for free: Navigating masculinized environments and balancing often contradictory expectations generally entails additional emotional labor for female journalists (Miller & Lewis, 2022). Agency does not operate outside of power but is entangled with it, and strategies that facilitate professional success may simultaneously reproduce existing hierarchies and norms (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009).

Taken together, these perspectives highlight the need to examine everyday journalistic practices for both constraint and agency. Within these practices, female journalists may draw on broader strategies of adaptation, negotiation, and resistance, which are enacted through context-specific tactics in particular interactions. Rather than treating women solely as subjects of structural disadvantage, it conceptualizes them as active participants whose actions are shaped by, but not reducible to, the conditions in which they operate. This study therefore seeks to address the following research question: How do female political journalists enact agency through everyday professional practices within the masculinized environment of Czech political journalism?

3. Methods

Embedded in the Central and Eastern European context, Czech journalism is shaped by the legacy of state-socialist policies that promoted women’s participation in paid employment while leaving traditional gender norms for caregiving largely intact (Urbániková & Čaladi, 2026). Consequently, while women make up roughly 45% of the Czech journalistic workforce, vertical segregation remains pronounced: Only 7% of

major Czech news organizations (two out of 28) are headed by a female editor-in-chief (Urbániková & Čaladi, 2026). This combination of relatively high female representation under a glass ceiling provides an important backdrop for analyzing gendered dynamics in political journalism.

The study is part of a larger project that focuses on the topic of emotions in professional relationships between political journalists and politicians. Our approach is based on a longitudinal research design that spans the years 2024, 2025, and 2026 (see Figure 1) to capture changes, trends, and patterns in the development of the overall research topic.

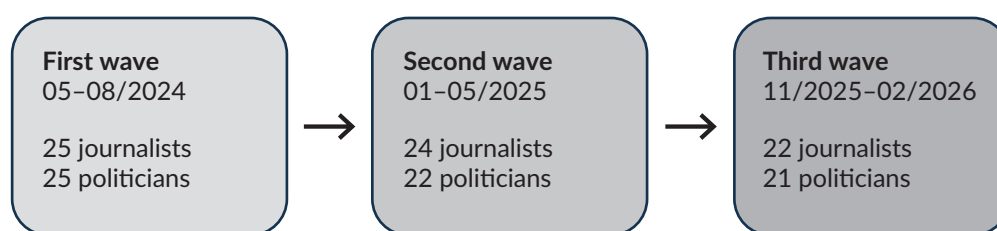


Figure 1. Data collection waves.

Gender emerged as a key factor during the first two rounds of interviews. While Wave 1 addressed journalist-politician relationships and professional practices, Wave 2 tackled the temporal change in the relationships, power dynamics, and professionalism. Wave 3 focused explicitly on how gender shapes relationships between journalists and politicians, separate from focusing on emotions in these relationships and their temporal change. This longitudinal design deepens the analysis of gendered institutional dynamics. Although no significant structural changes were documented across the waves, likely due to the deeply entrenched nature of gendered norms and practices within the studied environment, the iterative process allowed for the targeted refinement of gender-specific inquiries in the interview guide for the third wave. This repeated engagement fostered greater researcher-participant rapport to facilitate more nuanced disclosures of the gendered tactics and strategies, confirming persistent exclusionary cultures while detailing how journalists and politicians navigate these stable constraints.

The qualitative study is based on three waves of interviews with the same group of 25 political journalists and 25 politicians (see Table 1). The sample was constructed to reflect the greatest possible diversity of media (i.e., print, online, audio/radio, video/TV, and commercial/public service media) and political parties. Both groups represent the local, regional, and national levels to reflect, on one hand, the structure and audience of the media and, on the other hand, levels of political representation (e.g., local government/opposition in selected localities, regional government/opposition in selected regions, members of Parliament). We also aim to achieve heterogeneity in terms of gender, age, and professional experience. Participants were recruited through personal networks and with snowball sampling. Due to the withdrawal of some interviewees during the project (see Table 1), we conducted a total of 139 interviews over the course of three years. Out of the original group of 25 journalists and 25 politicians, there were 11 female journalists and 5 female politicians. The predominance of men, particularly among politicians, was due to the political representation in the Czech context.

Table 1. Number and structure of interviews.

Wave/groups	National level	Regional level	Local level	Total
Wave 1 (05–08/2024)				
Journalists	13 (6M, 7F)	6 (5M, 1F)	6 (3M, 3F)	25
Politicians	13 (10M, 3F)	6 (4M, 2F)	6 (6M)	25
Wave 2 (01–05/2025)				
Journalists	12 (6M, 6F)	6 (5M, 1F)	6 (3M, 3F)	24
Politicians	11 (8M, 3F)	5 (4M, 1F)	6 (6M)	22
Wave 3 (11/2025–02/2026)				
Journalists	10 (5M, 5F)	6 (5M, 1F)	6 (3M, 3F)	22
Politicians	10 (7M, 3F)	5 (4M, 1F)	6 (6M)	21

Notes: M = male; F = female.

While primarily focusing on female journalists, the study leverages the full interview corpus to provide essential relational context. Incorporating perspectives from all the politicians and journalists facilitates a more robust understanding of the institutional atmosphere—such as how external actors perceive and describe women’s professional conduct. This approach situates individual strategies within the broader discursive environment of the “political boys’ club.”

The research was conducted according to the rules of the Masaryk University Research Ethics Committee. All interviewees signed an informed consent form. The data were anonymized, and interviewees appear under codes. For transparency, in-text quotations are appended with an anonymized attribution to detail the participant’s profession, gender (F = female, M = male), operational level (national/regional/local), interview wave (1/2/3), and internal transcript number; for example: (journalist, F, national, W3.04). The face-to-face and online interviews were collected in the Czech language and ranged from 20 minutes to 105 minutes.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim using AI, and then manually corrected. The data were analyzed with Atlas.ti software. A multi-step process was used to ensure the quality of the analysis: A team of three researchers conducted the coding with a shared codebook, held regular discussions, and cross-checked their work (Brennen, 2025). The thematic data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) took two cycles of coding: a primary round based on structural, descriptive, and thematic matters; and a second round based on focused coding (Saldaña, 2009). In identifying themes during data analysis, we combined inductive and deductive approaches (Brennen, 2025). We paid attention to the themes that emerged during the first two waves of interviews. For Wave 3, we deductively set the questions focused on the gendered aspects of the professional relationship between journalists and politicians. Subsequently, we analyzed the interviews with indicators for gendered agency based on our theoretical framework.

4. Findings

Consistent with previous scholarship, our findings characterize Czech political journalism as a profoundly masculinized environment where female and male journalists are compelled to navigate a landscape defined by pervasive structural inequalities. To examine how they manage these challenges, our analysis builds upon established frameworks to explore the bounded nature of agency in political journalism. Specifically, we

utilize the “strategies” of “adaptation,” “negotiation,” and “resistance,” alongside “tactics,” such as “performative deference” and “flirtation,” while introducing new, further context-specific tactics, like “resigned suffering” and “solidarity.” Crucially, we apply the established tactic of “flirtation” in a new way, differentiating “reactive flirtation” (i.e., used for passive adaptation) from “deliberate flirtation” (i.e., deployed as an active instrument for negotiating access to information).

Notwithstanding these tactical variations, the baseline imperative to maintain professional access remained absolute. Under this systemic pressure, participants often downplayed boundary violations rather than labeling them as overt aggression—choosing not to “make a scene” (journalist, F, national, W1.07). The choice of particular strategies and tactics was further shaped by a complex intersection of age, experience, job title, and individual thresholds, because “everyone has that boundary somewhere else—some like getting a compliment, while for others it already crosses the line” (journalist, F, national, W1.09). While patterns emerged—such as younger age combined with daily presence in parliamentary halls leaned toward adaptation, while senior or explicitly feminist journalists more frequently negotiated or resisted—these choices remained fluid.

The following analysis first contextualizes the institutional climate, then dissects how adaptation, negotiation, and resistance strategies align with gendered tactics. Finally, we address why resistance remains the least utilized approach and discuss how these aforementioned factors jointly shape professional practices.

4.1. Setting the Stage: Sexist Anachronisms Echoing the 90s

This section briefly outlines the documented structural environment of everyday sexism that shapes the journalists’ work in the Czech Republic. Operating across three analytical levels—paternalistic verbal minimization, sexualized professional devaluation, and the violation of physical or digital boundaries—these behaviors form a normalized baseline rather than isolated incidents. Journalists noted that “the 90s still apply...in terms of humor, sexism...verbal comments” (journalist, F, national, W1.10). In practice, this manifests as sleazy scrutinizing looks, coquettish compliments, and undermining devaluations—such as the use of diminutive names or calling female reporters *girlies*. One participant illustrated her frustration with this outdated workplace atmosphere by asking: “Are we on a children’s playground or in parliament?” (journalist, F, national, W1.10). This pervasive climate was mirrored by political sources themselves; for instance, one male politician casually compared interacting with female journalists to interacting with female shop assistants (politician, M, national, W1.11).

While both female and male journalists experienced the crossing of physical boundaries, their interpretations of these events diverged sharply along gendered lines. For female journalists, physical violations often functioned as a paralyzing act that caught them off guard, leaving them struggling to immediately counter the lack of professional physical distance (journalist, F, national, W2.8). Conversely, male journalists frequently minimized these same interactions through traditional stereotypes, dismissing them as inherent, “biologically, culturally given” gender differences (journalist, M, national, W1.3). This contrast highlights the luxury of detached irony available to male journalists, who can often distance themselves from systemic manipulation through humor. This sharply contrasts with their female counterparts for whom such interactions carry distinct professional and physical weight.

Ultimately, this environment functions as a temporal pocket where sexist tropes often remain functional. Having established this context, we now turn to the specific strategies and tactics journalists use to navigate these situational constraints.

4.2. Adaptation and the Situational Determinants of Agency

Within the existing taxonomy of strategies (i.e., adaptation, negotiation, and resistance), “adaptation” emerges as a coping mechanism for those constrained by unequal power relations. This stems from a pragmatic fear of losing vital sources, facing professional ridicule, or simply the initial shock of unanticipated boundary-crossing: “[an older male politician] touched my face, and it caught me off guard, but I actually didn’t say anything to him” (journalist, F, national, W2.08). Our findings reveal that this no-choice stance is most prevalent among parliamentary reporters, whose constant physical proximity to politicians overrides factors like age and job seniority. For these journalists, everyday contact forces a resigned pragmatism; adaptation is driven by habituation, which simplifies interactions and avoids the emotional and professional cost of active resistance. As one participant noted, refusing to engage with “those old guys” feels impossible. As she eloquently summed up: “I’ve gotten used to [sexism and double meanings], because without it, I wouldn’t be able to talk to anyone” (journalist, F, national, W1.02).

In our data, adaptation to patriarchal norms manifests through two primary tactics: “reactive flirtation” and a tactic that we call “resigned suffering.” Within this adaptive context, flirtation functions as reactional compliance rather than active practice. Instead of driving the interaction, journalists echo or yield to the flirtatious dynamic enforced by the source—by smiling, laughing at the sources’ jokes, or acquiescing to familiar gestures, like kissing a cheek or hand. Notably, its manifestation is predominantly described by observers rather than those who utilize it, because social judgment leads adapting individuals to minimize their compliance, leaving observers to point out how some colleagues act “sweet and likable so the guy tells them more” while sources “stare and huff as the girls twirl around” (journalist, F, national, W2.03).

The second tactic—resigned suffering—operates as quiet endurance. It involves a tacit acceptance forced upon journalists who feel that securing information requires enduring lewd comments, suggestive looks, and physical boundary violations. Unlike reactive flirtation, journalists utilizing this tactic (e.g., journalist, F, national, W1.02) simply absorb the attention without returning it, ignoring, brushing off, or downplaying the behavior to maintain professional focus: “Someone touching your knee isn’t really anything you have to get [worked up about]” (journalist, F, national, W1.07). By remaining non-reactive, this tactic exposes how hostile working conditions are normalized as routine costs for access.

A significant barrier to challenging this environment is ultimately the role played by others in the field, which often leads to a redirection of blame away from the patriarchal structure and toward female colleagues. This horizontal hostility manifests when journalists perceive their peers as spoiling (by participating in gendered behaviors) the professional atmosphere or even hindering the process of achieving equality (journalist, F, national, W2.03). For example, one participant (journalist, F, national, W2.07) expressed deep personal distaste for performative gestures, like hand-kissing, from politicians but felt unable to set boundaries because other female colleagues frequently engaged in even more intimate greetings. In this context, asserting one’s own boundaries risks being stigmatized as hysterical rather than professional. Another journalist described this frustration with her peers in detail:

Those kinds of remarks—they weren't exactly aggressive, but they were suggestive...I was angry at the people responsible for it...my female colleagues....I saw how they stood there, giggling and posturing, and I thought to myself: "My god, I'm going to suffer because of this again, because someone will get the feeling that this is the norm." (Journalist, F, national, W1.04)

This reveals deep internalized sexism: Instead of holding those in power accountable, journalists frequently direct their frustration horizontally toward their colleagues. Furthermore, the pressure to adopt adaptation as a coping strategy to avoid professional stigma applies across the board. When facing explicit harassment from institutional actors, journalists simultaneously confirm the violations while immediately minimizing their impact, reframing the behavior as harmless to neutralize professional friction. For example, one male journalist openly acknowledged being harassed by a female source, yet neutralized the systemic weight of the violation by laughing it off and reducing the perpetrator to a benign workplace quirk:

Interviewer: Did she harass you?

Journalist: She did, and the other one did too.

Interviewer: And how does it happen?

Journalist: The way it happens is...we were just talking about it with a colleague...we both experienced it very similarly—It's like, "Mr. Editor, she acts like a playful little imp." She starts pecking you on the shoulder..."I like you, I love reading your pieces, come over here," and things like that. (Journalist, M, national, W1.01)

While many journalists accept the situation as a professional reality—frequently "laughing about it, discussing it openly, and supporting one another" (journalist, F, national, W1.11)—a significant portion of the community still judges peers harshly for flirtation, both reactional and deliberate (see Section 4.3). This displacement ignores the reality that adaptive compliance is often a structural necessity for maintaining access. Ultimately, by directing moral scrutiny toward individual colleagues rather than institutional actors, this dynamic erodes professional solidarity and allows the patriarchal system to remain unchallenged from within.

4.3. Leveraging the "Little Girl" Image: Bounded Negotiation and the Rules of the Game

Beyond adaptation, our data document the strategy of "negotiation," where journalists recognize the systemic inequality and pragmatically deploy the resources available to them to navigate constraints they cannot directly alter. Within the negotiation strategy, our data reveal the utilization of "deliberate flirtation" and "help me" tactics. Unlike the adaptive tactics, negotiation is partially premeditated. Knowing that the professional environment is structurally unequal, journalists enter these spaces prepared to navigate its informal rules, frequently describing this approach through the emic metaphor of "playing a game" with sources during routine encounters:

We can simply, within...that sort-of game, just tell each other, "You look good today," "you too," "where did you get that coat, it's great"....We just tell each other that while we're shaking hands and going to record something, because it's also simply that you see each other every other day....It's a level of small talk which helps both sides make the thing a bit more pleasant. (Journalist, F, national, W1.11)

As illustrated, this interactional game operates on a spectrum from mundane small talk to deliberate flirtation. Regardless of where the conversation starts, journalists play along to establish a comfortable rapport before pivoting to core professional inquiries. Notably, our data reveal no gendered differences in execution: Male journalists identically utilized this logic, mirroring the politician expectations to navigate the environment:

I perceive it as a game of sorts, so a person...should know what interests the other person....They say about him [a politician] that he likes younger men....It happened to me a few times that I felt like he was checking me out....I often take it more as a kind of humor in the style of: "Yes, okay, with [the politician] I'll just undo a button, etc."....I perceive that, like, knowing interests. (Journalist, M, national, W1.12).

Far from indicating an unconstrained playing field, engaging in these dynamics highlights the specific boundaries of the journalists' agency. Unable to unilaterally change the gendered realities of the political sphere, they redirect their expertise into managing its informal rules—a pragmatic, constrained reflexivity where reporters turn gendered expectations back onto sources to fulfill their professional roles.

While these strategic tools can be utilized by anyone, in our data, parliamentary halls place young female journalists in a specific, double-edged position: granting openings for immediate access and rapport building while subjecting them to patronizing, dismissive treatment from sources. Demonstrating how internalized these dynamics are, one male journalist recognized his colleague's precarious hardships while still infantilizing her:

I have a relatively young colleague who has definitely dealt with respondents "trying something" with her, so to speak. Like, they would talk to her differently just because she's a young girl....She never explicitly said it influenced how they approached her regarding information, but she did admit that she found it unpleasant. (Journalist, M, regional, W3.01)

Beyond patronization, this vulnerability carries many more acute risks, because the strategic performance can backfire into direct harassment regardless of the journalist's intent. In these volatile moments, the illusion of a manageable game collapses into a defensive necessity, prompting a possible shift from negotiation to resistance. As a young female journalist reflects:

I was certainly staying there a bit out of some kind of calculation...part of that journalistic instinct...but I probably didn't quite read the situation well. And then there was actually some kind of sexual proposition and some groping...from a certain politician....I said: "Well, so no," and I walked away. (Journalist, F, national, W1.11)

Because of these acute risks, age and seniority fundamentally alter how—and whether—particular tactics are executed. While younger journalists often leverage physical attractiveness, experienced journalists frequently transition to broader relational skills. Through accumulated professional authority, senior journalists often gain enough leverage to be absolved from the gendered expectations of deliberative flirtation. Though aging theoretically risks exclusion, no participants reported such professional displacement. Instead, as one senior reporter noted, it is "actually better now," recalling how early in her career a former editor even suggested "I should have sex with politicians to get information" (journalist, F, national, W1.07). Senior journalists can also transition into mentorship roles, teaching successors to navigate the landscape:

I have a new colleague here....I told her to be nice and to sort of count on the fact...that someone will tell her she has a nice smile and looks good today, and that she should use it to her advantage. (Journalist, F, national, W1.02)

However, these strategic choices depend heavily on structural and ideological contingencies. Daily presence in parliament pushes reporters toward routine adaptation to secure ongoing access. Furthermore, while some experienced journalists grow out of these performances over time, others actively refuse negotiation tactics due to feminist convictions (see Section 4.4).

Under the negotiation strategy, performative deference—including the help me tactic (Genovese, 2015; Lachover, 2005)—spans from deliberate calculation to split-second journalistic instinct. This subversion relies on a charade of incompetence—a harmless or uninformed front designed to manipulate the source’s sense of superiority. Whether planned or deployed instinctively, this practice is primarily achieved by leaning into gendered expectations and making specific linguistic choices, all while remaining predicated on the journalist’s awareness of the source’s preconceived biases. By recognizing that a source may perceive a young journalist as naive or stupid, she can use questioning (often deliberately naive) to play into that expectation, effectively outmaneuvering the source while they believe they are in a position of power. As one journalist noted, being perceived as an inexperienced “little girl” offers an “excellent starting position” to operate under the radar: “When old-school politicians perceive [me] merely as an inexperienced little girl, they inadvertently lower their guard and share more information than intended” (journalist, F, national, W2.06).

This dynamic is witnessed by male colleagues with professional admiration, noting that the most effective journalists are those who lean into these gendered expectations to gain the upper hand:

For the clever ones, it’s an immense advantage because there is nothing better than when a politician underestimates you. Some [female journalists] actually work with that; they play the “Lieutenant Columbo” part....I feel like these politicians are much more prone to underestimating female reporters, assuming they will understand things less than even a beginner male reporter. (Journalist, M, national, W3.01)

However, not all male colleagues share this perspective; others argue that women possess an inherent advantage when interacting with male politicians simply by virtue of their gender (i.e., looks and sexualized rapport; journalist, M, regional, W3.02).

In summary, negotiation comprises deliberate flirtation and help-me tactics. While providing situation-specific agency, these maneuvers function as tactical subversions that leave underlying structures unchanged. In practice, these choices are directly structured by individual demographics and context. We have seen that a journalist’s youth and relative inexperience can be leveraged into the help me tactic or casual rapport to secure initial access; however, this same status simultaneously exposes them to distinct liabilities, including patronization, professional ridicule, or the risk of a source crossing physical boundaries. Consequently, whether a journalist can leverage these gendered expectations or must instead pivot to active resistance depends heavily on their career stage, organizational autonomy, and their individual thresholds for tolerating sexist behavior.

4.4. *Tentative Resistance: Individual Defiance and Collective Solidarity*

The final and least utilized strategy identified in our data is “resistance.” While adaptation and negotiation dominate, resistance emerges as a critical alternative, manifesting in two primary tactics: “principled refusal/boundary setting” in response to unequal gender dynamics; and “solidarity” (i.e., collective efforts to challenge structural barriers). The relative scarcity might stem from the slowed evolution of feminism in the Central European region, where systemic gender critiques often face unique cultural hurdles (cf. Oates-Indruchová, 2016). Crucially, this scarcity confirms that Czech journalism and society—like much of the world—remain in need of systemic change.

On an individual level, the resistance strategy manifests in assertive boundary setting against political sources who use informal patronization to undermine professional authority. As one journalist explains:

It seems to me that we women are ridiculed more by those politicians....[Male Politician A] just wrote to me...and he addressed me by [my first name] or even [a shortened version of my first name]....I give it back to them, to those politicians, when they act like this. I simply behave assertively toward them. (Journalist, F, national, W3.08)

Resistance emerges not only as a direct reaction to the institutional atmosphere, but also as a critique of the strategies chosen by peers. By adopting a resistant stance, these individuals not only refuse to participate in the established professional norms but also actively judge the adaptation or negotiation strategies of their peers, viewing such compromises as a devaluation of professional standards. This creates significant friction among journalists, shifting accountability away from those who set the rules and toward the individuals navigating them. One journalist expressed this deep-seated principled refusal to participate:

I simply refuse to be part of that theater. When I see my colleagues playing into it—the hair-flipping, the giggling at unfunny jokes just to get a quote—it’s pathetic....They aren’t journalists in my eyes; they are just part of the decoration, and they make it harder for the rest of us to be seen as equals. (Journalist, F, national, W2.03)

Ultimately, this redirected energy fragments systemic struggle into peer judgment, reserved for those within the female cohort who prioritize tactical wins over systemic integrity. Beyond individual resistance, our data reveal that a nascent sense of solidarity and collective agency is beginning to emerge, bringing a solidarity tactic to life. While solidarity was not mentioned or described often, some was still present in the form of mutual support and the sharing of negative experiences, as one journalist suggested:

Journalist: They’ll take the liberty of looking you up and down and commenting on what you’re wearing...but I know that for my male colleague, the same thing happens with those older women.

Interviewer: And he lets himself be pawed at?

Journalist: Well, what choice does he have?...Of course, we sort of make fun of each other, but it’s more like supportive fun—that we experience it together...but we actually talk about it quite a bit, because we’re a similar age in that team. (Journalist, F, national, W2.06)

These solidarity actions, even if scarce, signal a shift away from a “dog-eat-dog” individualistic game and toward a more sustainable professional culture where systemic change might be prioritized over individual endurance. Crucially, this solidarity extends beyond in-group peer support to out-group advocacy. One journalist utilizes her reporting to write articles exposing sexist behavior toward female politicians, using her platform to shed light on the broader political arena (journalist, F, national, W3.08). However, the reality remains that these instances of resistance are completely marginal compared to the dominant strategies of adaptation and negotiation and the respective tactics used among them.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that Czech political journalism, similar to the global context, remains a profoundly masculinized domain where structural inequalities and baseline sexism persist (Macharia et al., 2025; Melki & Mallat, 2016; North, 2016b; Steiner, 2012; Voronova, 2014). Rather than treating these defaults as unchangeable, we examine how political journalists enact agency through everyday professional practices by analyzing the specific factors that dictate tactical selection, the fluid interplay between strategies, and the resulting costs and gains. We demonstrate that journalists exercise circumscribed, situation-specific agency across a spectrum of three core strategies—“adaptation,” “negotiation,” and “resistance”—which do not structurally transform the environment but serve as practical ways to secure access from positions of structural vulnerability (cf. de Certeau, 1984; Reich et al., 2026; Ross & Carter, 2011; van Zoonen, 1998).

Our empirical framework introduces novel tactics—“resigned suffering” within adaptation, “principled refusal/boundary setting,” and “solidarity” within resistance—while revealing how key situational factors dictate their selection. Crucially, we unpack the interplay of these choices by refining gendered behavioral resources, differentiating between “reactive flirtation” (i.e., a defensive response within an adaptation strategy) and “deliberative flirtation” (i.e., a premeditated instrument within a negotiation strategy).

The first core factor that influences agency is the spatial and structural context of the beat. “Adaptation” is triggered by the intense pressure of navigating parliamentary halls daily to secure baseline access (cf. Macharia et al., 2025; Ross & Carter, 2011). Within this high-frequency environment, journalists, regardless of age, are pushed into “resigned suffering” or “reactive flirtation” as defensive shields. The immediate gain of this tactical selection is professional survival and a reliable information flow, but the long-term professional cost is severe: the passive reinforcement of the unequal status quo (cf. Reich et al., 2026; van Zoonen, 1998) and judgement from peers.

In contrast, the “negotiation strategy” is triggered by a reporter’s proactive intent to leverage a source’s preconceptions. Within it, journalists utilize “help me” (Lachover, 2005) or “deliberative flirtation” (Genovese, 2015) tactics. Demographic factors heavily shape this strategy: Younger female journalists hold a distinct tactical advantage here by actively instrumentalizing the fact that they are already infantilized by sources, turning pre-existing patronization into a gain. Crucially, male journalists also utilize deliberative flirtation, leveraging gendered rapport to extract information. However, the costs of this strategic interplay are heavily asymmetric: While both genders experience physical boundary crossings, only female journalists face unique exposure to professional ridicule and patronization (cf. Robinson, 2004), while male journalists navigate these informal extractions without suffering comparable degradation.

The final and least utilized strategy is “resistance,” and its interplay with the other strategies is highly contingent. When source boundaries are breached, it can lead to a rapid pivot, but a breach does not automatically guarantee resistance. The lack of structural safety often forces journalists—including seasoned ones—to brush off violations and continue to endure them under “resigned suffering” just to maintain beat access. Active resistance is instead triggered only when severe violations intersect with accumulated seniority and strong ideological convictions. Introducing the novel tactics of “boundary setting/principled refusal” reveals the unique professional costs of resistance: it incurs deep internal friction because resistant journalists frequently judge the tactical compromises of colleagues who play along, shifting accountability away from political actors and fragmenting peer relationships. Concurrently, the “solidarity tactic” spans from internal, in-group peer support to external reporting to expose structural sexism.

By tracing these mechanics, we move past simple descriptions of exclusion to show how journalists handle their limited agency within a masculinized workforce (Baloch et al., 2025; Pain, 2017). We find that while playing into gender expectations can offer a quick, unpredictable advantage (Robinson, 2004), these individual workarounds usually leave the broader unequal structures untouched. Because active resistance is often too costly to use consistently, the focus inevitably shifts to personal survival—a reality that tends to isolate peers from one another rather than bringing them together.

6. Conclusion

This study addresses how female and male political journalists enact agency in their everyday practices within the masculinized environment of Czech political journalism. We show that journalists of both genders use a flexible toolkit of fluid tactics across three main strategic paths: “adaptation,” “negotiation,” and “resistance.” Specifically, spatial pressures in high-frequency beats, like parliamentary halls, push reporters into adaptive tactics, such as “resigned suffering” to secure baseline access. Conversely, “negotiation” allows journalists to proactively leverage source preconceptions through “deliberate flirtation” or “help me tactics”—where younger female reporters instrumentalize infantilization and male reporters deploy gendered rapport to extract information. Finally, defiance emerges via “boundary setting/principled refusal” and nascent “solidarity.” While these situation-specific maneuvers provide immediate information access, they yield deeply gender-asymmetric professional costs, reinforce the unequal status quo, and fragment peer relationships through horizontal friction. Supporting an ongoing cultural shift therefore requires collective endurance rather than individual tactical compromises. To achieve this, newsrooms must implement targeted training to counter sexist rhetoric, while management should establish formal networks and transparent reporting mechanisms. Crucially, these institutional supports must look beyond sexual harassment alone to address broader structural struggles over professional authority and beat access.

While our study offers valuable insights, it is subject to certain limitations that naturally point to promising pathways for future inquiry. First, our findings are rooted in the specific Czech national context, where traditional gender expectations and the lack of high-level female representation shape the field. This regional focus highlights a clear need for comparative, cross-national investigation to explore how different media systems and varying gender structures influence tactical selection among journalists globally. Second, our reliance on self-reported data reflects participants’ subjective perceptions of agency. Future studies could therefore employ observational ethnographic methods to complement these self-reported accounts in order to capture real-time negotiations of gender, power, and professional authority as they unfold on the political beat.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The data are not publicly available due to confidentiality agreements with the participants.

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