

OF FIRST GENTLEMEN and FIRST LADIES

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Last week's NATO summit made evident how embedded gender roles and stereotypes are in our minds. Even when we try to write vindicating or valuing those facts against the standard, we fall into the very same we are confronting. The picture of the NATO leaders' "first ladies" was a topic of discussion on social networks and media, as, for the first time, a man stood in the picture. Never before a man had attended the summit as a head of state's official companion.

Gauthier Destenay, a Belgian architect, was present during the summit as the spouse of Luxembourg's prime minister, Xavier Bettel, and attended the events on the agenda, as the other "first companions." This single action reached headlines which described it as historical. However, even if this fact by itself makes us question how internalized is the idea of leaders as male characters and first ladies as female ones, what we expect them to do reflects gender roles. The summit's picture should also be an invitation to think of the freedom of choice available to women in the public sphere.

Gauthier Destenay decided he would play that role during the tour and would cover the first ladies' parallel agenda. However, Joachim Sauer—Angela Merkel's husband—keeps himself as far as possible from political life. The same happens with businessman Philip May—prime minister Theresa May's spouse—, who is considered "always present, never there," as expressed on *The Guardian*.¹

These men have decided whether to appear in the picture or to keep at the rear; nonetheless, the same does not happen in the case of the heads of state' wives. For them, not being there does not seem an option. Melania Trump, for example, has been criticized for

being reticent to play the role of a full-time first lady. There was no first lady in France during these last years; however, the reason of this is François Holland's divorce, not his companion's will.

We applaud the symbol of a man willing to play the role of a head of state's official, sentimental partner. However, we do not question why they (the husbands) have the option to choose; while, for the wives, it seems more as a responsibility to fulfill. I am not saying Destenay's decision was wrong nor questioning the historical importance of a man playing such a role, but I do deem important that playing such a role be an election for anyone, without regards to gender ·

¹ Esther Addley, "Philip May: the prime minister's husband steps out of the shadows", *The guardian*, May 9th, 2017 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/may/09/philip-may-the-prime-ministers-husband-steps-out-of-the-shadows>.