

Newsroom Narratives and the Gendered Framing of Female Political Leadership

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ABSTRACT

The media has become one of the largest platforms for news dissemination in the last few decades. It shapes opinions, beliefs, and behaviours of individuals and society (The Power of Media: Shaping Society's Narrative, 2023) as a whole. It has the power to mobilise the public and drive necessary change.

This paper explores how the media circulates gendered narratives about women in politics, oftentimes using frames of emotion, competence and authority. With a comprehensive review of literature and research studies, it examines the stark contrast in representation of male and female politicians in news platforms. From sensational headlines, linguistic contempt, to emphasis on outward appearance, women, to a fault, are underrepresented in every phase of their political journey. Through these news stories, historical bias and gender norms are reinforced, continuing the vicious cycle.

News outlets have the power to sway public opinion and shape public perception, which should be used to create a positive image of female politicians, rather than bring them down. This paper aims to call for a collective reconsideration of how women leaders are framed and perceived, emphasising the need for fact-based, unbiased news narratives.

Keywords: women in power, politics, media, news, framing

Introduction

Women have historically been underrepresented across all media platforms, from print to radio to newsrooms. News outlets often depict women in power using specific words and connotations, constructing narratives centred around competence, emotions, and authority. Their portrayal differs vastly from that of male leaders in similar contexts, aiding the existing gap in gendered framing.

The media plays a huge role in shaping perceptions, influencing how the public views women in politics. Appropriate representation of women, or the lack thereof, has the potential to reinforce traditional norms and stereotypes. Gendered media representation generally splits the binary into males being assertive and competent, and females being passive and nurturing. The lack of an authentic portrayal of women in politics can discourage young girls, who are influenced by skewed headlines and unequal representation (Babatunde, 2025).

News platforms frequently default to gender stereotypes or statements that a politician, for instance, is a woman, since, historically, politics is associated with men (Atkinson, 2021). Women have to constantly prove themselves to be positioned in the same space as men. Women who tend to go against stereotypes are criticised for neglecting their nurturing role. On the contrary, if they lean into the nurturer role, they are deemed incapable of leadership (Reyes-Housholder, 2020).

Research shows that gender is inherently used to set the agenda for political news and framing stories. Media coverage of male politicians revolves around their contributions, and female politicians are judged based on stories surrounding their gender. Women are questioned more, are expected to adhere to more obligations, and are overall judged more harshly. If everyone has a fair chance at pursuing politics, merit should be the deciding factor, not gender (Atkinson, 2021).

A research article analysed 90 studies covering 25,000 politicians in over 750,000 media stories and conclusively found that there is a definitive gender bias in the amount of news coverage. Women politicians lag behind men in media attention, and there are major differences in the content of media reports. Stories on female politicians emphasise appearance, family, potential, and gender conventions (Van der Pas & Aaldering, 2020). Less visibility and negative coverage are disadvantageous to women in authoritative positions, affecting the career prospects of the politically inclined and threatening the credibility of long-standing politicians.

Across a range of fields, women are evaluated less positively than equally qualified men, being judged as ill-equipped to handle certain issues. Women are rewarded less for additional expertise and are punished more for a lack of expertise, leaving them in limbo. Women politicians, in particular, face an uphill battle, advocating for their rightful place, even if they are more experienced. Sheryl Sandberg, the COO of Facebook, said in a speech, “Friends and colleagues—both male and female—warned me that making this speech would harm my career by instantly typecasting me as a female COO and not a real business executive.” This quote sums up how women in power are often not given the recognition they deserve. To understand the extent of media bias, it is essential to examine how these patterns have evolved.

Background

Women in power have historically been portrayed differently from men in power. A salient example would be a study on Kenyan news print media, which sought to explore gender framing in news content and the amount of coverage and prominence given to women in politics. It analysed two media houses with daily publications over six months. Key findings included that news coverage of women in politics was low, their stories were placed in the inside pages, and rarely did their names make it to headlines (Thujo, 2012).

The media's role in shaping powerful women's narratives can be transformative. One story could make or break a political figure's reputation. A 2024 study analysed the impact of digital media on shaping women's empowerment. Often, women's narratives are shaped and reshaped by the patriarchal narratives of the media. Perpetual stereotypical portrayals over time have contributed to gender biases in society (Tuchman, 2000), especially in today's age of social media. The study found that news platforms prefer sensational headlines over substantive discussions on women, which is already limited. Digital news platforms, while serving as an outlet to disseminate news quickly, also perpetuate the spread of false, biased, or skewed perceptions (Parashar & Singh, 2024) through media framing.

The concept of framing was first introduced by Erving Goffman in 1974, who argued that individuals use 'frames' to interpret daily life. The media, similarly, uses specific frames to construct stories, highlighting specific social, political, and cultural perspectives, influencing the way an event is interpreted. The most common example is of news outlets presenting a political event in a myriad of ways, depending on their approach and the storytelling angle. Scholars have identified frames such as conflict, human interest, economic, and responsibility-led, among others. Each frame serves a particular purpose, whether it is to persuade, inform, or shape the audience's opinions. Understanding the dynamics of framing is essential for media producers and consumers, given its power to influence public discourse (Zaklana, 2025).

Framing is a form of metacommunication (Kirk Hallahan, 2008), describing the practice of thinking about news and story contents within familiar contexts. The basis of the Framing Theory is that the media focuses its attention on specific events and places them in a field of meaning. Frames structure the meanings of messages and can be designed to either enhance a more expansive understanding or as shortcuts to link stories to the bigger picture (Arowolo, 2017). While framing is typically an agenda-setting tradition, it also focuses on the issue at hand, rather than a broad topic. A news piece is framed to influence people to process information in a certain way, essentially setting an agenda for comprehension and perception. It is a conscious choice by journalists or reporters, as they are, up until that point, gatekeepers of the information. They organise and present the events by framing them differently, making framing an

unavoidable part of communication (*Framing Theory*, 2017). These frames become especially powerful in terms of political news, where every linguistic choice carries weight.

The media projects stereotypical, gendered images, adding to the existing underrepresentation of women in powerful positions. Countless analyses have been conducted on the topic, leading to significant case studies around the world. A study conducted on gendered framing in Irish political television programming analysed one month of broadcasts from different news shows. The findings indicated three dominant themes—marginalisation through underrepresentation, less airtime, and representation in a restricted and limited manner. Women were consulted on ‘soft’ topics, questions centred around their personal experience or opinion, and were rarely portrayed as experts (Hegarty, 2025).

In the Middle East, women have historically faced barriers to leadership, owing to deep-rooted cultural and societal norms, which are reinforced by the media. Mostly comprised of men, media outlets have begun the gradual shift into including female journalists, allowing them to shape balanced and nuanced narratives around gender and leadership. Traditional media outlets, however, still prioritise sensationalism and focus on the personal lives of women, rather than their professional accomplishments, and gender over their qualifications (Olivia, 2025).

In Nigeria, gender inequality remains a significant problem. Mass media coverage has shown that there is a slight increase in proportional representation, but studies show that there is much to improve in terms of the quality and frequency of coverage of women in power. Nigerian media, according to a survey, is not fair to women—they are portrayed either as caretakers or are objectified to promote beauty products and services. The way women are spoken to or about in the media is a point of contention; they have no say in most matters (Omonua et al., 2023). Political gendered polarisation is, unfortunately, common globally. Most studies conclude one call for action: a change in society and culture. While these case studies illustrate the nature of gendered media framing, a broader discussion is required to analyse what this bias means for the future of women in politics.

Discussion

Lowering the bias in women’s representation is a work in progress. Removing it entirely is not plausible, owing to centuries of discrimination. Women’s exclusion from serious news stories dates back to the 18th century, during the suffragist movement. Activists at the time needed media coverage to reach a wider audience, but male-run newspapers and magazines largely ignored them, or trivialised their pursuits. A woman who went against the norms of passivity and submissiveness was deemed inappropriate, insane, aggressive, or militant (Byerly, 2012).

“Women in the news” (Meeks, 2024), either meaning those working in the news industry or those depicted in the news, highlights that global representation is lacking on both ends, carrying societal implications. Based on the gatekeeping theory, the premise is that more women in the newsroom could facilitate less biased coverage of women (White, 1950). News coverage during the all-women and mixed-race U.S. Senate elections found that news outlets reported on the political qualifications of women compared with men, albeit on a lower scale (Bauer, 2022). In a study examining news coverage in Belgium, 40% of politicians were women, yet they accounted for only 20% of coverage (Beckers et al., 2023). They found that “regardless of time, broadcaster, or topic, news items made by female journalists have a higher chance to contain female speaking actors than news items made by male journalists.”

There is a distinct language when describing powerful women in the media. Narratives surrounding emotions, competence and authority are built, differing vastly from male leaders in similar contexts. A woman with a powerful career will quickly find herself in the news if something goes awry. Senator Debbie Halvorson, during her first campaign, was badgered with questions about how she would balance work and taking care of her kids and home life, to which she said, “They would never have asked a man, ‘What do you do with your children?’ I believe men get the presumption of credibility and confidence, whereas women have to prove it.”

When women politicians are covered on the news, they are first and foremost described based on their looks, being called “ugly” or “glamorous”, becoming major obstacles for advancing in their careers (Milligan, 2007). When they make public appearances, they are first judged based on their clothes and hair. Even the highest-ranking political women are not exempt from poor journalistic choices. Ruth Mandel, Director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics said, “To focus on their attire, the cut of their clothes, is to be in danger of trivialising who they are, the important role they play and the meaning behind women’s advancement to positions of power: that is, we’re moving to a true democracy of shared leadership.”

In recent years, the concept of “news bias” has emerged more prominently, demonstrating through extensive research and experimentation that there exists substantial gender bias in political news, existing in documents, sentiments, and word choice across news outlets and political leanings. Male leaders are described as “tough” and “dominant”, which are considered negative subtexts for women, often replaced by “aggressive” and “bossy” (Kittilson, 2012). Gender bias, therefore, is encoded in most news stories.

There is a certain expectation of leadership performance while framing female authority in the news. Attributes typically deemed feminine, like cooperation and kindness, have no place in the political arena. It has been suggested, time and again, that female politicians are less competent than their male counterparts, making descriptions and qualifications apply differently to both

genders. Male politicians are portrayed as dynamic, female politicians as passive, leading to a glaring linguistic asymmetry (Jaworska & Iarrivé, 2011) in representation. Appropriately positioning women in the political realm is difficult with the media's underlying bias.

Media framing majorly affects public perception and trust. A politician being described as 'likeable' is more desirable for women than men, when it should be equally important to both (Merrefield, 2024). The media continuously reports on political news, keeping its audience informed. In doing so, it influences the public on what issues they consider important. By selecting and framing certain issues, the media gives the perception of what is more pressing, prioritising topics over others (Andrich & Domahidi, 2023). This plays into the visibility and credibility of the political domain.

There is a double bind, where women in politics face a unique challenge due to a conflicting media paradox—they must balance feminine qualities like empathy and being a nurturer, with masculine traits like assertiveness and decisiveness. This leads to assertive women being considered aggressive and nurturing women being deemed weak (Arputharaj, 2025). The media's intense scrutiny subjects women to being evaluated every step of their political journey, making it hard for them to stay motivated to do their job and have a fair chance of climbing the rungs of the metaphorical ladder of power.

Conclusion

When women in power are elected, their authenticity must not be questioned. Their competence must not be challenged. Magnifying minor shortcomings and sensationalising their every word and move has the potential to jeopardise their careers. Social media has made it too easy to find faults, cancel culture prevails every step of the way, and it feels impossible at the moment to find a well-balanced news story about women in power. Fairly presenting information as fact, without preconceived notions of gender bias, is key to a more nuanced and equal representation of powerful women in the media.

To challenge the deep-seated gender bias in the media, a multifaceted approach is needed to combat it. Journalists and reporters must receive appropriate training to recognise and consciously avoid gendered framing. Representation of women in politics must develop into a fair, unbiased act. By amplifying their voices and narratives with respect, the media has the power to rewrite leadership, moving society closer to a place where gender does not determine credibility or authority.

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