

EXPLORING PRINT MEDIA COVERAGE OF FEMALE POLITICIANS IN LESOTHO

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Abstract

Reading the mainstream print media publications in Lesotho leaves one with the impression that politics in the country is a preserve for males only. Most of the newspaper headlines are dominated by male politicians, week in and week out. Rarely do women or female politicians feature prominently on the front pages of these newspapers as news. This raises the question whether it is deliberate for the newspapers to prop up male politicians at the expense of their female counterparts. This takes place in an environment where, statistically, women are more than men in number. This study therefore sought to explore and establish the reasons why coverage of female politicians is less evident as compared to the prominence given to their male counterparts in print media in Lesotho. The study was qualitative in approach as it envisaged unraveling why there is this imbalance in gender when it comes to the coverage of politicians in the country. The methods used to gather the information were in-depth face to face and telephony interviews with newspaper editors and their journalists, female politicians as well as with male and female legislators, media stakeholders and ordinary citizens. The findings were presented, discussed and analysed thematically.

Keyword: print media, gender balance, legislators, prominence, politicians.

1. INTRODUCTION

Newspapers in Lesotho give prominence to the politics beat as evidenced by the front page news that is usually characterized by political news headlines. What also becomes more apparent as you look into how this political beat is covered is the absence of female politicians in this front page news. It is in rare cases

where one reads stories written about women in politics, therefore, the study sort to establish the reasons behind the less prominence of news covering female politicians in the newspapers as compared to their male counterparts. The study also sort to find a panacea to this anomaly.

The print media together with radio and television hold a lot of traction in developing economies considering that these traditional mainstream media have got the widest coverage as compared to internet facilitated platforms. In other words, ordinary citizens' realities are what is captured and published in newspapers or broadcast on radio and television. That is why there should be an effort by newspapers to ensure there is gender balance in coverage especially of both male and female politicians. If the coverage is tilted in the favour of men predominantly, the end result might be providing higher profiles for men over women and ordinary readers will be persuaded to believe that in politics, men are more important than women. This study was therefore concerned with this imbalance and sort to rectify this imbalance by sensitizing print media stakeholders, policy makers, female politicians and ordinary readers. By doing so, the issue will be debated and attention will be given as much to female politicians as it is given to their male counterparts.

2. BACKGROUND

In Lesotho, print media was established at Morija in 1904. The Lesotho press has contributed significantly to the literacy development of other African countries. Morija printing has in the past printed books in more than 50 African languages, reaching as far as Cameroon and Tanzania (Willet and Ambrose, 2005).

Willet and Ambrose continue to write that the authorities in Lesotho established the government

Printers in 1960, six years before Lesotho attained independence from Britain. Prior to that, all government printing business was handled by Morija, Mazonod or South African printers. The government decided to establish its own printing press due to meeting deadline challenges with the local printers and security concerns with the apartheid South Africa printing companies.

The Lesotho Information Service (LIS) was established in 1963 with the aim to provide news and information to the Lesotho public. In its early days, the LIS was little more than an extension of Central Offices of Information in London. The LIS established the first government owned newspaper called Basutoland Times which began as a daily news sheet and after independence in 1966, it was renamed Lesotho Times and was published as a weekly newspaper by the news department of information (Willet and Ambrose, 2005). Since then, there have been many publications which are independent with some owned by the government. Currently, the newspapers publishing in Lesotho are Lesotho Times, Informative, the post, Sunday Express, The Nation, Public Eye and Metro, all privately owned and the government's Lesotho Today which is very inconsistent in publishing.

3.PROBLEM STATEMENT

The problem identified by the study is that female politicians are not adequately showcased in Lesotho to the extent that their capabilities and potential are overshadowed by that of their male counterparts who enjoy most of the limelight in the print media. Female politicians are most of the time only given prominence in the newspapers when misfortunes befall them such as being dismissed from ministerial positions.

4.RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

This study is going to add to the body of knowledge already in existence on gender balance in coverage by the print media. It is going to benefit media scholars, journalism students, female politicians, media owners and policy makers in debate to do with proper alignment to gender balance in political news coverage.

5.AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of the study is to expose the imbalance in gender coverage in the political beat in newspapers in Lesotho. The target is to change how female politicians are perceived by journalists, editors, the reading public as well as by male politicians so that advantage is not given to male politicians at the expense of female politicians in the print media sphere in Lesotho.

6.QUESTIONS

- Why is political news reporting in Lesotho newspapers biased towards male politicians?
- How much coverage is given to female politicians by the print media in Lesotho?
- Which newspapers cover female politicians in Lesotho as much as their male counterparts?

7.THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory framing this study is the feminist media theory by Jean Baker Miller who came about with this concept in 1976. The theory was based on listening to women's stories. Instead of seeing women through the lens of male psychology with its emphasis on separation and autonomy, Jean suggested that relationships are central to women's experience of themselves and the world (Judith, 2017). It relies on the feminist theory, that is, it applies philosophies, concepts, and logics articulating feminist principles and concepts to media processes such as hiring, producing, and distribution; to patterns of representation in news and entertainment across platforms; and to reception (Linda, 2014).

Unlike approaches that hide their politics, feminist theorizing is explicitly political. It addresses power. Feminist media theory takes gender seriously as a factor that structures identity and experiences without assuming permanent or static gender differences. An assumption that long dominated feminist media theory was this: if women controlled media production, media content would be different and better (Linda, 2014).

This theory is the most suitable to guide this study because it is all about fighting for what is right, and in this study what is right is for political women to be given the same coverage as male politicians by the newspapers. This theory addresses power, which means it fights for everyone's right to be recognized as worthy

and important to society at large, and since women in politics are not given equal coverage, this theory will guide the study to bring those points to light.

The theory is going to help enlighten the social world in a way that illuminates the forces that create and support inequality, oppression, and injustice, and in doing so, promotes the pursuit of equality and justice when it comes to political women and how their issues are being reported in the newspapers.

8.LITERATURE REVIEW

Study across the world reveals that media coverage has struggled with balancing male and female issues when it comes to political reporting. For instance, study from Canada of 2 500 news stories over 37 years revealed gender gap in nature of coverage (Geoff, 2017). That study concluded that female politicians running for the leadership of the federal party in Canada did not receive equal press coverage as compared to their male counterparts.

Ross (2010), states that early studies on how female political leaders were covered in the media tapped into the agenda setting, framing, and priming literature. Initially, these studies found that women tended to be treated quite differently from men. Collectively, these researchers found several problems with how women were covered in the media. First, there was the problem of visibility. Female politicians simply had less coverage than their male counterparts. While some noted that this may have been because many women candidates ran for fringe parties, they also found that the coverage for males in the same parties was still greater than for female candidates (Goodyear- Grant, 2013).

Not only was the visibility of female politicians problematic, but researchers also found that the way in which women were covered was different than men (Carly & Winfrey, 2009). For example, studies looking at prominence found that when women candidates were reported on, they tended to be positioned later in the story or in parts of the newspaper or newscast that was not as prominent as was given male candidates.

The ways in which women are disadvantaged are numerous. First, when women candidates started to emerge, they were treated as novelty candidates which

diminished the seriousness of their bid (Fridkin, et al., 2013). Second, their personal attributes were covered at the expense of their professional credentials. Third, their viability was questioned either as being a candidate who could only appeal to the "women's vote" or as someone whose electability was wanting (Falkn, 2008).

In the USA, when Elizabeth Dole sought the Republican presidential nomination in 2002, the amount of coverage she received failed to reflect her standings in the polls, disproportionately focused on her lack of funds, and treated her bid as a novelty (Kira, 2017). Dole received less issue coverage than the male candidates, and more attention was paid to her personality and appearance than those of the other candidates. Moreover, a qualitative analysis revealed that she was characterized negatively as "scripted, rehearsed, robotic, controlled" criticisms that seemed to reflect the gender bias reports.

Study also revealed that Hillary Clinton received a similar amount of coverage to Barack Obama in 2008, but her coverage was more negative. Falk's analysis showed that Clinton received more equitable coverage than previous female presidential candidates in some respects, but also found inequalities in coverage and the persistence of the traditional patterns of media coverage of female presidential candidates (Kira, 2017). Even public opinion polls showed that many Democrats believed Hillary Clinton was not treated as well by the press as the other candidates. The media also dwelled more on whether Clinton would exit the Democratic race, and when she would exit, than is typical of presidential nomination coverage.

Zimbabwe is no exception. In post 2000 Zimbabwe, while the contest pitting one political formation against another has been given prominence in the media, an important struggle that has attracted little attention during this period has been that of the genders, in particular the competition between men and women for the right to power to govern the country (Parichi, 2016). Media organizations have participated in this struggle by developing and distributing images of the various interest groups in the political fray, including men and women.

Parichi carried out an examination of newspaper representation of female politicians in Zimbabwe during the four general elections held between 2000 and 2008 and the newspapers under review were Kwayedza, The Standard on Sunday and Financial Gazette. The study found out that, beyond the inevitable trait of polarization of media in Zimbabwe, all three newspapers shared many tendencies in their coverage of female politicians. For instance, across the three newspapers, female politicians were downgraded through omission. They were also underestimated by being portrayed as in terms of frames irrelevant to politics (Parichi, 2016). Of the three newspapers, only The Standard on Sunday did not make use of the motherhood and wifehood frame in its representation of female politicians. In all the three newspapers, Zimbabwean female politicians are portrayed as hamstrung candidates, neither fit for public office nor eligible for marriage and motherhood (Parichi, 2016).

Lesotho is not different when it comes to media coverage of female politicians. MISA Lesotho (2017) states that, during the 2017 National Assembly Elections, the media did not do well regarding granting coverage to women candidates who contested in the elections. There were no clearly articulated plans by the media houses towards granting women a platform to canvass their election campaigns vis-à-vis their male counterparts, who, by virtue of being at the helm of their political parties' National Executive Committees, stood at a vantage point. According to the MISA document, generally, women political candidates in Lesotho suffer little coverage by the media for various reasons, including: political campaigns being led by male political leaders who see no need to have women candidates' specific campaigns, women candidates' lack of communication strategy for individual candidates as opposed to political party general communication strategy, lack of media houses' policies on coverage of women candidates coupled with absence of journalists interested in the subject, and limited capacity on the use of new media which is visible in the very low level use of social media platforms by women candidates.

9.METHODOLOGY

The study used qualitative research because, as Susan (2011) writes, qualitative research is primarily

exploratory and is used to gain an understanding of the underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations. It provides insights into the problem and helps to develop ideas or hypotheses for potential qualitative research. Furthermore, qualitative research is also used to uncover trends in the thought and opinions, and dive deeper into the problem (Coyne and Leeson, 2009).

This study used one on one face to face interviews in gleaning information from journalists and editors from different newspapers, female politicians and ordinary newspaper readers, both male and female.

The interviews were carried out in Maseru urban because the newspapers chosen for the study are headquartered in Maseru city together with the population relevant for the study.

The population of the study, which is defined by Robinson (2004) as a collection of individuals or objects that is the main focus of a scientific query, consisted of personnel from Public Eye, thepost, and Lesotho Times newspapers, newspaper readers, members of parliament, journalism students and their lecturers and female politicians in Lesotho.

The study could not interview the whole nation so a sample of the population was random sampling to interview two journalists and an editor from each newspaper, two female politicians, 10 newspaper readers balanced in gender, 10 journalism students and four lecturers.

10.FINDINGS

10.1 From newspaper readers

There were mixed reactions from male ordinary readers of newspapers in Lesotho. There were some men who said that when they read newspapers, they expect impartiality in gender when it comes to reportage on politicians. However, they see evidence of reporting that is tilted in the favour of male politicians at the expense of their female counterparts and they say as readers they expect to be informed fairly on all politicians so that they can make their choices wisely. On the other hand, some male newspaper readers say they do not see anything wrong with the way politics is covered in these

newspapers saying the absence of women politicians in the newspapers can be because there genuinely might not be anything worthy to write about.

Female readers of newspapers said that when they read newspapers, their expectations are to read about women especially in leadership because they regard such women as a source of inspiration. They therefore expressed disappointment in the fact that locally, women in politics are not given prominence at all. Instead of finding their women flag bearers headlining the news in print, they see men dominant on front pages of these newspapers as if this is a world of men only. Some of the female readers said they would like to advise newspaper publishers to balance their coverage, positioning women equally prominently as their male counterparts. They said the only time women are written about to some length is when some mishap has befallen them, for example when Mrs. Matibatso Doti was fired from cabinet by prime minister Thabane yet she is a workhorse who stands up for the poor and disadvantaged each time she is in cabinet.

10.2. Findings from female politicians

One female politician interviewee said that the absence of news about female politicians in the print media is not because journalists do not make an effort to cover them. She said she receives calls from journalists all the time asking her opinion on important issues. She said she tries to avoid making comments on hot and controversial issues because, as a woman, she fears it might backfire on her and tarnish her image. She says, as a woman, she has a reputation to protect so she avoids controversy of any nature as much as possible. She says when she is asked to comment, she refers the journalists to her male political colleagues. Another female politician said females in her political circles are reluctant to associate with newspapers because whatever they say ends up twisted and will come back to haunt them in their personal lives. She went on to say the print media prefers writing news that humiliates female politicians, hence their reluctance to make any public utterances. However, the female politicians advise newspapers to write fairly about both male and female politicians so that the political field is level in the media rather than just putting the spotlight on their male counterparts only.

10.3. Findings from media scholars

Some media scholars opined that the problem of little coverage of female politicians in Lesotho emanates from the problem of polarization in the politics of Lesotho where media houses take positions for or against some political establishments. They said this leads to journalists being led by the nose by certain politicians or political parties and this kind of arm twisting of the media is characteristic of corrupt politicians who are usually male. They went on to say that is the reason why journalism in Lesotho is so poor because it usually revolves around the same issues about the same individuals. They said journalism should be executed with fairness, covering diverse issues in order to fully inform, educate and entertain society. News should cover serious issues of importance to society in spite of the major players being male or female, the scholars went on to say. They said patriarchy that is prevalent in Lesotho society should not find a place in an important field such as journalism. Some of the scholars said for as long as the print media relies for livelihood on government adverts, dominant politicians will continue calling the shots in the print media and unfortunately, the dominant politicians happen to be male as is the nature of the politics of the country.

10.4. Findings from journalists

Journalists responded that they give coverage to women in leadership and such news is always in the papers. They said that it however is unfortunate that some females in these positions of leadership do not respond when called upon to contribute to debate on some issues when called upon. They insisted that they cover female politicians in their routine reporting. They said if it happens that they go for periods without writing about women in politics, it might be because nothing news worthy involving the female politicians will have occurred. One journalist said the reality of the matter is that the political realm of Lesotho is dominated by men despite the fact that the population of Lesotho has got more women than men. He went on to say that it is the majority of the women who actually create this situation by voting males into power rather than fellow women. Naturally, the news will be about the powerful men in

power because women stay in the fringes, the journalist continued to say.

10.5. Findings from newspaper editors

Editors said they report indiscriminately and they do not champion certain courses because their primary business is the production of news. They said they are not activists who fight in certain corners for certain people. The editors said publishing a lot on female politicians in Lesotho is very difficult because female political players in Lesotho are very few. They cited the example that of all the political parties in Lesotho, only one is led by a woman, which is the Reformed Congress of Lesotho (RCL) led by Ms Keketso Rantsu. The editors insisted they give fair coverage to female politicians as much as they do for their male counterparts. They said if there is news about the female politicians worthy publishing, they will publish.

10.6. Findings from legislators

Legislators from across the gender divide said that women have got the same rights as men and the constitution of Lesotho Section 30 actually advocates for affirmative action for women to be at par with men. They said the print media should therefore not discriminate against women if that is what is happening.

11.ANALYSIS

Newspapers should strive for fairness and balance in their reportage without propping up one gender to the disadvantage of others. Devlin (2006) emphasizes the point that in order for journalism to be the champion of development and equality in society, newspapers should report fairly and impartially.

Journalists should not be at the beck and call of politicians as this will compromise their practice. They should not also be scared of those in power as this will automatically infringe on their freedom of expression which they should defend at all costs. Grady (2010) writes that freedom of expression is part and parcel of protection of journalists as it promotes initiatives to increase transparency, fight crime and corruption and encourages the spread of reliable information. Reporting fairly with respect for coverage of genders is

therefore encouraged for the print media fraternity in Lesotho.

The print media in Lesotho should make an effort to report on female politicians so as to enlighten society to the importance of the women's contribution to the democratic processes in the country. However, the print media should not report on trivial issues simply because the news has to do with female politicians. This will make their news values and news content to look ridiculous and self defeating. It is important that women in politics be recognized and appreciated as politicians and be seen to be playing a role in the politics of the day, either in their constituencies or in their political parties. This will be useful in assessing the kind of politics that women are involved in and to determine the influence they have in policy formulation and in their political parties, writes Happy (2019).

Women in politics should not be afraid to come out to lead and to speak out regardless of the bad publicity they receive from the press. They should accept the invitations they get from the press to say something. Kondwani (2019) adds on to say that the other reason that can help women to come out and do well in politics is if they get support from their spouses and traditional and religious leaders, plus exposure to development projects, NGOs and local government institutions. Society should also change the way they think about women because the world is changing and now women can do almost everything that can be done by men.

Female journalists should take legal action against journalists who report wrongly or report false information about them. Especially those who do face to face interviews to get information then decide to publish something else about the female politicians. Journalists should account for their actions all the time if the industry is to stay respectable. When journalists commit errors, they must correct themselves and their expression of regret must be sincere and not cynical.

12.RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that society at large should support female politicians and the media should give fair and substantial coverage to female politicians. It

does not matter that they are few than male politicians. They deserve the spotlight as much as male politicians. They study recommends that issues of bias towards male politicians and against female politicians be avoided by the media fraternity at all costs because these politicians, male and female have got constituencies they represent. Gender should never be an issue but quality of delivery by a politician to the constituency he or she serves.

The study also encourages female politicians to stand up to the world, the print media fraternity included, where unfairness is evident which hinders their progress in their profession of choice.

13.CONCLUSION

The study established that female politicians in Lesotho do not receive as much coverage in the print media as compared to their male counterparts. The study also established that female politicians in Lesotho are still afraid to open up to the media and therefore journalists end up with nothing news worthy to publish about them. The study also established that ordinary readers want to see more of news on their female politicians as much as they currently see about male politicians. The government is influential in newspaper content because of the power of advertising revenue the print media relies on from the government.

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