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WOMEN, POLITICS & POWER IN THE NEW MEDIA WORLD



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Executive Summary

Despite evidence that gender-balanced representation in government is beneficial for policy-making and democratic institutions overall, women are still heavily underrepresented in most national legislatures globally. What can be done to speed up progress towards achieving better gender balance and what role are traditional media and social media outlets playing, consciously or unconsciously, in the promotion of gender-inclusive and participatory democracies?

This study seeks to find a response to these questions through personal interviews and conversations with over 85 women leaders in politics (including three former Prime Ministers and one former president), civil society, television, journalism and technology, the desk review of over 100 publications and an artificial intelligence based analysis of the 2020 Democratic Party Presidential primaries in the United States.

The research has three important takeaways.

Firstly, traditional media remains mostly an obstacle for women's political ambitions, as the coverage women in politics receive is still heavily biased against them, both in quantity and in quality, and this has a negative impact on women's political ambitions, viability as candidates and ultimately on societal expectations of women and power.

Secondly, social media is widely used by women politicians and represents for them a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it provides them important avenues for direct communication with the public to deliver an unfiltered narrative; on the other hand, it exposes them to shocking amounts of sexism, harassment and threats.

Thirdly, there are actionable steps and evidence-based recommendations for traditional and social media outlets, policy-makers, political parties and women politicians for changing the narrative around women and power and promoting more gender-inclusive democracies. A few of the steps outlined in greater detail later in this report include: increasing diversity at all levels of decision-making in journalism and technology; using technological innovations to track and eliminate bias and harassment against women in politics; promoting digital literacy to ensure that citizens become conscious consumers of information; and investing in women's political participation and candidate training programs globally.

This work also hopes to be a call to action for all citizens to demand unbiased and equal treatment of female politicians in the news and the opportunity for them to use the digital space safely and effectively.

Introduction & Methodology

In addition to being a precondition for truly inclusive and representative democracies, women's equal representation in government improves policy-making¹ and increases the public's trust in the institutions where they serve.²

Yet, almost twenty-five years after the Beijing Platform for Action's call to increase equal participation of men and women in politics and to promote a balanced and non-stereotypical portrayal of women in the media,³ progress has been slow in both areas.

In terms of their political representation, women hold today on average 24.3% of parliamentary seats globally⁴ and are disproportionately less visible than their

male colleagues in news coverage on politics and government, even after adjusting for their relative representation.

At this pace, the World Economic Forum estimates it would take more than a century to achieve gender equality.⁵

Understanding the role traditional and social media⁶ outlets are playing, consciously or unconsciously, in the promotion of more gender-inclusive and participatory democracies and what can be done to speed up progress is both urgent and critical.

It's urgent, as everyday more people join the 830 million who are already online⁷ and use the internet as a key

1 Di Meco, L., *Women's Political Networks. Defining Leadership, Breaking Barriers, and Fostering Change. Background Research*, The Wilson Center (2017); Anzia, Sarah F., and Berry, C. "The Jackie (and Jill) Robinson Effect: Why Do Congresswomen Outperform Congressmen?", *American Journal of Political Science* (2011).

2 Dollar, D., Fisman, R. and Gatti, R., "Are Women Really the 'Fairer' Sex? Corruption and Women in Government", *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* (2001).

3 The Beijing Platform for Action, adopted at the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China (1995) is an agenda for women's empowerment. It aims at removing all the obstacles to women's active participation in all spheres of public and private life.

4 Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Women in Politics: 2019* (2019), < <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/infographics/2019-03/women-in-politics-2019>>.

5 The World Economic Forum, *The Global Gender Gap Report 2018* (2018), <http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2018.pdf>.

6 For the purpose of this paper, "the media" and "traditional media" both refer to what used to be defined as "mass media", namely forms of communication designed to reach the mass of the people (newspapers, magazines, television and radio). Social media refers to forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos). Both definitions are borrowed from the Merriam-Webster dictionary.

7 International Telecommunication Union (ITU), *ITU ICT Facts and Figures 2017* (2017).

source of information around politics and governance.⁸

It's critical, given the resurgence of what Niall Ferguson calls "caveman politics - not only male, but aggressively, crassly masculine"⁹, denounced by Kristina Wilfore as a "new wave of authoritarianism that seek to push women aside and diminish progress on minority rights, by controlling social media channels, attacking the press and limiting freedom of assembly and expression".¹⁰

In order to understand traditional and social media's impact on fostering (or hindering) progress on gender equality in government, some key questions need to be addressed.

What are the global trends and regional specificities in the relationship between women in politics and traditional and social media? How are female politicians addressing the double binds they face in building their media persona? How has social media changed the way female politicians address their constituencies? Is social media empowering female political aspirants and politicians, disempowering them, or both? How do female candidates

and politicians use the different social media platforms? Can technological innovations help in ensuring a fairer media treatment of women in politics? What are the most important steps that can be taken to ensure that traditional and social media serve to promote more inclusive and stronger democracies?

This study aims at responding to these questions, through personal interviews and conversations¹¹ with over 85 women leaders in politics, civil society, journalism, television and technology across multiple ideologies, countries and regions of the world¹², as well as a desk review of over 100 publications and an artificial intelligence based analysis of the 2020 Democratic Party Presidential primaries in the United States.

It also offers immediately actionable steps, best practices and evidence-based recommendations for traditional and social media outlets, policy-makers, political parties and female politicians for changing the narrative around women and power and promoting more gender-inclusive and stronger democracies.

8 European Parliament, *Women in decision-making: The role of the new media for increased political participation*.

9 Vladimir Putin in Russia, Donald Trump in the United States, Xi Jinping in China, Narendra Modi in India and Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey all seen by Ferguson as examples of this trend. Ferguson, N., "The rise of caveman politics", *The Boston Globe* (March 21, 2016).

10 Kristina Wilfore, personal interview, March 14, 2019.

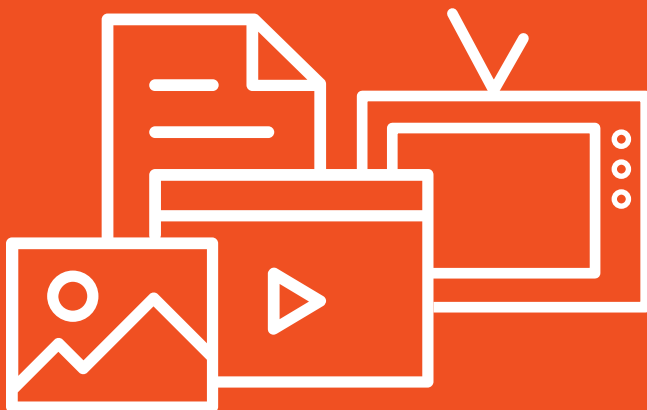
11 The conversations and personal interviews carried out for this study were conducted between January and June 2019 in English, Italian and Spanish.

12 Twenty-eight countries are represented in the study. They are: Afghanistan, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Bangladesh, Belgium, Brazil, Costa Rica, Denmark, France, Ghana, India, Italy, Japan, Lebanon, Malawi, Mauritius, Mexico, Morocco, Myanmar, Pakistan, Philippines, Slovenia, Tunisia, Turkey, Ukraine, Uruguay and the United States.

Thirty countries are represented in the study.



A Woman Politician: Gendered Media Frames on Women & Power



The media has a critical responsibility in shaping societal attitudes on the desirability of women's leadership by producing (and reproducing) normative expectations¹³ about women's place in society, and such assumptions are among the most powerful predictors of women's advancement in public life.¹⁴

Sometimes, the media influences attitudes in favor of women's empowerment. In Bangladesh, watching television was positively associated with women's sense of empowerment.¹⁵ Through television, Afghan women learned about new laws on gender equality, as well as about male and female relations in other societies. According to Humira Saqib, Director of Afghan Women News Agency:

*The media can help women in role modeling and working with these media can inspire other women to get out of their home and work in community.*¹⁶

Often, the media's role is mixed. Talking about this, Pat Mitchell, an American journalist, Emmy-winning producer



From my first job in television, I was fully aware of the power of the medium to either represent or misrepresent, to influence for good or not so good.

Pat Mitchell, American journalist, producer and media executive, director of TedWomen

and pioneering media executive and the Director of TedWomen,¹⁷ says:

From my first job in television, I was fully aware of the power of the medium to either represent or misrepresent, to influence for good or not so good. Engaging that power to improve the representation of women—more women on camera reporting, more behind the cameras producing and making editorial decisions, and more women's stories—was a starting point for me. The next step was

13 Heldman, C., "Cultural Barriers to a Female President in the United States" in Cox Han, L. and Heldman, C. (eds), *Rethinking Madam President: Are We Ready for a Woman in the White House?* Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner (2007).

14 The Wilson Center, *The Global Women's Leadership Initiative Index* (2018), <<http://data.50x50movement.org/index>>.

15 Kabeer, N., "Contextualizing the economic pathways of women's empowerment", *Pathways Policy Paper* (2011), Brighton.

16 Humira Saqib, personal interview, April 1, 2019.

17 TEDWomen is a three-day conference and featuring speakers focused on women's and gender equality themes. For more on TEDWomen, see: <<https://www.ted.com/attend/conferences/special-events/tedwomen>>.

*recognizing the importance of women as media consumers and responding with programming choices with more relevance to their lives and work. Both goals meant pushing back barriers, stereotypes about what women could do and what women wanted to see on television. Numbers have improved on all counts but still not enough women in decision-making and not enough women owners of media companies. These remain barriers to a fully representative media and to media's power being fully engaged to further empower women.*¹⁸

Particularly when it comes to women's political leadership, almost everywhere, traditional media is mainly an obstacle, as the coverage women in politics receive is still heavily biased against them both in quantity and in quality.

According to the Global Media Monitoring Project,¹⁹ the largest and longest longitudinal study on gender and the media available, in 2015 women made

up only 16 percent of people in news on politics and government globally. Despite having increased their numbers in national legislatures, they were less visible than five years earlier, the media sending cues to voters and political party elites that women are not a "normal" or desirable part of the political world.²⁰

The quality of the media coverage also speaks volumes.

All over the world, stories of female politicians and candidates often underline sexist stereotypes as they are likely to focus on the way women are dressed, their body image and their family life, with much less attention paid to their ideas, policies and proposals.²¹ Such coverage has negative consequences for female candidates' electability²² and negatively impacts young women's political ambitions.²³ A 2012 survey of Australian women showed that eighty

18 Pat Mitchell, personal interview, May 19, 2019.

19 Global Media Monitoring Project (2015), <<http://whomakesthenews.org/gmmp/gmmp-reports/gmmp-2015-reports>>.

20 Lühiste, M. and Banducci, S., "Invisible Women? Comparing Candidates' News Coverage in Europe", *Politics & Gender* 12(2): 223–53 (2016).

21 Llanos, B. and Nina, J., *Elections Coverage from a Gender Perspective. A media monitoring manual* (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2011); Norris, P. (ed.), *Women, Media, and Politics* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1997); Ross, K., *Gendered Media: Women, Men, and Identity Politics* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Plymouth, 2010).

22 Maggio, R., *Unspinning the Spin: The Women's Media Center Guide to Fair and Accurate Language*, The Women's Media Center (2014); Larris, R. and Maggio, R., *Name it. Change it. The Women's Media Center's Media Guide to Gender Neutral Coverage of Women Candidates + Politicians*, The Women's Media Center (2012); Llanos, B., *Unseeing Eyes: Media Coverage and Gender in Latin American Elections* (Stockholm: International IDEA (2011); Kittilson, M. and Fridkin, K., "Gender, Candidate Portrayals and Election Campaigns: A Comparative Perspective", *Politics & Gender* 4 (2008), pp. 371–392. Bystrom, D. and Kaid, L., "Are Women Candidates Transforming Campaign Communication? A Comparison of Advertising Videostyles in the 1990s" (2002), in: C. S. Rosenthal (ed.), *Women Transforming Congress*, University of Oklahoma Press, 146–170; Ross, K., 'Women Politicians and Mainstream Media: a Game of Two Sides', *Centre for Advancement of Women in Politics School of Politics*, Queens University Belfast Occasional paper # 1 (2003).

23 Lake, C., Snell, A., Gormley, C. and Lethbridge-Cejku, F., "An Examination of the Impact of Media Coverage of Women Candidates' Appearance. Findings from an online dial survey of 1500 likely voters nationwide with an oversample of 100 young women voters" (Lake Research Partners Washington, 2013).

percent of the respondents over the age of 31 reported being less likely to consider a political career after seeing how unfairly Julia Gillard, the country's first female Prime Minister, was treated by the media.²⁴

Sara Blanco, Communications Director of the nonprofit Running Start, which trains young women to run for office, puts it this way:

*We hear from young women all the time that one thing that sometimes makes them hesitant to run for office is that they fear how they will be treated in the media. They see how women leaders face all kinds of sexist coverage (focusing on appearance, doubting qualifications, criticism of parenting choices, and more) and understandably, being the object of all of that really doesn't appeal to them.*²⁵

According to Joyce Banda, former President of Malawi:

*All it takes is a fake story and smear campaign fabricated by a journalist to ruin years of hard work. This makes women nervous to run for office, because not only can it harm her political aspirations, but also bring shame to her family. Media training and preparation is critical for women political leaders.*²⁶

While all female politicians seem to face some degree of sexism in the media coverage they receive, studies show that things worsen particularly as female politicians try



All it takes is a fake story and smear campaign fabricated by a journalist to ruin years of hard work.

Joyce Banda, former President of Malawi

to break the highest glass ceiling, running for Prime Minister or president against a male candidate and therefore openly defying societal expectations of women as supportive rather than competitive, best fit for a place *behind* every great man.²⁷ If they get elected and then don't deliver as expected, the criticism that follows sometimes takes openly sexist undertones, reigniting misogynistic arguments against women's political abilities.²⁸

24 Williams, B., 'He's "taken back the reins" and she's "a backstabbing murderer": a comparative media analysis of the Prime Ministerial ascension of Julia Gillard and Malcolm Turnbull', Paper presented at the 24th World Congress of Political Science, Poznan, Poland (July 2016).

25 Sara Blanco, personal interview, January 28, 2019.

26 Joyce Banda, personal Interview, April 5, 2019.

27 Kittilson, M. and Fridkin, K. "Gender, Candidate Portrayals and Election Campaigns: A Comparative Perspective".

28 Hao, A., "In Brazil, women are fighting against the sexist impeachment of Dilma Rousseff", *The Guardian* (July 5, 2016), <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/jul/05/in-brazil-women-are-fighting-against-the-sexist-impeachment-of-dilma-rousseff>; Hyun-ju, O., Anger at Park brings out misogyny, sexism, *The Korea Herald* (November 23, 2016), <<http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20161123000760>>.

Finally, even when media narratives are not openly sexist, they often reflect “gendered news frames”,²⁹ as women politicians are framed by the media first and foremost as *women* who happen to run for office or to hold public office; their gender identity is always their “primary descriptor”, the most interesting thing about them, a constant reminder of her exceptionality in comparison with the default, the norm, implicitly understood as the male politician.³⁰ Such narratives also are detrimental to female candidates’ chances to get elected, as they make them seem less plausible political leaders.³¹

Global Patterns & Regional Specificities in The Media Coverage of Women in Politics

Overall, the media has yet to guarantee fair and equal coverage to female politicians. While there are some regional specificities in the form of the bias they encounter, many of the same patterns apply almost everywhere and, as Ross puts it, “women often achieve their political ambitions despite the news media, not because of them”.³²

In Latin America, analysis of election coverage finds that male candidates still have a clear advantage over female ones, both in the quantity and the type of coverage received, even once their relative numbers are controlled for. On average, male politicians are featured in more and longer news stories and they are much more likely to be granted longer interviews,³³ while stories on female politicians are fewer, shorter and often trivializing in nature, as obsessive attention is paid to their choice of clothing, body and family status. Paradoxically, women in the

29 Murray, R., “Conclusion: a new comparative framework” in Murray, R. (ed), *Cracking the highest glass ceiling : a global comparison of women’s campaigns for executive office*.

30 Ross, K. and Sreberny, A., “Women in the house: media representations of British politicians”, in Sreberny, A. and van Zoonen, L. (eds.) *Gender, politics and communication* (Hampton Press, Cresskill, NJ, 2000).

31 Thomas, S. and Wilcox, C., *Women and Elective office: Past, Present, and Future*. 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc. 2006).

32 Ross, K., *Gender, Politics, News: A Game of Three Sides*. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2016. E-book).

33 Llanos, B., *Unseeing Eyes: Media Coverage and Gender in Latin American Elections*.



region have made great progress towards equal representation in politics, the media continues to reflect a *machista* culture.³⁴

Similarly, in Sub-Saharan Africa, despite progress having been made in women's descriptive representation, with Rwanda being the first country in the world to have attained and surpassed gender parity, the media has largely failed to recognize female voices and political contributions.³⁵

In the Middle East and North Africa, female politicians are still underrepresented in

traditional media outlets for a variety of reasons, including the fact that many of them shy away from seeking more media visibility because they fear harassment and damage to their image as a result of it.³⁶

In Australia, significant gender bias was found in the way the media covered Julia Gillard, Prime Minister from 2010 to 2013, when compared to Malcom Turnbull, who has been holding this post since 2015.³⁷

Overall in Asia, despite several countries having had female Heads of State, most

34 The Economist 'Wonder women and macho men. Latin American women are making great strides but culture is not keeping up', *The Economist* (August 22, 2015).

35 Matakaire T., 'Analysis of Coverage of Women Politicians by the Print Media in Media in Zimbabwe', *Women in Politics Support Unit* (2003).

36 Ben Salem, M. and Mejri, A., "Media Visibility of Tunisian Women Politicians in Traditional and New Media: Obstacles to Visibility and Media Coverage Strategies" in Raicheva-Stover, M. and Ibroscheva, E. (eds.), *Women in Politics and Media: Perspectives from Nations in Transition*; Al-Ariqi, A., *Middle Eastern Women in the Media: a Battle Against Stereotypes: Al Jazeera: A Case Study*, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (2008).

37 Williams, B., "He's "taken back the reins" and she's "a backstabbing murderer": a comparative media analysis of the Prime Ministerial ascension of Julia Gillard and Malcolm Turnbull", *Paper presented at the 24th World Congress of Political Science*, Poznan, Poland, July 2016.

female politicians are far from being covered equally and fairly. In India, Azmat Rasul finds that Bollywood's representation of female politicians "perpetuate patriarchal ideology in which women are passive homemakers and effectively domesticated and excluded from public sphere",³⁸ and the media rewards with positive coverage only female politicians who conform to patriarchal expectations of what it means to be "a good woman", while heavily criticizing the others.³⁹

In Pakistan, studies have found media to be more likely to frame female lawmakers as "fashion celebrities" or "non-serious politicians" on television, their competence, experience and morality often questioned.⁴⁰

Talking about the media coverage of female political leaders, Farahnaz Ispahani, a Pakistani American, writer and politician who has served as Member of Parliament in Pakistan from 2008 to 2012, paints a challenging situation.⁴¹



Women political leaders in Pakistan have never been portrayed fairly in Pakistan.

Farahnaz Ispahani, Member of Parliament in Pakistan from 2008 to 2012

Women political leaders in Pakistan have never been portrayed fairly in Pakistan. The founder of Pakistan, Mr. Muhammad Ali Jinnah's sister, Fatima Jinnah, who was his companion and colleague was toppled from her pedestal of respect when she first ran for elected office against a military dictator in 1965. She was portrayed by the regime as a traitor to Pakistan. Her speeches were censored, her campaign was harassed and some Islamic parties stated she must be defeated simply because she was a woman. She lost the election among claims of rigging by her opponents but she paved the way for other women to join politics and contest elections in Pakistan. From Miss Fatima Jinnah flash forward to today: you can clearly see that the treatment of women in politics by the traditional media has not changed. An interview of Maryam Nawaz Sharif, a vice president of the Pakistan's PML-N Party, was "forcefully" taken

38 Rasul, A., "Between the Family and Politics: Female Politicians as Media Objects in Bollywood Films", *Society and Culture in South Asia* (2017), 3(1), 24-44.

39 Bathla, S., "Gender Construction in the Media: A Study of Two Indian Women Politicians" (2004). *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 10:3, 7-34.

40 Cheema, M., "Understanding the Gender Dynamics of Current Affairs Talk Shows in the Pakistani Television Industry" in Raicheva-Stover, M. and Ibroscheva, E. (eds.), *Women in Politics and Media: Perspectives from Nations in Transition*; Munir S et al. "Media Analysis of Women's Participation in Politics" (2014). *Mass Communication Journalism* 4:183; Norris, P. (ed.), *Women, Media, and Politics* (Oxford University Press. New York, 1997)

41 Farahnaz Ispahani, personal interview, April 11, 2019.

off air soon after it was run. A woman leading the Pakistan Muslim League was initially seen as unexpected as the party is center-right and socially conservative. However, she has emerged as a leader accepted by the party and their voter base.

North America struggles with some of these very same issues. In the United States, multiple analyses of media coverage found that female candidates generally received less and qualitatively worse coverage than male candidates, with stories focusing on their personal traits rather than their issue positions.⁴² As Hillary Clinton, the first woman to win the presidential nomination of a major political party in America, put it: “It’s not easy to be a woman in politics. That’s an understatement. It can be excruciating, humiliating. The moment a woman steps forward and says: ‘I’m running for office’, it begins: the analysis of her face, her body, her voice, her demeanor; the diminishment of her stature, her ideas, her accomplishments, her integrity. It can be unbelievably cruel”.⁴³

42 Kahn, K. and Goldenberg, E., “Women candidates in the news: An examination of gender differences in the U.S. senate campaign coverage”, *Public Opinion Quarterly* 55 (1991), pp. 180-199; Kahn, K., “The distorted mirror: Press coverage of women candidates”, *Journal of Politics* 46 (1994), pp. 503-525; Heflick, N. and Goldenberg, “Objectifying Sarah Palin: Evidence that Objectification Causes Women to be Perceived as Less Competent and Less Fully Human”, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 45 (3) (2009), pp. 598-601; Dunaway, J. et al., “Traits versus Issues: How Female Candidates Shape Coverage of Senate and Gubernatorial Races”, *Political Research Quarterly* (2013), 66(3), pp. 715-726.

43 Clinton, H., *What happened*. New York: Simon & Schuster (2017).



For women, it is frustrating to see that their voice is still not represented fairly in the media.

Lesia Radelicki, Women's Coordinator for the European Socialist Party's and local Councillor of Saint-Gilles (Brussels)

According to Lesia Radelicki, Women's Coordinator for the European Socialist Party and local Councillor of Saint-Gilles (Brussels):

As a new candidate, making and marking your place in traditional media is not easy. Building a 'relationship' with traditional media, knowing how to address it and making sure your projects and message are translated and broadcasted correctly is a challenge - we are not always aware of that when we decide to run for office. For women in general, it is frustrating to either see that their voice is not represented in media fairly, due to their underrepresentation in politics, the media's failure to reach out to female experts or because women candidates are still sometimes asked to comment upon trivial issues like their looks/outfits – instead of their opinions and projects.

A study of the media coverage of female candidates in Canada found that women are generally described according to four roles: “sex object, mother, pet, and iron maiden”, perpetuating tired stereotypes that are at odds with women’s ability to be perceived as authoritative political leaders.⁴⁴ In Mexico, male candidates are granted significantly higher percentages of stories and minutes than their female counterparts in local electoral campaigns.⁴⁵

Things are not very different in Europe. A 2016 study of European parliamentary elections found that, even controlling for viability and voting system, there is a persistent gender gap in the amount of coverage that female candidates receive.⁴⁶ In Poland, women candidates were found to be virtually invisible in the media coverage of the 2011 parliamentary campaign; that same year in Irish elections, women constituted about a third of the candidates, but were granted only 10% of airtime in on popular current affairs shows.⁴⁷ In Serbia, women generally have access to less airtime and when interviewed, they are



In Turkey, biased language against women is a common occurrence on the majority of mainstream media, with very few women politicians and commentators appearing on TV channels.

Gülseren Onaç, Vice President of the Turkish Republican People's Party from 2014 to 2016

asked mostly about family policies.⁴⁸ In Albania, female politicians are being mostly invited “to speak about stereotypically feminine and trivial things”, often turning down such invitations, having to choose between invisibility and potential damage to their credibility. In Bulgaria, female legislators are often referred to as “the girls of parliament” and praised for their charm and beauty, instead of their political

44 Goodyear-Grant, E., “Gendered News. Media Coverage and Electoral Politics in Canada”, *Recherches Féministes* (2014).

45 Rodelo, F. V., “Disparidades de género en la cobertura mediática de campañas electorales locales en México (2016), *Cuadernos.info*, (39), 87-99.

46 Luhiste, M. and Banducci, S., “Invisible Women? Comparing Candidates’ News Coverage in Europe” (2016), *Politics & Gender* 12(2):223–53.

47 O’Brien, A., “It’s a Man’s World: A Qualitative Study of the (Non) Mediation of Women and Politics on Prime Time During the 2011 General Election” (2014), *Irish Political Studies*, 29:4, 505-521.

48 OSCE Office For Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), *Handbook on Promoting Women’s Participation in Political Parties* (2014), Warsaw, OSCE.

contributions.⁴⁹ According to Gülseren Onanç, Vice President of the Turkish Republican People's Party from 2014 to 2016:

*In Turkey, biased language against women is a common occurrence on the majority of mainstream media, with very few women politicians and commentators appearing on TV channels. For this reason, the impact of traditional media on women's willingness to run for office is generally negative.*⁵⁰

In this grim picture, positive evolution towards more gender-equal coverage of female political candidates have been

reported in some races in Europe and the United States.⁵¹ While more needs to be analyzed to understand the reasons behind this improvement and confirm it as an ongoing trend, it's plausible that professional media in these regions have engaged in self-examination and adopted corrective actions—partly because of more gender diversity in their newsroom, partly in response to the pressure received from women's organizations and society as a whole—an affirmation of the importance and power of multiple stakeholders working together to drive change.⁵²

49 Danaj, S. and Godole, J., "Gender, Politics, and the Albanian Media: A Women Parliamentarians' Account" and Ibroscheva, E. and Raicheva-Stover, M., "The Girls of Parliament: A Historical Analysis of the Press Coverage of Female Politicians in Bulgaria" in Raicheva-Stover, M. and Ibroscheva, E. (eds.), *Women in Politics and Media: Perspectives from Nations in Transition*.

50 Gülseren Onanç, personal interview, May 6, 2019.

51 Hayes, D. and Lawless, J., *Women on the Run: Gender, Media, and Political Campaigns in a Polarized Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Kittilson, M. and Fridkin, K. "Gender, Candidate Portrayals and Election Campaigns: A Comparative Perspective".

52 Smith, K., "When All's Fair: Signs of Parity in Media Coverage of Female Candidates", *Political Communication*, 14, pp. 71-82.

A Catch-22: Female Politicians on the Media Tightrope

As a result of persistent bias and sexism, women politicians need to be especially deliberate in deciding how they will relate to the media and address the stereotypes and expectations that come with their gender identity.

Betty Yee, an American politician who has served as California State Controller since 2015, describes how she chose to relate to the media as follows:

I am cognizant of how through the media lens, public perception of an elected official's personality can overshadow their experience and qualifications. I have spent over 35 years focusing on finance and taxation issues and perhaps have had to navigate more biases and labels and meet a higher bar than many men to demonstrate that I am knowledgeable and can make tough decisions. This has helped me build a reputation for hard work, fairness, and integrity. My public and private personas are one and the same, which in a lot of ways, makes doing this job easier because I do not have to worry about being 'on'—I just concern myself with being me".⁵³

For many female politicians, however, establishing a media persona is a catch-22.



Perhaps I have had to navigate more biases and labels and meet a higher bar than many men to demonstrate that I am knowledgeable and can make tough decisions.

Betty Yee, California State Controller

When women in politics adopt characteristics commonly associated with leadership (per default male), portraying themselves as “tough” or “a fighter”, they risk being perceived as too aggressive, cold, “unfeminine” and ultimately unlikeable, as was Hillary Rodham Clinton’s fate in the 2008 presidential campaign.⁵⁴ According to Bibi Ameenah Firdaus Gurib-Fakim, who served as the 6th President of Mauritius from 2015 to 2018:

54 Schlehofer, M., Casad, B., Bligh, M. and Grotto, A. ‘Navigating Public Prejudices: The Impact of Media and Attitudes on High-Profile Female Political Leaders’, *Journal of Sex Roles* 65 (2011), pp. 69-82; Scott, K. and Brown, D., ‘Female First, Leader Second? Gender bias in the encoding of leadership behavior’, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, Vol. 101, No. 2 (2006) pp. 230-242.

53 Betty Yee, personal interview, April 28, 2019.



If a woman knows her mind and is an independent thinker, society through the media will try to bring her down!

Bibi Ameenah Firdaus Gurib-Fakim, 6th President of Mauritius from 2015 to 2018

*The media will always refer to a woman as being 'feisty, aggressive'... If a woman knows her mind and is an independent thinker, society through the media will try to bring her down!*⁵⁵

Alternatively, when female candidates stress their soft skills and “feminine side”, in most cases⁵⁶ they risk being perceived as weak. Unlike male politicians, who already

55 Bibi Ameenah Firdaus Gurib-Fakim, personal interview, January 31, 2019.

56 Positive stereotypes commonly associated with women as caring, selfless and honest are an asset when female candidates enter the political stage after male leaders are tainted by scandal or as wives and daughters of important male figures, accepting the burden of power to realize their legacy. According to Paxton and Hughes, Corazon Aquino in the Philippines, Violeta Chamorro in Nicaragua, Angela Merkel in Germany and Theresa May in the United Kingdom are examples of the first pattern, while Indira and Sonia Gandhi (India), Violeta Chamorro (Nicaragua), Corazon Aquino (Philippines), Benazir Bhutto (Pakistan), among others, are examples of the second one (Paxton, P. and Hughes, M., *Women, Politics, and Power: A Global Perspective*. 3rd Edition, p. 90-94, Sage Publications. Los Angeles, 2016).

embody the masculine traits commonly associated with leadership and can therefore show themselves as emotional, for women a soft, compassionate image may be interpreted as “not tough enough for the job”.⁵⁷

Sometimes, the media paints a negative image of female politicians based on both stereotypes simultaneously. A former female political leader who chose to remain anonymous talked about being described by the media at the same time as “a young girl” and at the same time “too dominant”.⁵⁸ Also, female politicians’ reproductive choices are a constant obsession for the media—a significant double bind—and the subject of greater media scrutiny than the reproductive status of a male politician.

Childless female political leaders often draw curiosity and criticism. Helen Clark, Prime Minister of New Zealand from 1999 to 2008, was described as selfish as she was not a mother;⁵⁹ Maia Sandu, who ran for office in Moldova, was the target of sexist attacks from her opponents for being a single woman.⁶⁰

57 Johnson, C. ‘From Obama to Abbott: gender identity and the politics of emotion’, *Australian Feminist Studies* 28(75) (2013) pp. 14– 29.

58 Anonymous former female political leader, personal Interview, March 17, 2019.

59 Wiliarty, S., “How the *Iron Curtain* helped break through the glass ceiling: Angela Merkel’s campaigns in 2005 and 2009”, in Murray, R. (ed), *Cracking the highest glass ceiling: a global comparison of women’s campaigns for executive office*.

60 OSCE Office For Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, *Moldova, Presidential Election, 30 October 2016: Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions* (Warsaw: OSCE, 2016).

However, coverage focusing on female candidates as mothers has downsides too, as it symbolically serves as a “reminder of women’s odd choice of public mission instead of private fulfilment”.⁶¹

While stories about their families generally humanize and ultimately benefit male politicians, they negatively impact women, particularly the ones with small children, as they raise questions on their ability to juggle family and profession, and discourage people from taking their candidacies seriously.⁶²

At the same time, female politicians in some instances have successfully used the “mother frame” as an asset in getting to power. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, president of Liberia since 2006, often mentioned how her experience as a mother made her a better fit for being the president of her country. Michelle Bachelet, Chilean President between 2006 and 2010, and again, from 2014 to 2018, highlighted her role as mother in her 1995 campaign, describing “each family as a kingdom, where the father rules, but the mother governs”. In her 2010 Presidential campaign, Dilma Rousseff referred to herself as “Mother of the People” and “Mother of Brazil”.⁶³

As a result, many female politicians find it extremely difficult to navigate the double

binds and contradictions that are common occurrences in their relationship with the media and decide to forego any attempts to control the public image journalists paint of them, but this might come at a cost, as explained by Sonja Lokar, executive board member of the Women’s Lobby of Slovenia and member of Slovenian parliament from 1986 to 1992:



I decided to be myself in everything. I was nominated twice as the worst dressed woman politician – I decided to be just amused, they labeled me an old-fashioned communist – I did not deny, they attacked me to be a member of “abortionists’ lobby” – I ignored it.

Sonja Lokar, executive board member of the Women’s Lobby of Slovenia and member of Slovenian parliament from 1986 to 1992

61 Van Zoonen, L., “The personal, the political and the popular. A woman’s guide to celebrity politics”, *European Journal of Cultural Studies* (2006), pp. 287-301.

62 Murray, R., “Conclusion: a new comparative framework” in Murray, R. (ed), *Cracking the highest glass ceiling : a global comparison of women’s campaigns for executive office*.

63 Dos Santos, P. and Jalalza, F., “The Mother of Brazil: Gender Roles, Campaign Strategy, and the Election of Brazil’s First Female President” in Raicheva-Stover, M. and Ibroscheva, E. (eds.), *Women in Politics and Media: Perspectives from Nations in Transition*.

I decided to be myself in everything. I was nominated twice as the worst dressed woman politician - I decide to be just amused, they labeled me an old-fashioned communist - I did not deny, they attacked me to be a member of “abortionists’ lobby” - I ignored it. There is a price to such attitude: you will not have a career, but if you continue long enough working for social change with all stakeholders you can bring in an issue coalition, you will make this change.⁶⁴

64 Sonja Lokar, personal interview, January 10, 2019.

The Double-Edged Sword: Women & Politics on Social Media



All over the world, female politicians are increasingly turning to social media as a way to overcome marginalization and connect with their constituency.

A 2016 survey of female parliamentarians from 107 countries⁶⁵ found that more than 85% of them use social media, and particularly Facebook, with younger legislators being the most active.

It's a tool many women political leaders who were interviewed for this study reported finding extremely useful to mobilize their constituency, shape the political discourse, denounce sexism and ultimately succeed as political leaders. However, social media is also a space where online harassment, threats and organized cyber attacks aimed at silencing them are common occurrences.

For Julia Gillard, 27th Prime Minister of Australia from 2010 to 2013:

*Social media is for women politicians a double-edged sword, as it has both benefits and burdens. The benefits are that you can establish relations with a mass constituency. You can say what you want to say and publish it. The very considerable downside is the fact that the social media environment is so gendered and full of vile material when it comes to women politicians.*⁶⁶

According to Kristin Haffert, women's leadership expert and Co-founder of Mine



Social Media is for women politicians a double-edged sword. The benefits are that you can establish relations with a mass constituency. The very considerable downside is that the social media environment is so gendered and full of vile material.

Julia Gillard, 27th Prime Minister of Australia

The Gap, social media's role in advancing women's leadership is complex.⁶⁷

All over the world women are deterred from a life in politics because of the public exposure that comes with it. At the same time, thanks to social media, women in every region of the world in politics have been thrust into the public eye in a new way. This monumental shift has created a cadre of new role models who are making it less remarkable to be a woman in politics. Today's women in politics are more formidably inculcating a new wave of women who will run—because role models matter.

⁶⁵ Patterson, T., *Social Media: Advancing Women in Politics?*, Women in Parliaments Global Forum (2016).

⁶⁶ Julia Gillard, personal interview, April 2, 2019.

⁶⁷ Kristin Haffert, personal interview, August 25, 2019.



Social media is a tool. I don't think it's enhancing or hindering women's voices; it's doing both at the same time.

Anna Bressanin, journalist, filmmaker and Multimedia Editor for the BBC

Finally, according to Anna Bressanin, a journalist, filmmaker and Multimedia Editor for the BBC:

Social media is a tool. I don't think it's enhancing or hindering women's voices; it's doing both at the same time. It's giving the chance to speak and be heard, but at the same time it's a place where women can be verbally assaulted with a violence that wouldn't happen in a face to face interaction. I think anyone who covered the last political campaign in the US has received disturbing messages on their Twitter feed or on Facebook. The ones I received were more likely to address the fact that I am a woman and the language was charged with gender violence. It's kind of a mob mentality—the same that you find at political rallies where people shout at journalists when in a group and then are polite in one-on-one interviews.

*At the same time, I personally saw young women activists getting heard on the political scene on a national level, also thanks to the ability to spread their message instantly on social media, Instagram and Twitter.*⁶⁸

Female Politicians on Facebook, Twitter & Instagram

According to Ross, especially for political actors marginalized by mainstream traditional media such as women and members of smaller political parties, being able to speak to an infinite public “out there on their Facebook page, via their Twitter feed, or in their personal blog is both personally and politically liberating but also good for democracy”.⁶⁹

Through Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, female politicians and political aspirants are able to communicate directly with voters and influence the political agenda at more limited costs and on their own terms.⁷⁰ Sometimes, they do so even better than their male politicians: in Europe, a study found female politicians⁷¹ able to generate more followers and likes on social media.⁷²

68 Anna Bressanin, personal interview, March 18, 2019.

69 Ross, K., *Gender, Politics, News: A Game of Three Sides*.

70 Cmeciu, C. and Pătruț, M., “The Visual Framing of Romanian Women Politicians in Personal Campaign Blogs during the 2012 Romanian Parliamentary Elections”, in Raicheva-Stover, M. and Ibroscheva, E. (eds.), *Women in Politics and Media: Perspectives from Nations in Transition*.

71 European Parliament, *Women in decision-making: The role of the new media for increased political participation*.

72 Bystrom, D. and Kaid, L., ‘Are Women Candidates Transforming Campaign Communication? A Comparison of Advertising Videostyles in the 1990s; Barbara Lee Family Foundation ‘Politics is Personal: Keys to Likeability and Electability for Women’ (2016).

For Celinda Lake, a prominent pollster and political strategist who has served as senior advisor to dozens of progressive women politicians in the United States and internationally:

*Social media provides women (and all candidates) the ability to drive their own narratives, to highlight what they want people to think about when they think of them. Though they will receive misogynistic responses from opponents and trolls online, because of their higher public profile and the large reach of social media, positive responses from women and men can overwhelm the negative comments.*⁷³



Social media provides women the ability to drive their own narratives. Though they will receive misogynistic responses from opponents and trolls online, positive responses from women and men can overwhelm the negative comments.

Celinda Lake, pollster and political strategist

⁷³ Celinda Lake, personal interview, April 2, 2019.

Many of the women politicians interviewed for this study reported finding social media extremely useful to connect with the electorate and push their messages without traditional media's intermediation.

For Comfort Doyoe Cudjoe-Ghansah, Member of Parliament and second Deputy Minority Whip in Ghana:

Social media has played a vital role in my political life, considering the impact and exposure it has given me. It has been a major tool for me to showcase my projects to my constituents/followers and to also give them updates on several other things I do as a politician. Prior to my use of social media for this purpose, my opponents have always painted the picture as though I don't do anything for the constituency as their elected representative in Parliament. Indeed, many of the constituents had bought into this propaganda until I started projecting my achievements through social media. To my surprise, I have been able to change this negative perception—created maliciously by my opponents to discredit my candidature—within the short time that I started using social media to promote my projects. I have gained the admiration of many within my constituency, and across Ghana, to the extent that some electorates within other constituencies have promised to transfer their votes to my constituency in order to vote for me in the next election. I often receive messages from people (that I don't know personally) congratulating and/

or encouraging me to keep up the good work as I gain much influence. Thanks to social media.⁷⁴



Social media has played a vital role in my political life, considering the impact and exposure it has given me.

Comfort Doyoe Cudjoe-Ghansah,
Member of Parliament, Ghana

Not all social media platforms are equal. For Allie Miller, Lead Product Manager at IBM Watson at the time of the interview, and now US Head of Artificial Intelligence Business Development for Startups and Venture Capital at Amazon:

Twitter is now a de facto platform for politicians to share short-form opinions or reactions. Tweets are scrutinized, screenshotted, and unearthed to show how political opinions have evolved over the years. Tweets feel real, from the heart, and in the moment. This is not limited to elected officials; political influencers—from journalists to activists—

have gained millions of followers/listeners. On Facebook, posts are more formal. They are written intentionally to elicit engagement; they regularly include photos, links, or requests for comments. Facebook posts from political officials and influencers feel like they are part of a more polished conversation. Facebook has perfectly designed “badges” when you vote, global check-ins, planning opportunities for larger rally events, etc. It is a more structured, business-like political communication engine. LinkedIn, despite it being a “professional” platform, is nearly devoid of politics. This is due to the fact that: (a) individuals are more likely or more encouraged to keep their political beliefs separate from their work life and (2) LinkedIn does not encourage it from a user experience or branding standpoint.⁷⁵

A study of female politicians’ use of Facebook in Israel found them to generate more user engagement in terms of likes and shares in comparison to male politicians, enabling them to attract more attention and mobilize more support.⁷⁶

Alenka Bratušek, former Prime Minister of Slovenia and currently deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Infrastructure, said of the role that Facebook played in her election:

⁷⁴ Allie Miller, personal interview, March 24, 2019.

⁷⁶ Yarchi, M. and Samuel-Azran, T., “Women politicians are more engaging: male versus female politicians’ ability to generate users’ engagement on social media during an election campaign” (2018), *Information, Communication & Society*, 21:7,978-995.

⁷⁴ Comfort Doyoe Cudjoe-Ghansah, personal interview, February 1, 2019

The role of Facebook was very important for our party being reelected to Parliament in 2018. I also had live conversations with our voters, we presented our engagement in Parliament through Facebook, our meetings with people in person to fairs, festivals etc., and I believe all of this helped get our party the support we needed. As a small party, we haven't had the coverage from the media at all, so we actually had to rely on different ways and channels in order to reach people, and social media was an important tool to get our messages across.⁷⁷



The role of Facebook was very important for our party being reelected to Parliament in 2018. As a small party, we haven't had the coverage from the media at all, and social media was an important tool to get our messages across.

Alenka Bratušek, Prime Minister of Slovenia from March 2013 until September 2014 and current Deputy Primer Minister and Minister of Infrastructure of Slovenia

⁷⁷ Alenka Bratušek, personal interview, March 14, 2019

Svitlana Zalishchuk, a Ukrainian Member of Parliament, tells a similar story, despite a harrowing experience with online harassment and fake news:

I cannot imagine myself and hundreds of female politicians, opinion leaders, and civic activists without the ability to communicate through social media. In countries like Ukraine, where traditional media are owned by oligarchs and used to push forward their interests, getting a free channel of communication is absolutely needed. It is Facebook with the help of which we start revolutions and build up volunteer movements. Within 2013-2014, I personally coordinated Facebook page Euromaidan which played a crucial role in the revolution, covering transformative campaigning and coordination of strategic messaging while reaching out to a daily audience of up to four million readers.⁷⁸

Facebook was also a very useful tool for Anna Villaraza-Suarez, Member of Parliament from the Philippines:

Social media is the medium I use to communicate with my constituents. The Philippines is the top user of social media in the world. Out of about 100 million Filipinos, 67 million use the internet, and spend about 10 hours daily on social media sites with four hours of those in Facebook. This is also the platform I use. Facebook has become the source of news for Filipinos.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Svitlana Zalishchuk, personal interview, March 26, 2019.

⁷⁹ Anna Villaraza-Suarez, personal interview, February 3, 2019.



Social media is the medium I use to communicate with my constituents.

Anna Villaraza-Suarez, Member of parliament, Philippines

When it comes to female politicians' use of Twitter, studies of electoral campaigns in the United States have found female candidates to use the platform more often than male ones, have more followers, establish stronger connections and interact more frequently with them, with positive effects on their likeability.⁸⁰

The interviews suggest this might not only apply to the United States. For Angellica Aribam, former National General Secretary of the National Students' Union of India, Twitter has been a powerful tool:

Social media and especially Twitter have

*played an instrumental role in my political career. In India, Twitter is used extensively by politicians, policy-makers, news outlets, and civil society. It has given me the opportunity to interact with these aforementioned sections of the society, and form collaborations whenever our interests aligned.*⁸¹

Interestingly, there seem to also be differences with respect to the type of content female and male politicians share on Twitter, with women tending to post fewer personal pictures and statements about themselves (presumably given the heightened scrutiny of their physical appearance and image), focusing instead on mobilizing their followers around policy issues and asking for their support to the campaigns by donating, volunteering, voting early, etc.⁸²

Conversely, a number of female political leaders are recently turning to Instagram to show their personal side, without fearing the vicious attacks generated on other platforms that foster more of a "pack mentality".⁸³ According to Celinda Lake, the social media presence of United States Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is a great example of how female politicians can use Instagram to their advantage:

80 McGregor, S. C., & Mourão, R. R. Talking Politics on Twitter: Gender, Elections, and Social Networks (2016). *Social Media+ Society*, 2(3), 1-14; Evans, H., Cordova, V. & Sipole, S. 'Twitter Style: An Analysis of How House Candidates Used Twitter in Their 2012 Campaigns'. *Political Science and Politics* (2014). 47. 10.1017/S1049096514000389; Meeks, L., 'Gendered styles, gendered differences: Candidates' use of personalization and interactivity on Twitter', *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* (2016), 13:4,295-310.

81 Angellica Aribam, personal interview, April 5, 2019.

82 Evans, H. & Clark, J., "You Tweet Like a Girl!": How Female Candidates Campaign on Twitter (2015). *American Politics Research*. 44. 10.1177/1532673X15597747.

83 Barboni, E., (Anti)social media: the benefits and pitfalls of digital for female politicians (2018).

Her [Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez'] live-streamed Instagram videos where she is cooking dinner and talking with her "peeps" make people identify more with her. She shows herself to the world as an ordinary person, doing ordinary things like everyone else, while succeeding on the highest stage of getting elected to Congress and shaking up politics in Washington. That is incredibly empowering and allows people generally, and women specifically, to identify with her and to aspire to such success for themselves.⁸⁴



***Social media and especially Twitter
has played an instrumental role in
my political career.***

Angellica Aribam, former National General Secretary
of the National Students' Union of India

⁸⁴ Celinda Lake, personal interview, April 2, 2019.

Bias, Sexism and Violence against Women in Politics on Social Media

While they recognized the benefits of being online, the majority of female politicians and experts interviewed for this study reported being extremely concerned about the pervasiveness of gender-based abuse (ranging from insults to death threats) in the digital space as a real barrier for women who want to engage in politics.

Emails, blogs and social media platforms have provided new channels for misogyny and gender-based violence, with the most vicious attacks being against women of color and religious minorities.⁸⁵ A 2014 survey carried out in Europe calculated that, in this region, one in ten women have already experienced a form of online violence since the age of 15.⁸⁶ According to the Women's Media Center, women are "the majority of the targets of some of the most severe forms of online assault—rape videos, extortion, doxing with the intent to harm...[and are] victims of nonconsensual pornography, stalking, electronic abuse and other forms of electronically-enhanced violence".⁸⁷

Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Director of UN



Effective legal and social controls of online anti-social and criminal behaviours continue to be an immense challenge. And in the age of social media and 'anywhere, anytime' mobile access, cyber violence can strike at any time, and follow its targets everywhere.

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Director of UN Women

Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka expresses strong concern on this front:

New social media and communication technologies present additional opportunities for attacking women, with one report finding that women are 27 times more likely to be abused online than men. The 2015 GSMA report⁸⁸ highlighted that the gender access and usage gap was partly as a result of fear from online threats and concerns over privacy and

85 Barboni, E., (Anti)social media: the benefits and pitfalls of digital for female politicians.

86 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Violence against women: an EU-wide survey – Main results*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, p. 104. (2014).

87 Women's Media Center, *Online Abuse 101*, <<http://www.womensmediacenter.com/speech-project/online-abuse-101>>.

88 GSMA is a trade body that represents the interests of mobile network operators worldwide; their 2015 report examines how many women in low- and middle-income countries own mobile phones, how intensively they use them, and the barriers to mobile phone adoption and use compared to men.

*security. When women suffer this violence online, the aim is no different than offline to control, assert power over, silence and keep women out of the conversation or from participating and benefitting equally from that space. The rapid spread of the Internet means that effective legal and social controls of online anti-social and criminal behaviours continue to be an immense challenge. And in the age of social media and ‘anywhere, anytime’ mobile access, cyber violence can strike at any time, and follow its targets everywhere”.*⁸⁹

Female politicians and political activists are, in this respect, easy and frequent targets, with online threats, harassment and graphic sexual taunts⁹⁰ being used to delegitimize, depersonalize and ultimately dissuade them from being politically active.

A recent survey of women parliamentarians from all over the world found that 41.8% of the respondents had seen extremely humiliating or sexually charged images of them spread through social media, including photomontages showing them nude.⁹¹

In Britain and the United States, a female politician or journalist is abused on Twitter every 30 seconds⁹² and cybercrimes often remain unpunished, as most law enforcement jurisdictions have limited resources with which

to investigate cybercrimes, requiring them to ignore all but the most severe or disturbing complaints, often responding only after an escalation to a more tangible threat has occurred. In 2016, Jo Cox, a female Member of Parliament in the United Kingdom, was killed by a far-right activist. She had been a victim of repeated online harassment and threats.

For many women considering a role in politics, online violence and sexism are a real concern and strong disincentive.⁹³ For Dr. Nyo Nyo Thinn, Former Parliamentarian from Burma and the Founder of Yangon Watch:⁹⁴



It could be discouraging for politically aware young women to be more involved in politics just because of witnessing the degree of hatred online.

Dr. Nyo Nyo Thinn, Former Member of Parliament, Burma

89 Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, written interview, May 3, 2019.

90 iKNOWPolitics, *Consolidated Response on Prevention and Mitigation of Electoral and Political Violence Targeted at Women* (2015), <http://iknowpolitics.org/sites/default/files/violence_against_women_in_politics.docx>.

91 Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), *Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians* (2016), <<http://www.ipu.org/pdf/publications/issuesbrief-e.pdf>>.

92 Amnesty International, *Troll patrol* (2018).

93 Campbell, R. and Lovenduski, J., *Footprints in the Sand: Five Years of the Fabian Women's Network Mentoring and Political Education Programme*, Fabian Society, London (2016).

94 Dr. Nyo Nyo Thinn, personal interview, April 24, 2019.

Also, armies of often politically motivated trolls and bots are often amplifying the scale of the problem and muddying it.⁹⁵

Mini Timmaraju, Executive Director of External Affairs at Comcast, relates her experience in the following terms:

When I was working as the Women's Vote Director for Hillary Clinton's 2016 Presidential Campaign, I would often post about women's events, policy positions of interest to our women supporters and updates from our women surrogates. I noticed that as I became more active and gained more followers, I was increasingly followed by trolls and obvious bots,⁹⁶ posting inflammatory replies and comments to intimidate and harass our female followers. It made me realize that the amount of energy that a woman has to spend online to defend her positions and her reputation is just overwhelming.⁹⁷

In India, Maneka Gandhi, the Indian Union Cabinet Minister for Women & Child Development in the Government of PM Narendra Modi, had her Twitter account trolled as she denounced cyber bullying and promoted a hotline aimed at urging citizens to denounce online abuse and harassment. Among those following her trolls, hence increasing their visibility, profile and outreach,



The amount of energy that a woman has to spend online to defend her positions and her reputation is just overwhelming.

Mini Timmaraju, Executive Director of External Affairs at Comcast and the Women's Vote Director for Hillary Clinton's 2016 Presidential Campaign

was the Indian Prime Minister himself, an avid and skilled user of social media.

Amanda Renteria, President of Emerge America⁹⁸ and Candidate for California Governor, recounts having been a target of fake news as National Political Director of Hillary Clinton's Presidential Campaign:

I was targeted by the Russians in 2016 in a fake memo the FBI retrieved. The story about this memo was written in the Washington Post. Since then, I received hateful DMs, etc. from QAnon efforts/groups. Frankly, it was a sobering experience about our world.⁹⁹

95 Barboni, E., (Anti)social media: the benefits and pitfalls of digital for female politicians; Chaturvedi, S., *I Am a Troll: inside the Secret World of the BJP's Digital Army*, Juggernaut (2016).

96 According to the Collins English Dictionary: "A troll is someone who posts unkind or offensive messages on social media sites, and often tries to start arguments with other users" and "A bot is a computer program that carries out tasks for other programs or users, especially on the Internet". Both definitions are available online: <https://www.collinsdictionary.com>.

97 Mini Timmaraju, personal Interview, January 28, 2019.

98 Emerge America is an organization that recruits, trains and provides a powerful network to Democratic women who want to run for office in the United States.

99 Amanda Renteria, personal Interview, April 2, 2019.

Svitlana Zalishchuk has a similar story:

I myself have experienced the situation when one absurd fake produced by the number of Russian websites was actively picked up in social media and shared by Ukrainian users. Aimed at discrediting me as the politician, the story was suggesting that I made a promise in my FB-post to run naked through Kyiv once the town in the east of Ukraine Debaltsevo is taken by the Russian-backed separatists. “Substantiated” with the fake screenshot of the post, the story kept circulating on the Internet for a year, objectifying my sex and distancing discourse about my personality from the professional area.¹⁰⁰ These aren’t isolated cases.

While much more needs to be researched on the intersection of fake news, online violence against women in politics and cyber security, several of the female politicians, journalists and experts interviewed for this study expressed strong concerns about the pervasiveness of what they perceived as politically-motivated attacks using bots and fake news accounts to specifically silence female politicians.



I received hateful DMs, etc. from QAnon efforts/groups. Frankly, it was a sobering experience about our world.

Amanda Renteria, President of Emerge America ,
National Political Director of the 2016 Presidential
Campaign for Secretary Clinton and Candidate for
California Governor

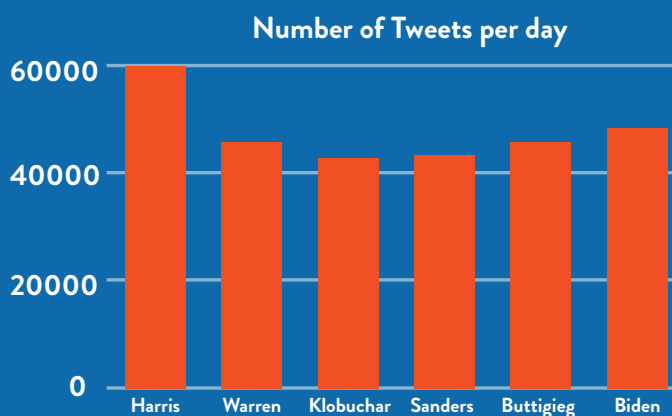
¹⁰⁰ Svitlana Zalishchuk, personal interview, March 26, 2019.

Using Artificial Intelligence to Track Gender Bias in the 2020 Democratic Primaries in the United States

Using artificial intelligence, Marvelous AI,¹⁰¹ a data analytics firm, reviewed the Twitter and news coverage of the Democratic primary for the 2020 Presidential elections in the United States, measuring the volume of conversation¹⁰² each candidate received between December 2018 and April 2019, along with the political bias and credibility of the Twitter users participating in the conversation, and the major themes in the coverage of each candidate.

They found that the volume of tweets was comparable across candidates and gender lines, peaking at around forty to fifty thousand per day.

Top 6: Campaign Launch Coverage



The nature of the coverage, however, revealed significant differences and systematic patterns along gender lines, with female candidates receiving more attacks from right-wing and fake-news accounts than male politicians. MarvelousAI uses link-sharing behavior of Twitter users to place them on a two-dimensional graph: political bias on the X-axis (lower values = left-leaning, higher values = right-leaning) and credibility on the Y-axis (lower values = fake / conspiracy, higher values = credible). The chart below shows the average political bias and credibility of the users discussing each candidate, based on what kinds of news outlets they propagate.¹⁰³ Overall, it's possible to notice that while the candidates that are considered more popular and likely to win the nomination get more right-wing/fake coverage, there is an added penalty for female candidates which seems to be much bigger than the penalty for popularity.

101 Marvelous AI is an early-stage technology startup, building natural language processing tools that enable researchers and communications professionals to track narratives in political discourse. The above mentioned analysis was commissioned for this study. More on this topic can be found at: <https://marvelous.ai/2019/02/28/gender-and-race-in-the-2020-primaries-no-the-playing-field-isnt-level/>.

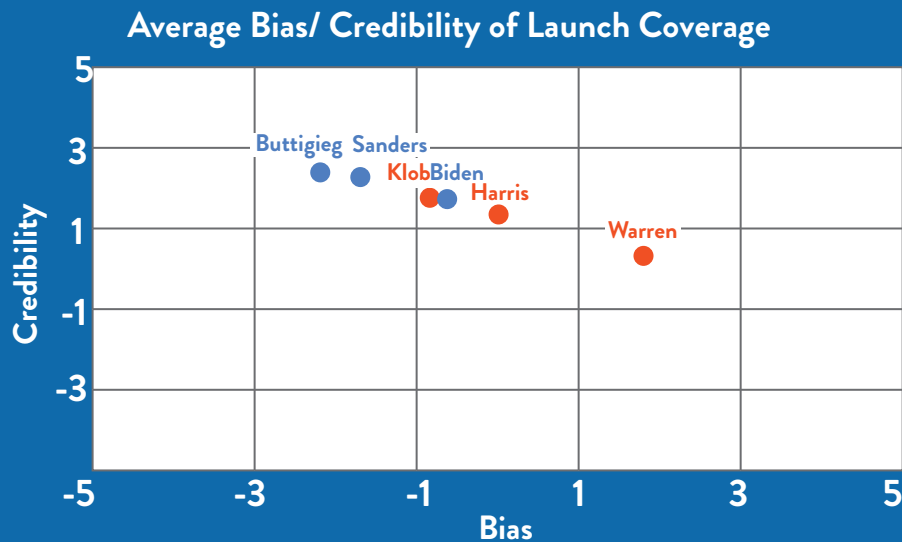
102 The definitions of political bias and credibility of news websites used for this study are in line with the findings from Media Bias Fact Check, a journalist-run rating service which provides the most comprehensive media bias resource on the Internet.

103 Oates, S., Gurevich, O., Walker, C. and Di Meco, L., Running While Female: Using AI to Track how Twitter Commentary Disadvantages Women in the 2020 U.S. Primaries (2019).

Penalty for Running while Female

In addition, the social media narratives about female candidates are more negative and mostly concerned with their character, as opposed to their policies with almost no change in major storylines when

excluding right-wing users and while such narrative aren't exclusive to women (e.g. Joe Biden), they seem to be the norm for female candidates and the exception for male ones.



Top narratives persist across political spectrum

[character] Kamala Harris is not Authentically American, progressive, or black

[character] Elizabeth Warren lied about her ethnic heritage

[character] Amy Klobuchar is mean to her staff

[electability] Bernie Sanders is the “real” front-runner

[electability] Pere Buttigieg is running a good campaign

[electability] Joe Biden is creepy to women and has a lot of baggage

According to Olya Gurevich, Chief Scientist and Co-founder at Marvelous AI:¹⁰⁴ *Even in the week surrounding their campaign launch, typically an opportunity for a candidate to dominate the news cycle and often their best shot at defining themselves to the*

public, the top social media narratives, both from trolls and mainstream users, were negative and concerned with their character, leaving less discourse space for positive or policy-related discussions of female candidates. It's quite disheartening.

¹⁰⁴ Olya Gurevich, personal interview, April 30, 2019.

#Shepersisted:¹⁰⁵ Women Using the Digital Space to Fight Sexism & Drive Change

In addition to being used by female politician candidates and the trolls that want to attack them, social media is creating a space for feminist activists to mobilize people and drive change globally.

In her study of young women's use of the Internet, Harris¹⁰⁶ argues that the mere act of 'going online' allows women to create identities, identify themselves as a citizen and take civic action in new ways for the issues that they care about. Similarly, Keller¹⁰⁷ finds that through their online engagement, young women are building confidence as political actors and beginning to engage in the public arena.¹⁰⁸

105 "Nevertheless, she persisted" (or #shepersisted on Twitter) is an expression adopted by feminists, especially in the United States, to refer to women's persistence in breaking barriers, despite being silenced or ignored. It started in 2017 after the United States Senate voted to silence Senator Elizabeth Warren's objections to confirmation of Senator Jeff Sessions as U.S. Attorney General.

106 Harris A., "Young women, late modern politics, and the participatory possibilities of online cultures", *Journal of Youth Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 5 (2008), pp. 481-495.

107 Keller J.M., "Virtual Feminisms, Girls' blogging communities, feminist activism, and participatory politics", *Information, Communication & Society*, 15:3 (2012), pp. 429-447.

108 European Parliament, *Women in decision-making: The role of the new media for increased political participation*, Directorate General for Internal Policies, Policy Department C: Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs (2013).

According to Jensine Larsen, Founder and CEO of World Pulse, a social media network powered by women from more than 190 countries:

Having witnessed networking in our online community for over a decade, I regularly hear stories of women coming from a variety of countries - from the Philippines to Kenya - who self-report that they decided to run for office after hearing other women share their stories and as a result of the validation and support they received from the online community.



I regularly hear stories of women self-reporting that, as a result of positive feedback from an online community and witnessing other women's stories, they decided to run for office.

Jensine Larsen, Founder and CEO of World Pulse

Sometimes, social media is used to advocate for policy change.

On Change.org, a website allowing anyone worldwide to create and sign petitions and disseminate them through social media, women are on average much more successful than men in reaching a higher number of signatures as well as in achieving policy change, their success being largely due to the ability to attract more female signers and mobilize policy-makers online and offline.¹⁰⁹

Also, feminist activists are successfully using social media to create engagement around women's rights issues across countries, as here instead described by Uma Mishra-Newbery Women's March Global Interim Executive Director:

*Many people don't know about the situation for women in Saudi Arabia and the extreme oppression women and girls face. Yet we have been able to unite close to 250,000 people on a petition calling for an immediate release of the imprisoned women human rights defenders by utilizing Facebook, Insta Stories, Twitter, etc. to help draw awareness.*¹¹⁰

Finally, female activists are using the tools provided by social media to denounce sexism and gender-based violence, and to change norms on gender and power.

109 Mellon, J. and Russon-Gilman, H., Sjöberg, F. and Peixoto, T., "Gender and Political Mobilization Online: Participation and Policy Success on a Global Petitioning Platform" (2017). Ash Center Occasional Paper, July 2017.

110 Uma Mishra-Newbery, personal interview, February 1, 2019.



We have been able to unite close to 250,000 people on an online petition supporting women human rights defenders in Saudi Arabia.

Uma Mishra-Newbery, Interim Executive Director of the Women's March Global

Started with the aim of denouncing and addressing sexual harassment, the #MeToo movement has had political implications too, as more women have reported being more interested in voting for a female candidate as a result of it.¹¹¹ The #NotTheCost Campaign launched by the National Democratic Institute has denounced and counteracted violence against women in politics globally¹¹² and in Kenya, the #BetterThanThis digital campaign laid the ground work for long-

111 In 2018, 37% of American women (and 50% of millennial women) reported that the issues regarding sexual harassment made them more likely to vote for women candidates. That same year's Mid-Term elections saw an unprecedented number of female candidates run for office and win seats in the United States House of Representatives and Senate. Barbara Lee Family Foundation, *New research: Voters, Candidates and #MeToo* (2018).

112 Bardall, G., "Gender-Specific Election Violence: The Role of Information and Communication Technologies" (2013), *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, 2(3).

term institutional reforms for the inclusion of women in political spaces.

Finally, social media has provided fresh opportunities to groups whose voices had not been heard before. According to Kristina Wilfore:

Being part of a global community of activism for women has bolstered countries with less visible rights for women, and with less presence of women in politics. It's now more acceptable to label oneself as a feminist, which many countries in the Former Soviet Union have historically characterized such identity as a Western phenomenon. Social media has been a vehicle for pointing out sexism and rigid gender roles toward women by creating a public account of the instances of insult and discrimination - in media, politics and everyday interactions between men and women. Digital platforms have given minority voices more power to level the playing field and help women activists find a common voice and see opportunities for organizing less active women by encouraging them to speak out and use their own platforms as well as contribute to various hashtag campaigns.¹¹³



Being part of a global community of activism for women has bolstered countries with less visible rights for women, and with less presence of women in politics.

Kristina Wilfore, a political consultant and expert in increasing women's political influence internationally

113 Kristina Wilfore, personal interview, March 14, 2019.

Creating Change: How Journalists, Tech Companies, Policy- Makers, Political Parties and Politicians Can Change the Discourse on Women and Politics¹¹⁴



¹¹⁴ These recommendations were inspired by over eighty-five original interviews and conversations with experts, female politicians and journalists, as well as by the guidelines and recommendations issued by international and US-based institutions. These institutions include, among others: International IDEA, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Global Alliance for Media and Gender (GAMAG), the European Commission, the International Federation of Journalists, the Women's Media Center (WMC), the Barbara Lee Family Foundation and Atalanta.

Ensuring that women have equal opportunities to engage politically is extremely beneficial for the quality of countries' democratic debates, with positive ripple effects for a multiplicity of actors.

When female politicians are actively engaging with their followers and debating policy issues online, social media increases its legitimacy as an arena of civic engagement.¹¹⁵

When female political candidates are more visible, political parties increase their appeal to those female voters who are currently not seeing themselves represented by the political establishment.¹¹⁶

When women leaders are made visible on television and news, traditional media outlets are recognized as agents of positive change, improving their appeal to an audience that is ever more willing to call out sexism and leverage its power (including its purchasing power) for good.

More broadly, women's participation in governance increases public trust in democratic institutions, enlarges the pool of qualified candidates and improves policy-making.



At a time when freedom of speech is under threat, it is imperative for social media companies and traditional media to promote freedom of expression and also discern between freedom of expression and hate-speech.

Nighat Dad, Pakistani lawyer and internet activist

Yet, so far, female politicians and political aspirants have been mostly left to themselves, relying on one another and the power of their connections for support when dealing with traditional and social media. While such connections are essential in unlocking women's leadership¹¹⁷, changing the narrative on women and power to promote more inclusive, diverse and stronger democracies will require a greater effort from news and social media outlets.

¹¹⁵ Clayton, A., O'Brien, D. Z. and Piscopo, J. M., "All Male Panels? Representation and Democratic Legitimacy", *American Journal of Political Science* (2019), 63: 113-129.

¹¹⁶ UNDP and NDI (2011) *Empowering Women for Stronger Political Parties. A Good Practices Guide to Promote Women's Political Participation*.

¹¹⁷ Verveer, M. and Azzarelli, K., *Fast Forward: How Women Can Achieve Power and Purpose* (Mariner Books, 2015).

According to the Pakistani lawyer and Internet activist Nighat Dad:

*At a time when freedom of speech is under threat both in the online and offline spaces, it is imperative for social media companies and traditional media to promote freedom of expression and also discern between freedom of expression and hate-speech. Social media companies and traditional media have a huge role to play in any state and it is important for them to promote free speech for individuals and also not be biased in terms of their reporting.*¹¹⁸

Policy-makers, political parties and citizens themselves also must be agents of change, using their purchasing power and whatever leverage they have to push for change online and offline. According to Allie Miller:

While the majority of the responsibility falls on the social media company itself, we, as users, must stand against technological injustice when we see it. If you see inappropriate content, flag it. If a mobile photo app does not recognize your face because you are not their “average tested user”, contact the company and ask for change. Tell your friends to contact them. Write an article. Speak to a journalist. Because if there is a feature missing that is critical to building a bedrock of inclusion, you can use the very platforms you want it on to get your voice heard. In the age of social media, every user is powerful, and every human can make a difference.

118 Nighat Dad, personal interview, April 2, 2019.

*If there is change you want to see in the world, gather your (social) network and take action.*¹¹⁹



In the age of social media, every user is powerful, and every human can make a difference. If there is change you want to see in the world, gather your (social) network and take action.

Allie Miller, Lead Product Manager at IBM Watson at time of interview, now US Head of Artificial Intelligence Business Development for Startups and Venture Capital at Amazon

119 Allie Miller, personal interview, March 24, 2019.

How Traditional Media Outlets Can Change the Frames on Gender & Politics

1. Ensure diversity in the newsroom

The first step towards promoting greater gender equality in the media coverage of female politicians is ensuring diversity in the newsroom, because when more female journalists are in decision-making roles, women politicians are more likely to receive coverage that is fair in tone and quantity.¹²⁰

Marianne Schnall, journalist, author of “What Will It Take to Make a Woman President? Conversations about Women, Leadership and Power” and founder of Feminist.com and WhatWillItTake.com also talks about the difference that having more female journalists can make in terms of the media representation of women politicians:

*I always reached out to female elected officials when writing political stories about them. In many ways, as a female journalist, I found it easier to establish relationships of trust with them, as there is often greater confidence that the way they'll be covered and the questions they'll be asked won't have gender biases.*¹²¹

120 Steiner, L., “Newsroom accounts of power at work” in C. Carter, G. Branston, and S. Allan, eds. (1998) *News, gender and power*, London and New York: Routledge. pp.145-159; Melin-Higgins, M., “Coping with journalism: Gendered newsroom culture” in M. de Bruin and K. Ross, eds. (2004) *Gender and newsroom cultures: identities at work*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc. pp.197-222.

121 Marianne Schnall, personal interview, February 14, 2019.



In many ways, as a female journalist, I found it easier to establish relationships of trust with them.

Marianne Schnall, journalist and author

Almost everywhere, however, newsrooms are mostly male-dominated and while the number of women who graduate in media-related studies has grown, female journalists are often confined to reporting on education and lifestyle, or quit the job after a few years, as they clash with the newsroom sexist culture, the glass ceiling towards higher management positions and the difficulty balancing family and 24-hour news cycles.¹²²

According to Susan Chira, Editor in Chief of the Marshall Project and former Deputy Executive Director, Foreign Editor and Senior Correspondent for Gender Issues at The New York Times:

News media organizations need not only to be proactive about hiring women—and women of color, women from different social and

122 Ross, K., *Gender, Politics, News: A Game of Three Sides*.

educational and class backgrounds—but also much more proactive about helping them throughout their careers: making sure they receive plum opportunities and assignments that could arm them with credentials that could prepare them for leadership positions down the line. And companies need to be extremely conscious of their policies around parental leave, child-rearing, flexible work arrangements, age limits for retirement, etc., because women often do take more time to rise through the ranks or attain senior positions because of their caretaking responsibilities, whether for children or elderly parents. There are many women entering journalism; there are far too few in leadership positions”.¹²³



There are many women entering journalism; there are far too few in leadership positions.

Susan Chira, Editor in Chief of the Marshall Project and former Deputy Executive Director, Foreign Editor and Senior Correspondent for Gender Issues at the New York Times

¹²³ Susan Chira, personal interview, April 23, 2019.

For Annalisa Merelli, Staff Reporter at Quartz:

*Challenges run on many different levels: from the likelihood to be assigned on certain beats, to salary and promotion discrimination, to more practical issues such as safety, or having to give up a story because women by nature incur higher threats of violence than men, or even being in uncomfortable situations with sources who make inappropriate comments. Additionally, I don't know that many male reporters get asked, upon learning that they are journalists, whether they write about fashion—it's rather common for me (I cover politics).*¹²⁴

Though limited, there are some best practices in this field. Anna Bressanin explains how one such initiative is changing the way teams work:

Recently the BBC launched the 50/50 initiative—every department keeps track of the gender balance of our journalists and of the people we feature and interview. The goal is to help us understand where we are and ultimately bring the quota to 50/50. I am not part of the 50/50 steering committee, but as a commissioning editor for BBC Reel in the US, I hire and work with about 70 freelancer journalists around the world. Every month we receive a report of how many women vs. men journalists had their work published on BBC Reel and stats on the gender balance of the people we feature in our pieces. It's a useful tool and it's a conversation starter. It makes editors take action if they see that

¹²⁴ Annalisa Merelli, personal interview, February 20, 2019.

their vertical is not doing well at closing the gender gap.¹²⁵



I don't know that many male reporters get asked whether they write about fashion—it's rather common for me (I cover politics).

Annalisa Merelli, Staff Reporter at Quartz

2. Provide gender-sensitive media training to journalists

Secondly, media outlets should commit to providing training to their staff at all levels in recognizing and addressing gender bias in their own concepts, language, choice of panelists, interview setting and visual materials. For example, debates where all candidates are sitting have an equalizing effect on women, who are on average shorter than men and give the visual impression of being “weaker” in debates where male and female candidates are standing side by side.

While gender-sensitive media training has taken place in some countries,¹²⁶ these initiatives are few and far between, and the overwhelming majority of journalists interviewed for this study reported not having received any capacity building in this area.

3. Adopt gender-sensitive indicators for media coverage of male and female politicians

Thirdly, adopting gender-sensitive indicators for media coverage of male and female politicians can be helpful in improving fairness in the coverage of female politicians and political candidates.

Quantitatively, coverage of female politicians should aim at being at least proportional to their relative presence in governance, as this would go a long way in normalizing the idea of female leadership and empower young women to consider a political career for themselves.¹²⁷ Qualitatively, coverage of female politicians should ensure that journalists are treating female political candidates and politicians fairly and without replicating gender stereotypes. As the American feminist, journalist and political activist Gloria Steinem notes: “The most workable definition of equality for journalists is reversibility. Don't mention her young

¹²⁶ European Commission, *Opinion on 'Breaking Gender Stereotypes in the Media'*, Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, Social Europe (Brussels 2010).

¹²⁷ Campbell, D. and Wolbrecht, C., “See Jane Run: Women Politicians as Role Models for Adolescents”, *The Journal of Politics*, 2 (2006), pp. 233-247.

¹²⁵ Anna Bressanin, personal Interview, March 18, 2019.

children unless you would also mention his, or describe her clothes unless you would describe his, or say she's shrill or attractive unless the same adjectives would be applied to a man".¹²⁸

4. Establish media awards for gender-sensitive reporting

Another instrument that can be useful in promoting gender-sensitive reporting is media awards that reward best practices from individual journalists, as well as media outlets; such awards have been implemented by nonprofits like the *International Women's Media Foundation* or the United Nations all over the world, including in Samoa, Uganda, India and South Africa, just to mention some.

5. Challenge gender stereotypes around women and power

Finally, traditional media has the responsibility to start challenging gender stereotypes by showing more gender non-stereotypical images and stories, ensuring time and space are dedicated to disseminating the findings of available research on the benefits of gender equality and shining a spotlight on a more diverse set of leadership styles.

¹²⁸ Larris, R. and Maggio, R., *Name it. Change it. The Women's Media Center's Media Guide to Gender Neutral Coverage of Women Candidates + Politicians*.

How Social Media Companies Can Become Equalizers for Women in Politics

In order to ensure that the digital space becomes a truly safe and empowering arena for both men and women to engage in political debates and exercise their political rights on equal terms, several issues must be addressed.

1. Improve diversity

Firstly, Silicon Valley must improve its record when it comes to gender diversity. Alaina Percival, CEO and Board Chair of Women Who Code, explains it in the following terms:

When you have a diverse team building a product or developing an idea, you have greater perspective allowing for more creativity and the ability to approach a problem from different angles. An example of this is that when airbags were first invented, they were killing women because they had been designed by an all-male team and built for an average-sized man. Having greater diversity means you are able to see and address issues that you might otherwise be blind to, and that could be the case with online hate speech addressed against women.¹²⁹

¹²⁹ Alaina Percival, personal interview, March 15, 2019.

¹³⁰ While there is no universally recognized definition of harassment and violence, it might be good to point to the one adopted by the Law 243 in Bolivia, which defines political violence as “physical, psychological or sexual actions, behaviors, and/or aggressions” and harassment as any act “of pressure, persecution, harassment, or threats, made by a person or a group of people, directly or through a third party, against women candidates, elected and appointed officials, or those performing a public service, or against her family, with the purpose of shortening, suspending, impeding or restricting the functions attached to her post”.



Having greater diversity means you are able to see and address issues that you might otherwise be blind to, and that could be the case with online hate speech addressed against women.

Alaina Percival, CEO and Board Chair,
Women Who Code

2. Take advantage of technological innovations to address online sexism, gender-based hate speech and harassment

Secondly, it's of utmost importance that social media companies address online sexism, gender-based hate speech, harassment¹³⁰, organized trolling and bots aimed at silencing women's and minority voices.

The majority of female politicians and experts interviewed for this study reported the need to improve user accountability and ensure that abusive content and hate speech be identified, tracked and removed in a more transparent and consistent manner than is the case today.

Lisa Roman, Public Policy Manager at Twitter, reports that the company has been making important changes to its operations to address this issue:

Our team uses proprietary-built internal technology to proactively find abusive content and provides users with a single report that they can email to the police. Our Hateful Conduct Policy prohibits the promotion of violence against—or threats of attack toward—people on the basis of certain categories such as gender, race and ethnic origin. As per these policies, we take strong enforcement action if an incident violates our rules. Hateful conduct directed at women, including direct threats of violence and harassment, are prohibited on Twitter. We have made more than 30 individual changes to our product, policies and operations in the past 16 months, all with the goal of improving safety for everyone. We now take action on 10 times the number of abusive accounts as the same time last year. Our policy, product and engineering teams continue to work collaboratively to find ways to innovate to protect our users and enhance their experience, particularly as those in our society intent on harm find new ways to hurt and abuse.¹³¹

¹³¹ Lisa Roman, personal interview, May 2, 2019.



The role that social media platforms' algorithms played in spreading misogyny is by now well documented. I believe that technologists now have the moral responsibility, as well as the opportunity, to help ameliorate the unfairness in media.

Olya Gurevich, Chief Scientist and Co-founder at Marvelous AI

Technological innovations, and artificial intelligence in particular, can and should be used to support efforts to curb biased, hostile and harassing content on social media rather than aid it. According to Olya Gurevich:

The role that social media platforms' click-optimization algorithms played in spreading misogyny and other biases is by now well documented. I believe that technologists now have the moral responsibility, as well as the opportunity, to help ameliorate the unfairness in media, and this goes beyond just changing the click incentives. There is a growing body

of research on identifying, and addressing, inherent bias in AI models learned from biased real-world data (e.g. current text similarity models learned that “man” is as closely related to “computer programmer” as “woman” is to “homemaker”). On the flip side, technology, and AI in particular, needs to be deployed as a defense mechanism for individuals or groups who receive unfair coverage. In some cases, just pointing out the systematic unfairness in qualitative ways is enough to start changing journalists’ attitudes; but most often that’s not enough, and targeted individuals need to be further empowered to protect themselves. As an example, at Marvelous AI we’re creating tools to detect political narratives about individual candidates, and helping them decide which narratives are likely to become harmful (and warrant some sort of response) vs. narratives that aren’t worth worrying about. Much more can be done, and has to be done.¹³²

3. Invest in training programs equipping female political activists and women in public service on how to use social media safely and effectively

Finally and in order to ensure that more people, particularly women, are able to take advantage of social media’s equalizing potential to engage civically and politically, large companies like Google, Twitter and Facebook should invest resources to level the digital playing field by supporting civil

society organizations that train female political activists and women in public office, particularly the ones from traditionally underrepresented groups, on how to use emails and social media in a way that’s safe and effective, without being silenced by mobs of hateful trolls.¹³³



Particularly for women stepping into the public eye for the first time, the abuse prevalent on social media can be shocking and frightening. Training programs are essential to ensure that women know how to effectively use the resources available to them.

Eva Barboni, Founder and CEO at Atalanta

¹³² Olya Gurevich, personal interview, May 8, 2019.

¹³³ Eva Barboni, personal interview, November 3, 2019

How Political Parties Can Support Female Politicians Online and Offline

Traditionally considered the gatekeepers of democracy, political parties have a responsibility in ensuring that men and women fully take part in the political discourse and take advantage of the opportunities provided by traditional and social media to disseminate their messages, free from violence and harassment.

1. Increase diversity at all levels, including senior party leadership

First of all, achieving gender parity within political parties at all levels of the hierarchy must be a clear goal, as it will be key in ensuring lasting shifts in internal party cultures in favor of gender equality.

2. Adopt codes of conducts regarding the use of language on social and traditional media, severely punishing sexist and harassing language coming from their members

Secondly, political parties must ensure that their internal culture doesn't breed or tolerate sexist behaviors and language, adopting codes of conduct regarding the use of language on social and traditional media and severely punishing sexist and harassing language coming from their members.

3. Encourage female political activists and politicians to learn about their vulnerability to violence and enhance their safety

Thirdly, senior party leaders should encourage their female members to learn about their vulnerability to violence and enhance their safety through tools like #think10, an online self-assessment and safety planning tool developed by the National Democratic Institute.¹³⁴

4. Political parties should provide training to female candidates and political aspirants on how to engage with traditional and social media

Fourthly, political parties should provide tailored training to female candidates and political aspirants on how to engage on traditional and social media in a way that's both effective and safe, taking into consideration safety issues and double binds, among other things.

For Liz Grossman, Managing Director at Baobab Consulting, such trainings are essential for female politicians' success:

In order for women to best harness the media, they should hire experts who can prepare them for interviews and questioning, who can also enforce strict rules with journalists regarding which questions they can ask and which subjects are taboo. Leaders cannot be expected

¹³⁴ #Think10 (<https://think10.demcloud.org>) is a tool providing politically-active women guidance on how to enhance their personal security and develop a safety plan relevant to their political context, personal and professional profile.

*to succeed at securing positive media coverage alone, and they need advocates to ensure they are treated fairly and their message is carefully crafted to achieve their goals.*¹³⁵



Leaders cannot be expected to succeed at securing positive media coverage alone, and they need advocates to ensure they are treated fairly and their message is carefully crafted to achieve their goals.

Liz Grossman, Managing Director at Baobab Consulting

¹³⁵ Liz Grossman, personal interview, January 31, 2019

How Policy-Makers Can Change Policies and Culture for Gender Equality in Government

Policy-makers have a unique role to play in promoting gender equality in government and beyond by providing a regulatory framework for the media, helping young generations access technology and understand how to use it, as well as protecting and expanding the political rights of women and other underrepresented groups.

According to Ana Helena Chacon Echeverri, who served as Costa Rica's Vice President from 2014 to 2018 and is now Ambassador to Spain:

*Connectivity makes a nation more democratic. In countries where access exists only in the capital, it's impossible to transfer information quickly and we are equally vulnerable to fake news, which is difficult to forget and undermines people's trust in institutions. Digital literacy and the dissemination of truthful and constant information will make democracies stronger.*¹³⁶

Globally, women use the internet on average 12% less than men, with the gap widening to 32% in the least developed countries¹³⁷, due to social norms, income and concerns around privacy and safety.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ Ana Helena Chacon Echeverri, personal interview, March 21, 2019.

¹³⁷ Chakravorti, B., "There's a Gender Gap in Internet Usage. Closing It Would Open Up Opportunities for Everyone", *Harvard Business Review* (2017).

¹³⁸ National Democratic Institute (NDI) *Women, Technology And Democracy Survey* (Washington, DC, 2015).



Digital literacy and the dissemination of truthful and constant information will make democracies stronger.

Ana Helena Chacon Echeverri, Costa Rica's Vice President from 2014 to 2018 and currently Ambassador to Spain

1. Increase internet access and promote digital literacy

Firstly, governments all over the world should aim at ensuring everyone has equal access to the internet, as well as the cognitive skills to understand and elaborate the information that they receive online. For Valeria Fedeli, an Italian Senator and former Education Minister:

*We need a plan for digital literacy, in which the media, social networks and public policy-makers must take responsibility to put everyone in the position of being citizens who are more aware, responsible and involved in the democratic life of the country.*¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Valeria Fedeli, personal interview, January 11, 2019.

For this to happen, national school curricula must integrate media and information literacy (MIL) courses,¹⁴⁰ promoting critical thinking and providing citizens with the ability to consume and create media content in a positive, thoughtful and effective way, aware of existing bias and able to recognize it and call it out.



We need a plan for digital literacy, in which the media, social networks and public policy-makers must take responsibility to put all citizens in the position to be more aware, responsible and involved in the democratic life of the country.

Valeria Fedeli, Senator, Italy

¹⁴⁰ International nonprofits have designed, piloted and implemented such courses all over the world, with some best practices, as described in Grizzle, A., 'Enlisting media and informational literacy for gender equality and women's empowerment' in Vega Montiel A. (ed.), *Media and gender: A scholarly agenda for the global alliance on media and gender: Towards a global alliance* (UNESCO/IAMCR, Paris, 2014).

According to Swati Chaturvedi, Indian journalist and recipient of the 2018 Prize for Courage for her reporting on politically organized trolling and online harassment: *Sexism in the media is a function of the market. Free press is about the consumer—if the consumer wants a certain content and tone, the press will comply. The papers that use scandalistic and sexist language do so because it's good for their bottom line and business model. The only solution is to change social norms and raise a generation of kids who understand that stereotyping women and judging them by their physical appearance is a way to de-humanize them. Once people understand this, they'll then ask for a different type of content and a different paper.*¹⁴¹



Sexism in the media is a function of the market. Free press is about the consumer—if the consumer wants a certain content and tone, the press will comply.

Swati Chaturvedi, Indian journalist and recipient of the 2018 Prize for Courage

¹⁴¹ Swati Chaturvedi, personal interview, Apr 2, 2019.

2. Promote fair and equal coverage of women politicians on traditional media

Secondly, policy-makers should consider adopting regulations aimed at leveling the playing field and promoting fair and equal coverage for female and male politicians on the news media. In Brazil, a court recently asked that political parties give female candidates at least 30 percent of radio and TV ad time and 30 percent of their campaign funds.¹⁴² In Iceland, the 2011 Media Act demands the monitoring of media output for sexist content, among others. Sweden also requires that public broadcasters' programs be operated on the basis of a gender equality and diversity perspective.¹⁴³

3. Impose fines on social media companies failing to remove abusive content and ensure that perpetrators of online violence face appropriate punishments

Thirdly, as far as regulations for the digital space are concerned, policy-makers should impose fines on companies failing to remove abusive content and

ensure that perpetrators face appropriate punishments, including by increasing the capacity and resources of police departments specialized in these types of crimes. There are some legislative best practices in terms of regulations: in 2012, Bolivia adopted a groundbreaking law on harassment and political violence against women, including psychological threats and harassment. The following year, Mexico amended its law on violence against women to include a similar provision. Several European countries have also adopted regulations against sexist and hate speech and the Council of Europe addressed this issue through a wide set of instruments and strategies, including the 2011 Istanbul Convention and the Internet Governance Strategy 2016-2020. The European Union has also recently issued guidelines urging companies to remove content inciting hatred and violence within one hour, but “without any associated legislation to give the rule teeth” it has had little impact.¹⁴⁴ Everywhere, implementation of policies to address online violence against women has been quite weak and the majority of politicians and journalists interviewed for this study reported having suffered online harassment, with total impunity for their perpetrators.

142 Cornish, A. (Host), Osborn, C. (Interviewee) & Petrone, T. (Interviewee). (2018). New Regulations In Brazil Are Trying To Address Gender Gap For Upcoming Elections. Retrieved from National Public Radio website: <https://www.npr.org/2018/09/11/646801449/new-regulations-in-brazil-are-trying-to-address-gender-gap-for-upcoming-election>.

143 Edström, E., Nordic journalism with gender parity and problems, in Edström, E. and Mølster, R. (eds) *Making Change. Nordic Examples of Working Towards Gender Equality in the Media*. Nordicom (2014).

144 Council of Europe, 'Background note on sexist hate speech', Gender Equality Unit, Council of Europe, (Strasbourg, 2016); Barboni, E., (Anti)social media: the benefits and pitfalls of digital for female politicians (2018).

How Women Politicians Can Use Traditional and Social Media to Succeed

According to Melanne Verveer, Executive Director of the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security at Georgetown University and first United States Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues: "Social media represents for many women politicians an entirely new frontier and one that they need to still learn how to take advantage of and use in a safe and effective way. It's an entirely different ballgame".¹⁴⁵



Social media represents for many women politicians a new frontier. It's an entirely different ballgame.

Melanne Verveer, Executive Director of the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security and first United States Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues

While the responsibility for fixing online sexism and harassment falls on the gatekeepers (political parties, traditional and social media), there are some best practices female political aspirants and politicians can adopt in engaging with traditional and social media in a way that benefits their political outcomes, learning from the women that have been most successful at it.

1. Call out sexism, denounce online harassment and respond to negative ads

Firstly, women in politics need to be prepared to push back against sexism, denounce online harassment and respond to negative ads. Many of them have successfully done so in past years,¹⁴⁶ seeing both their popular support and the awareness around this issue increase, as there is evidence that when a female candidate directly confronts sexist coverage, explaining

¹⁴⁶ Asked about her marital status during her presidential campaign, Kah Walla, a single woman, responded that such question kept coming up just because she was a woman and continued: "Those who have brought Cameroon to its knees are married men" (Ngomba, T., 'Cameroon's Female Obama: Deconstructing the Kah Walla Phenomenon in the Context of the 2011 Presidential Elections in Cameroon' in Raicheva-Stover, M. and Ibroscheva, E. (eds.), *Women in Politics and Media: Perspectives from Nations in Transition*). During her 1995 Presidential Campaign in Chile, Michelle Bachelet exposed and addressed the sexist attacks she had received from her opponents (García Beaudoux, V., 'Television Influence on the Creation of Gender Stereotypes and in Social Perception of Women's Leadership. The Importance of Reframing for Social Change' *Ciencia Política, suppl. Feminismos y prácticas políticas en América Latina*, 9.18, 2014, pp. 47-66). In 2012, then Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard denounced the misogynistic treatment she had been target of, in a speech that became famous all over the world.

¹⁴⁵ Melanne Verveer, personal interview, February 13, 2019.

for example why appearance-based stories and questions about domestic arrangements have no place in the media, she recovers voter confidence and creates a more gender-friendly environment for future candidates.¹⁴⁷

2. Build a community of online supporters who will pile onto the aggressors when they post harassing comments on social media

Secondly, female politicians and candidates need to build a community of supporters who will pile onto the aggressors when they post harassing comments on social media. For Celinda Lake:

As more women politicians use social media to build connections with more people, the potential to drown out the misogyny and harassment grows. For example, in the days following the Trump/Billy Bush bus video”,¹⁴⁸ an author in Canada who had written about sexual assault and harassment invited women to tweet at her about their first experience being assaulted/harassed using the hashtag #NotOK. In just a couple days 28 million women responded and Twitter lit up with these stories. Forcing others who never took the issue seriously to come face

¹⁴⁷ Larris, R. and Maggio, R., *Name it. Change it. The Women’s Media Center’s Media Guide to Gender Neutral Coverage of Women Candidates + Politicians*; Barbara Lee Family Foundation, *Change the Channel: Ads that Work for Women Candidates* (2013).

¹⁴⁸ This refers to a video, filmed in 2005 and featuring then TV celebrity Donald Trump with the journalist Billy Bush. In the video, which came to light during the 2016 United States presidential campaign, Donald Trump brags in vulgar terms about kissing, groping and trying to have sex with women.

to face with these firsthand accounts is a powerful way to shift their opinions.¹⁴⁹



As I exposed and denounced trolls, thousands of people came in my defense.

Laura Boldrini, Congresswoman and former President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies

Laura Boldrini,¹⁵⁰ Congresswoman and former President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies, reports having highly benefited from the support of an online community of like-minded people who supported her as she was harassed by trolls and haters:

Social media is truly a double-edged sword. I became a target of politically motivated, vicious online attacks carried out by armies of trolls who used sexism and fake news, trying to silence and delegitimize me. Yet, as I exposed and denounced the trolls and harassers, thousands of people came to my defense online, claiming the digital space as an arena to denounce sexism and shape the political discourse.

¹⁴⁹ Celinda Lake, personal interview, April 2, 2019.

¹⁵⁰ Laura Boldrini, personal interview, June 4, 2019.

Conclusion

Writing this paper has been a true journey in discovering the incredible power and resilience of women political leaders globally. Despite extremely hostile environments, they are committed to staying the course and driving change with any tools available to them, even when these tools are fraught or can pose a danger for their reputation and safety. While women politicians' voices throughout the paper are compelling and paint a consistent picture of their complicated relationship with traditional and social media, they are only a small sample.

In order to complete, check and fine-tune the findings of this research, it's essential that more country-and region-specific studies be carried out, understanding the specificities of different cultural and legal contexts and taking into account intersectionality. Also, a data-driven analysis is needed on the way male and female politicians use social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram globally.

How many women politicians are on these platforms in different countries, how active are they and how many "friends" and "followers" do they have with respect to their male colleagues? Are female politicians more frequent targets of

attacks coming from fake news accounts on social media, as an early study of the 2020 Democratic Party Presidential primaries in the United States seems to suggest? If so, why? Does this apply to other countries too?

While studies have been made in some countries and races, there isn't a global framework to collect or present this information and social media companies approached for this study didn't provide this information.

Finally, what are the behaviors that have made some female politicians able to use traditional and social media as a way to enhance their political outcomes and their ability to drive change, and how can they be replicated?

Finding answers to these questions is critical because the more we know, the likelier it will be that traditional and social media outlets can truly begin to serve as tools to promote gender equal and participatory democracies.

It's also urgent, as the global challenges democratic societies and the planet as a whole are facing require bolder responses, and we cannot rely only on half of the talent pool to be able to address them.

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