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## Media's Gender Bias in Political Sphere in Zimbabwe

\*<sup>1</sup>Muleya Jameson Denzilizium and <sup>2</sup>Ziweya Progress

<sup>1, 2</sup>Lecturer, Management and Leadership, SARPCCO Centre of Excellence, University of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe.

### Abstract

The media is one of the most powerful and pervasive of the agents of socialisation; through its messages, the society's perception is constantly influenced either negatively or positively. Embedded within our day to day lifestyle, different forms of media are largely unfair, stereotypical and limiting in presenting women than they do with men. This is evidenced by the available statistics in media coverage of both women and men on any given issue, (Wood, 1994; pp. 31). In Zimbabwe, there are several issues that are skewed by media reporting for either personal or collective reasons. This paper will delve into how the media is biased towards gender when presenting issues related to men and women in Zimbabwean politics, specifically those vying for political office and those already in political positions. Men and women are stereotypically depicted in ways that mirror and endorse how gender is socially viewed, for instance those that purport men's natural ability to lead and women's perfect fit for domestic and care work. Media in Zimbabwe also has a tendency of normalising skewed or incorrect reporting that works against women through its depictions that either lack context or use loaded language in presenting women. The opinion of the media is powerful in a way that commands respect from society; it should therefore be put into cognisance that if media are used properly they can be an effective instrument to reverse long standing destructive views and or stereotypes in society. This paper therefore, presents the skewedness of Media in Zimbabwe's political area.

**Keywords:** Media, gender, politics, media's gender bias

### 1. Introduction

Media portrayals are very important in any political fraternity. Politics is about power in the national governments of a Country or State. Politicians are people elected in the positions of authority and mandated with decisions on how to use and allocate country's economic resources. Women and men with ambitions of authority join politics in order to get this power. In a democratic country like Zimbabwe as indicated in section one of the 2013 Zimbabwean Constitution, government leaders are elected by people (electorates). Politicians engage in campaigning process which is a way of influencing electorates to vote for them. Media as the main campaigning tool plays a pivotal role when it comes to influencing electorates to vote for candidates for political position. Any political candidate who qualifies for any political position in a country's political structure needs to adequately convince electorates that he/she is better qualified than other candidates. This is where media becomes an important instrument. Media can work in favour or against the candidate during the political campaigning process. It can be used in the framing, ignoring or presenting the candidates to the public (Falk, 2010) <sup>[4]</sup>. This paper will therefore concentrate in explaining how media is gender bias in politics. It is a fact that media affects women and men in politics differently.

### 2. Women Politicians and Media

Section 56(2) of the Zimbabwean Constitution states that "women and men have the right to equal treatment, including the right to equal opportunities in political sphere..." In Zimbabwe, however, media does not give a fair play ground for women and men in politics. It seems to be biased against women as compared to the men counterparts. As pointed by Falk (2010) <sup>[4]</sup>, historical trends show that women political candidates of any level consistently receive less press coverage than their male counterparts running in the same races. Whenever the media decide to cover the events, there is inadequacy in the coverage of women's issues by news media. This indicates how news media is being a structurally masculine narrative. Women related issues are considered marginal importance in media. Women who wish to succeed in politics are forced to define themselves outside the patriarchal definitions of femininity in order to be taken seriously. In most cases, media like the society describe such women as unfeminine and give them various labels such as 'iron women, ruthless, belligerent and doggedly', which attributes are common in men. However, it is surprising to note that when these attributes emerge in men, media attach different character to mean strong leadership yet when in women politicians, it is criticised and vilified by the same media. This clearly indicates that women who enter political sphere are prone to criticism as opposed to their male

counterparts who are praised for braveness. Inadequacy of reporting about women and marginalisation of women related issues in the media contributes to the treatment of inequality as of secondary importance in politics. It is important to realise that media's responsibilities should be in challenging the patriarchy. In fact, the media's unfair treatment of women politicians worsen the situation in the society's patriarchal created structures where women's entry and success within politics sphere is not tolerated.

Very little if any, positive comments from media about Zimbabwean women politicians. For those women who have made it at the top such as Zimbabwe's former Vice president Joice Mujuru, the then MDC A's president Thokozani Khupe and others regularly receive negative comments if ever media cover their events while their male counterparts, the likes of Nelson Chamisa are described as charismatic leaders simply because they are male politicians. All what the media has done is either to ignore women politicians by none coverage of their events or write negative inferences about them. The media's negative reports on women politicians have negatively affected their positions in society. This is supported by Falk (2010) [4] when he said "when multiple reports and newspapers consistently short-change women or invite the same negative inferences, the candidate and her supporters may be justifiably concerned". Typical example in Zimbabwe is the then MDC A's women president Thokozani Khupe who rarely received media coverage in her 2018 campaigns and some times where it covered her events, it portrayed her as a loser certainly attributed to the actually results where she lost dismally. This does not only affect Thokozani Khupe as an individual, instead, when press tends to treat women less seriously than men, this regular pattern will undermine even other individuals who would be potential women from believing that they can win the elections should they take up the competition (Falk, 2010) [4].

In most cases, when media reports on women, they are often represented as victims of violence, class of people who need government assistance and other negative representation of women which discriminate their self-confidence.

Women are usually reported as weak and less intelligent; making them not suitable for public sphere including politics (Beoku-Betts, 1975) [1]. Falk (2010) [4] also noted the misconception which people have on women when they say women are unusual and unnatural for them to be in political sphere. Furthermore, the press ignore women politicians resulting in them being unpopular to electorates and more specific to other women.

This will shun away potential female political candidates as this seems to normalise the fact that women are less normative and more difficult for women to achieve (Falk, 2010) [4]. Politics is played in the public sphere which the same sphere is said to be not for women (Beoku-Betts, 1975) [1] and as such, press negatively portrays and ignores women who choose to join politics and this deter some other women from having political aspirations.

Press do concentrate on politicians of higher level where women are rarely found, for example currently Zimbabwe does not have a woman at presidium level and very few sit in the cabinet. Those women who had made it to ministerial posts are allocated less visible ministries which are not much covered by media. The scarcity of women in higher and important political positions which receive more media attention combined with the current press propensity to ignore these women who do compete for political offices reduce the chances of producing women role models and mentors who

would inspire other potential good women leaders. It is obedient and exploited domestic workers who are reported as real role model for women, thus emphasising women's place to be in domestic sphere like homes. A Zimbabwean gender and media consultant Marimbe (2019) [7] also noted the missing of women in influential positions when she said "there is worrisome scarcity of women on parastatal boards, political structures, in cabinet and other public service positions".

Side-lining and ignoring women politicians by the press which has in most cases portrayed them in a stereotypical way has an effect of amplifying the idea that women do not belong to political sphere. Women have been described as the class of people who belong to domestic sphere of home taking care and public spheres including political is the men's play area. Press coverage as put forward by Falk (2010) [4] present female political candidates in traditional roles highlighting personal lives and family responsibilities rather than political accomplishments. It is for this reason that press usually tends to portray women as less viable than their men counterparts to hold public offices as such, cover them less often, making them seen less normative.

### 3. Relationship between Media and Politics

Despite the availability of interpersonal contact between political candidates and electorates on lower levels, media remains faster and effective in the dissemination of information about candidates especially at House of assembly, senatorial and presidential level where large constituents are covered. Most of the information reaches these constituents through media as such press plays an integral role in a campaigning process (Falk, 2010) [4].

The way press portrays and treats political candidates do affect who later decide to be a candidate (ibid). Media's effects can either encourage people to join politics and become interested or disengage the idea of participating in politics. Media's unfair treatment of women in politics tend to convince audiences that women are intruders and should not participate in politics. This enforces the thinking that women are incapable of running public offices which thinking should be opposed as it has been proved to be oppressive and barbaric to the contemporary societies which should be calling for equality and inclusivity. In fact, media should be encouraged to represent the society fairly.

### 4. Role of Media in Politics

Media is one of the important tools in the field of politics. As noted by Rakow and Kranick (1991) [6], some types of news such as hard, serious, or important news seem to be meant for men while less important, soft or social news which include human interests, lifestyle news are for women. This therefore supports the traditional statement which says 'news is about men, by men, through men's eyes. News is a commodity and public represent consumers, media is the tool through which news is sold to public then how women politicians are sold to people in qualitative terms is as important as how often they appear in the news (Ross 2003) [10].

A standing assumption in the modern democratic country like Zimbabwe is that men and women have comparable access to position of power. The question is that, does this assumption stand considering the way media treats women and men in politics? Media is a marketing tool for politicians since everything known about any politician especially at national level is imparted through the media. Its bias can seriously have important social effects (Falk, 2010) [4]. Some of the

questions to be asked when analysing the media coverage in Zimbabwe as far as men and women in politics include inter alia whether press coverage mitigate or perpetuate stereotypes and gender roles particularly ones that concern political women and whether the way the press covers women candidates affect women's decision to compete for public office. It seems that media only recognise and respect women when dancing for their leaders like chimurenga choir in Zimbabwe and this re-enforces the statement that women are objects.

It is believed that many women in Zimbabwe who manage to compete for political offices maybe more driven and competent than the average men politicians. If this is the case despite media prejudice, many people then ask why women should get worried about the media bias and stereotypical in terms of coverage of women politicians.

The most important character of media is its influence in the marketing of politicians' competencies to the electorates. Zimbabwe as a free and democratic country (section 1 of its constitution) that prides itself on creating a fair and level political playing field on which any citizen has the right to pursue public office (section 56(2) of the constitution), people should have all the reason and concerned if the media is biased in favour of one class (men) over the another (Falk, 2010) [4]. It is therefore against this that media should respect the Constitutional provisions and treat all classes both men and women equally. Press's ignorance on women politicians and sometimes painting them in stereotypical ways deter women from competing for public offices thus making women underrepresented in public offices as compared to their men counterparts who are always given the opportunity and well marketed by media when running for positions.

## 5. Women Politicians as News Sources

Women are rarely used as news sources since they do not hold higher posts neither as spokespersons especially in major political parties in Zimbabwe. As traditional, media focus much on leaders of political parties which are male dominated. News which focuses mainly on policies is obtained from men who hold influential positions in their parties such as presidium and spokespersons.

Media consider women as objects and not subjects and therefore sources of news are men as noted by Rakow and Kranick (1991) [6] when they say "news is for men, by men and through men's eyes. Mores so, media are interested on major and popular political parties, for example ZANU PF and MDC A, which are male controlled thereby neglecting the other minority parties including women controlled like Drs Joice Mujuru and Thokozani Khupe's parties. This means no news will come from the women as they are side lined by media as far as coverage is concerned.

Media are more attracted to stories of people in prominent positions and more so in major political parties. The fact that there are few women politicians in prominent positions in major political parties in a country aids to the non-achievement of a media profile by women politicians (Racioppi 2001) [9], like in Zimbabwe where ZANU PF and MDC T have no women in their presidium. Media are therefore attracted to men who are believed to know more because of their dominance and women are the second class. When women found that they have no place in major political parties, they try to form their own political parties as the case with Dr Joice Mujuru after being offloaded by ZANU PF and Dr Thokozani Khupe which become minority parties.

Media as usual give attention to big hitters and not interested on minority parties and worse being led by women.

## 6. Effects of Media's Gender Bias

It is a fact that media have proved to be very powerful in terms of influencing the public opinion which is essential in politics. However, it is not a secret to mention that media have performed dismally in as fa as promoting gender equality is concerned (Marimbe, 2019) [7]. The coming of online social media have been received with a positive view especially by women and other feminists who hoped that it would neutralise the traditional media in gender bias coverage and reporting. It was thought to have brought the opening up a wide variety of global and local opportunities for women in many sectors including political sphere, instead, as of today, it is still regrettably opened a floodgate of gender biased abuses. It is clear that women politicians suffer the effects of media's lack of coverage, stereotypical coverage and coverage that make women less likely to win than they actually are (Falk, 2010) [4]. This will obviously supress women's political engagement and interest. More so, few women in politics would minimise the rile-modelling benefits which comes with seeing other women in public offices. Women leaders especially at higher political levels coupled with wide media marketing for them would provide confidence to other women. Lack of well-advertised role model women leader would result in fewer women likely to pursue political office. 'No run no win' is the game of politics. This means when, women are discourage in pursuing political office, men benefit since they face no competition from women.

The truth about the media is that, they trivialise women's political contributions, undermine political their authority and sometimes render them invisible. It is rare to find an impartial objectivity when media is reporting politics more so the experience of politicians.

Today media has become more important for politicians as the mode of communicating with the public especially when announcing important decisions to populace (Wheeler 1997; Negrine 1998) [14, 8] as it has an advantage of immediacy and avoidance of irksome interpretation of political pundit (Steele and Barnhurst 1996; Bird 1998) [12, 2] which comes with announcing to their peers.

Like in any other scarce resources, media' space cannot accommodate all the stories and as such, good news stories struggle to compete for media attention.

The absence of laid down principles on how to measure the goodness of the stories give journalists to subjectively select stories for media inclusion. Usually the media go for sensational stories instead of factual ones. It has therefore proved to be very hard to get good coverage even for stories which we might consider worth. Media's concern is to go wherever they get a 'quick' story sometimes at an expense of good factual story which could be considered worth in people's lives.

## 7. Language Used in Media

The semiotics in women show that before women are described as politicians or experts, they are first described as women opposed to men who are never identified as men when being associated with their expertise or political careers. A good Zimbabwean example is on Drs Mujuru and Khupe who are usual described first as women and given the advices of balancing family life and their careers despite the fact that they are doctors have seen it all but because they are women. Fowler (1991) [5] also noted that women politicians are



frequently identified according to their marital and family status. Jessie Duarce (1999) of South Africa also commented that “no news would describe man’s appearance a derogatory terms; instead, man’s words are taken as important. However, she further noted that media is interested in describing women’s colour of teeth, make-up, dressing and other trivial issues leaving things that matters. All this is trying to downsize women. Thus, she said the media will be judging women by their looks and their morals rather than their intellect.

Usually media describe women as being passive, signifying as opposed to the description given to men who are given values of strength, leadership and action. Like in the patriarchal discourse, media always treat women politicians as it does to all women-treating them as objects, ignoring their special acquired skills, abilities and even achievements.

## 8. Women in Media

The big question to ask in media gender bias is who direct the media on what, how and for whom to report? This brings the issue of composition in the newsrooms. As noted by Marimbe (2019) [7], the key area of concern is the near absence of women media owners. These media owners control the decisions such as what news and area of concentrating, as such, the absence of women media owners means men owners would always want to have more coverage and praises to men politicians. As if that is not enough, there is only a token number of female media managers who are responsible for news editing and as men managers, they would always want to degrade women especially when they are competing with a male counterpart in political position. Men always classify women as others and consider them intruders in public spheres including political sphere as such they would try their best to make them inferior when reporting in media. The good example can be seen when Dr Thokozani Khupe and Advocate Nelson Chamisa were fighting for presidency in the then MDC A party. Chamisa as man candidate always received positive comments while Thokozani was reported as unsuitable candidate.

It is a fact that news function as a masculine narrative. People in media are very influential when it comes to what is included in news and these include media owners, media managers and journalists. As rightly pointed by Rakow and Kranich (1991) [6] when they noted the importance of attitudes of journalists and other people in media in choosing the news sources.

Whenever women are interviewed, they are only asked about the gender and women’s issues which seem to be less important and do not attract large audience. Mostly they are interviewed discuss issues to do with family support which takes women back to the private domestic sphere where they are care givers. For example, the ZTV programme on women in agriculture emphasise the importance of women’s family support while programmes which discuss issues of security such as constituency talking features men. It is also usual to find that news reports which feature women and men would demonstrate that women’s age and marital status is included simple to degrade the status of women. Dr Khupe, MDC T president is a good example where she is always referred as a unmarried women. This shows that media concentrate on trivial issues like women’s appearance and dressing rather than on things of concern such as women politician’s good policies which would market her much to electorates/public. On the other hand, media rarely comment on men’s outward appearance like what it does to women. Media concentrate on

the issues that matters most such as policies when commenting on men politicians. A women politician is always described as a women politician in the media much concentration on her sex and more so describing her with what she is not such as she is ‘not’ a typical politician (Ross and Sreberny 2000) [11].

## 9. Strategies to Increase Women Coverage

The development of gender directory to provide ready women contacts would give media easy access to women who could be contacted when they are needed to comment on certain issues.

People who appear in the media are not picked haphazard. It is worth to note that there are factors considered by media personnel on who is allowed to access to the media. These factors include, inter alia, news policies, political hierarchies, insider and networking (who do you know). Most of these factors seem to work against women politicians who occupy lower level in the political hierarchies both in their political parties and legislatures, also are not well connected in the media system thereby lacking the ability to attract media attention for easy gateways to access media space. Fighting to achieve significant positions with their political parties and legislatures is one strategy that women politicians can employ if they want to attract the attention of media. It is also important to remember that media do not follow you because you are doing something important instead you have to create good relationship with them (journalists).

The personality of the interviewer, reporters and pundits who are responsible for interrogating what comes out of politicians’ mouths for repackaging also matters. Media personnel identify individuals to interview through their talents or expertise on the concerned issue. In other words, media are attracted to contact or interview a person on an issue of her area of interest or expertise. It is therefore important for women to identify and not only show but also prove to media their talents if they are to attract the attention of the media. The big issue is how to breakthrough to become identified that you are an expert in your area of expertise? These calls for a person to first create good relations with journalists.

## 10. Stereotypical Characteristics of Women

The existence of gender stereotypes which are perpetuated in and by the media is another issue which is worrisome in political sphere. These stereotypes which in most cases negatively affect women are going on unchallenged despite the fact that society could benefit from equality, diversity and inclusivity of both classes of men and women. Marimbe (2019) [7] noted that in Zimbabwe the current media content, sources of news and language of reportage is highly stereotypical and excludes women’s voices.

Women politicians who act beyond confines of natural femininity as imposed by patriarchal discourse and become powerful are labelled as ambitions, confrontational and stubborn. This is the description usually given to such politicians like Drs Mujuru, Khupe and Chigumba who have proved to have crossed the lines and found themselves in the political sphere. These women are occasionally demonised and described as evil.

Media is then fast to make it a topic when a women is alleged malice and evil like what happened on the story of Dr Joice Mujuru when she was alleged to have bewitching the former President Robert Mugabe. The witchcraft is more associated with the feminine as being reported by media. Women are

constantly called a purveyor of evil. Weitz (1977) [13] has described these stereotypes when he said that people find imputations of covert mystical aggression on women. Women are also constantly referred as little girls by media who seem to be incapable of making decisions as such women are referred as not suitable for public office where decisions are the order of the day. This therefore belittles women's political status.

### Conclusion

The quality of news does not matter in media hence a statement that 'the reality is that good news is not always the best news in the eyes of the media as such, the whole mind-set and culture of the media need to change. It requires a complete change of communication relationship between the media and women in politics to reverse and transform the existing biased coverage of women in politics. The responsible authorities should be encouraged to force media to recognise and institute a conscious effort to report on women in politics in a fair and accurate manner. Media should realise that gender of politicians has nothing to do with the quality or quantity of coverage instead, professionalism should be applied. The tendency of media taking women related issues as secondary importance do put away the interest of many women to participate in politics of the country. As long as gender equality is not fairly addressed by media, it would be difficult to attract more women to compete in politics. It is encouraged therefore that Zimbabwe engages in restructuring of gender relations following the clear failure by media in fair reporting female politicians.

Women's position in their political parties and government is one of factors which determine the extent at which they would receive media coverage. However accessibility of women politicians is important in influencing coverage of women politicians. Sometimes political parties control the coverage of media and beyond media's control. The situation of political reporting can improve through changes in both the political parties and national political structures and in the media newsrooms. This would improve the quality and quantity of coverage for women in politics.

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