

Summary of the e-Discussion on

WOMEN IN POLITICS AND THE MEDIA

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LAUNCHING MESSAGE

Background

“The press was as kind as it knew how to be. It meant well and did all for us it knew how to do. We couldn't ask it to do more than it knew how.” [Laughter] — Susan B. Anthony, 1893

Susan B. Anthony was familiar with the press' ways. Journalists relentlessly ridiculed the women's suffrage movement.¹ Fast forward to more than a century later, women in public life still face biased, sexist, and discriminatory media treatment. [Research](#) over the past few decades reveals that women in politics continue to be at a disadvantage when it comes to media coverage.

When reporters cover women in politics, they often use terms that emphasize women's traditional roles and focus on their appearance. They perpetuate stereotypes of women politicians as weak, indecisive, and emotional. They sometimes even hold women politicians accountable for their children's or husbands' actions, though they rarely hold men politicians to the same standards.²

A [study](#) by the Inter-parliamentary Union on violence against women parliamentarians reports that the media can perpetuate rumors and misogynistic behavior. The study's survey revealed that 27.3% of the participating women MPs said that traditional media had shared highly contemptuous or sexually charged images or comments about them. The percentage rose to 41.8% when they were asked about photos or comments disseminated through social media.

Globally, women in politics, particularly women of color, experience overwhelming levels of abuse and [gendered disinformation](#) campaigns, which traditional and social media often fuel and perpetuate. With the purpose of discrediting, delegitimizing, and silencing women in politics, [studies](#) have shown that women are often discouraged and dissuaded from getting involved in politics because of gendered media reporting.

Indeed, sexist media coverage contributes to the underrepresentation of women in politics.³ A worldwide study found that while women's position has generally progressed, it is slower in media representation and politics. Further, it concluded that the more there is sexism in the media, the less women candidates there are.⁴ The media has a powerful influence on voters and gender differences in media coverage can have real electoral consequences. Not only can it dissuade women from engaging in politics, but it also discourages political parties and political elites from selecting women as candidates.⁵

Objective

This e-Discussion raised awareness and collected experiences and knowledge on gender differences in political media coverage, its impact on women's political participation and

¹ Maria Braden, *Women Politicians and the Media*. (University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 1.

² Ibid.

³ Loes Aaldering and Daphne Joanna Van Der Pas, *Political leadership in the media: Gender bias in leader stereotypes during campaign and routine times*. *British Journal of Political Science* 50: 911–31. 2018.

⁴ Amanda Haraldsson and Lena Wängnerud, *The effect of media sexism on women's political ambition: Evidence from a worldwide study*. *Feminist Media Studies* 19: 525–41. 2019.

⁵ Daphne Joanna Van der Pas and Loes Aaldering, “Gender Differences in Political Media Coverage: A Meta-Analysis” *Journal of Communication*, Volume 70, Issue 1 (February 2020): 114-143. doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqz046

representation, as well as gathered good practices and recommendations on ways to counter the negative impact of media portrayals of women in politics with fair and unbiased coverage.

Journalists, producers and editors, media monitoring institutions, electoral management bodies, women and men in politics, political party leaders and members, civil society and women's rights activists, practitioners, and researchers were invited to join this e-Discussion from 07 to 30 September 2022 by answering the below questions. The submissions contributed to the consolidated reply below, augmenting the knowledge base available on the topic.

Questions

1. Are women politicians less visible or covered differently than men in political news coverage in your country? Please share data, if available.
2. What can lawmakers, governments, and civil society do to ensure media outlets/journalists deliver fair and balanced media coverage of women and men in public life?
3. With sexist traditional media coverage disseminated on social media, women in politics are exposed to vicious online attacks and abuse by often anonymous perpetrators. What can social media companies, media outlets, governments, lawmakers, and other decision-makers do to put an end to the crisis of online violence against women in politics?

CONTRIBUTORS

iKNOW Politics and its partners thank their followers for taking the time to contribute to this e-Discussion and share experiences, practices, and recommendations. The following participants joined the e-Discussion:

1. [Abir Chebaro](#), Expert in Gender Equality and Governance, former Gender Advisor to the Prime Minister, **Lebanon** (*Arabic*)
2. [Akua Sena Dansua](#), former journalist, former Ambassador of Ghana to Germany, Former Minister for Tourism, Former Minister for Youth and Sports, Former Minister for Gender and Children's Affairs, Former Member of Parliament, **Ghana** (*English*)
3. [Akshi Chawla](#), Independent Researcher and Editorial Consultant, Founder of #WomenLead, **India** (*English*)
4. [Antonetta Lovejoy Hamandishe](#), Programme Officer at the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa, **Zimbabwe** (*English*)
5. [Claudine Cordani](#), Journalist and Director of the journal *Les cents plumes*, **France** (*French*)
6. [Domani Doré](#), Member of Parliament and Spokesperson of the RPG Arc-En-Ciel party, former Minister of Sports, Founder of the DOM Success Academy, **Guinea** (*French*)
7. [Dr Florence Ebila](#), Professor at the School of Women and Gender Studies, Makerere University, **Uganda** (*English*)
8. [Maggie Alonzo](#), Deputy Secretary General of the TODOS Political Party of Guatemala and Vice President for Mexico and Central America of the Christian Democratic Organization of America, **Guatemala** (*Spanish*)

9. [Meraj Hamayun Khan](#), member of the Provincial Assembly of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and former Minister of Education, **Pakistan** (*English*)
10. [Movimiento de Mujeres de Voluntad Popular Activistas regionales de Mérida](#), **Venezuela** (*Spanish*)
11. [Rosalee Keech](#), member of the Board of Directors of the League of Women Voters of the United States (LWVUS), **United States** (*English*)
12. [Dr Santosh Kumar Mishra](#), Independent Researcher (retired), S.N.D.T. Women's University, **India** (*English*)

SUMMARY

1. Are women politicians less visible or covered differently than men in political news coverage in your country? Please share data, if available.

All contributors agree that the media coverage of women in politics is subject to gender biases that favor male politicians in both quantity and quality. Women in politics are less visible and treated differently than men in the media. [Claudine Cordani](#) claims that this is more true when it comes to women who have leadership roles and who speak out for societal progress that challenges the patriarchy.

A recent [study](#) found that men largely dominated televised political discussions and programs in the four-month period leading up to the general election in **Lebanon** in May 2022, with male representation standing at 93% during the February – March period. As for April and May, male representation stood at respectively 78% and 88%, shares [Abir Chebaro](#). Furthermore, another [study](#) found that although women made up 16% of all candidates in the Lebanese parliamentary election, they only had 5% of news coverage from February to election day.

Sharing findings from Media Monitors in **Zimbabwe**, [Antonetta Lovejoy Hamandishe](#) reports that newspaper coverage of women political actors during the 2018 elections was very limited. In online media outlets, women politicians were found to be exceptionally under-represented, representing only 12% of coverage.

In **Uganda**, a [study](#) by the Uganda Media Women's Association that analyzed media coverage around the 2016 general elections reveals that the visibility of women, including through written, recorded, and visual coverage, was significantly less than that of men, shares [Dr Florence Ebila](#). The representation of women as political news subjects stood at just 20%. It was also found that the higher the candidates' socio-economic status, the more likely they were to be given exposure. In the rare instances that women were covered, their description was mainly related to care giving and domestic roles, such as homemaker and mother. Moreover, it was found that women were seven times more often identified by their family status than men, as wives, mothers, sisters, or daughters.

[Maggie Alonzo](#) says the macho culture continues to be dominant in **Guatemala**. When a woman holds a political or leadership position, the press tends to focus on her appearance, family, and personal relationships. According to her, although women work hard to earn their space, the media often refers to them in relation to a man, as his daughter, wife, or girlfriend, implying that women are given their positions because of their personal ties with men in power.

Participants argue that when interviewing women politicians, journalists often make stereotypical comments and ask gendered questions. In **Guatemala**, to make it and to survive in politics, women can expect their personal lives to be scrutinized, for their integrity to be questioned, and to be subject to attacks on their perceived shortcomings as wives and mothers, reports [Maggie Alonzo](#).

The media has a critical role to play in making politics more inclusive, representative, and gender-sensitive. Yet, it often fails to do so, says [Akshi Chawla](#). While politics is widely covered and analyzed, it is rarely done through a gender lens. She claims that in **India**, when women in politics are covered, there is a disproportionate focus on their personal lives, on their looks or their clothes, more than on their work and policy views, compared to men.

The numerous examples shared by the participants show that this is a global issue. In **France**, women in politics are regularly disrespected, denigrated, and insulted, much more than men, who tend to protect each other, [Claudine Cordani](#) reports. As part of her work covering world news on women in politics, [Akshi Chawla](#) mentions examples of how the press perpetuates sexism in politics, instead of calling it out. For instance, a newspaper in **Ireland** mocked a woman MP's appearance at a political event, another in **Fiji** made 'scandalous' claims about a popular woman politician as retaliation to her opposing a bill, and a news outlet in the **United States** published nude photos of a woman lawmaker.

As a former politician in **Ghana**, [Akua Sena Dansua](#) says that her personal experience with sexist media treatment was traumatic. During the twelve years she was a Member of Parliament, she faced regular media attacks that, according to her, were meant to break her and end her political career. As the first woman Minister for Youth and Sports, she says that many of the media attacks against her were instigated by men who were interested in her position and/or who were unhappy she held that position.

Under her leadership, **Ghana's** national team reached the Quarter Finals in the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, which according to her, made many male opponents jealous such an achievement was reached under a woman's tenure. Although meant to discourage her, these attacks through the media strengthened her as she was prepared to face such challenges before entering public life, as she says she knew that "politics has always been a minefield for women."

Earlier in her career as a journalist in **Ghana**, [Akua Sena Dansua](#) shares that she had to fight male colleagues to include stories on gender inequality and women in politics.⁶ [Research](#) on media representation of women politicians in Ghana and **Nigeria** reveals that newsroom culture is often masculinized and ignores women's issues in news coverage, as media institutions are dominated by men in ownership, leadership, and operations.

[Akshi Chawla](#) refers to a UN Women study she worked on revealing that the media continues to be dominated by men in **India**. Similarly, [Antonetta Lovejoy Hamandishe](#) adds that the media landscape in **Zimbabwe** remains largely male-dominated and patriarchal. Beyond politics, the

⁶ Further reading suggested by Akua Sena Dansua:

- *Media Representation of Women Politicians: The case of Ghana and Nigeria*, Sally Osei- Appiah, 2019
- *Media Coverage of Female Parliamentary Candidates in Ghana: An Analysis of The Daily Graphic and The Ghanaian Times Newspapers*, Samuel Akapule and Paul Achonge, August 2016

entire news ecosystem needs to become more inclusive, representative, and gender-sensitive so that it can be better equipped to provide fair coverage for all political actors, urges [Akshi Chawla](#).

2. What can lawmakers, governments, and civil society do to ensure media outlets/journalists deliver fair and balanced media coverage of women and men in public life?

Media attention brings an invaluable electoral advantage and, structurally speaking, reduced media interest in women candidates and politicians can harm the overall representation and participation of women, argues [Antonetta Lovejoy Hamandishe](#). The more women in politics are ignored, or ridiculed/abused when they have visibility, the more likely they are to withdraw from public life, regrets [Dr Florence Ebila](#). Lawmakers, governments, and civil society can make significant contributions to ensure that media outlets/journalists deliver fair and balanced media coverage of women and men in public life, argues [Dr Santosh Kumar Mishra](#).

Drawing from [research](#) findings showing that gender stereotypes presented in the media influence children, he adds that traditional and online media significantly shape perceptions about the role of women and girls in society and have the potential to perpetuate gender inequality. The findings reveal that when children are exposed to stereotypical gender portrayals, there is a correlation with preferences for 'gender appropriate' content and activities, traditional perceptions of gender roles and occupations, and attitudes towards expectations and aspirations for the future.

Equally, the media can play a transformative role in spreading gender equality content and contribute to equality in society. [Dr Santosh Kumar Mishra](#) says the media needs to be encouraged to produce gender-balanced content and to develop self-regulatory policies, including greater access to decision-making positions for women in its ranks. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess progress need to be put in place, so that gender equality in content, operations, and management is achieved.

[Claudine Cordani](#) shares that knowing who controls the majority of media companies in **France** – wealthy men – it is difficult for her to hope for fair and balanced media coverage. To her, the journalist profession has been impoverished and the quality of information is in jeopardy because it has become too selective and patriarchal. To help curb this, she co-launched a digital ecofeminist monthly publication, [Les Centes Plumes](#), which she argues we need more of.

Similarly, stressing the importance of civil society in being vigilant and attentive to politics and the media, [Akshi Chawla](#) started the [#WomenLead](#) publication in **India**, which covers world politics from a gender perspective. Calling on civil society to remain engaged, she says that sexist coverage needs to be systematically called out and sensitive and meaningful reportage noticed and amplified.

To [Akua Sena Dansua](#), the starting point for transformative change is for journalists and other media professionals to accept the reality that women are rightfully taking their place in society and that there is no turning back. Journalists need to be sensitized and conscious of the effects of their gender stereotypical coverage, words, and attitudes on the public, and in turn, the public

needs to be constantly reminded of the negative effects of media gender stereotyping, including those on women in public life, says [Dr Florence Ebila](#).

Civil society organizations and international development partners have a big role to play in ensuring the media is educated on gender inequality and offers better coverage, argues [Antonetta Lovejoy Hamandishe](#). They should support media training and conduct public awareness-raising campaigns on gender inequality in the media, as well as invest in policies and tools to combat gendered misinformation, especially during election times. Monitoring of media coverage of women candidates should be done by electoral management bodies, media monitoring organizations, and civil society organizations to have a clear picture of the extent of gendered media reporting and better inform corrective policies and mechanisms.

With data on harmful gendered media coverage, legislators can put in place laws and policies with prosecution mechanisms and charges for perpetrators, says [Akua Sena Dansua](#). Governments and media institutions should regularly train and improve the capacity of journalists, investigators, prosecutors, and legal officers on how to handle cases of gendered misinformation and media abuse and violence against women in politics, she adds.

Additionally, more efforts should be made by parliaments and political parties to promote and increase women's political participation and representation, so that women are more present and therefore more visible in the public sphere, say [Maggie Alonzo](#) and [Meraj Hamayun Khan](#). [Antonetta Lovejoy Hamandishe](#), [Akua Sena Dansua](#), and [Domani Doré](#) add that women should be trained for public speaking and dealing with the media and that they should be given more opportunities to speak as experts in various fields and not be confined to gender equality discussions.

3. With sexist traditional media coverage disseminated on social media, women in politics are exposed to vicious online attacks and abuse by often anonymous perpetrators. What can social media companies, media outlets, governments, lawmakers, and other decision-makers do to put an end to the crisis of online violence against women in politics?

Governments, lawmakers, and tech companies can and must put an end to the crisis of online violence against women in politics, says [Dr Santosh Kumar Mishra](#). Online violence against women in politics is a growing challenge for democracy as it has increasingly been used as a tool of democratic backsliding and illiberalism, he adds. Citing the [National Democratic Institute](#), [Dr Santosh Kumar Mishra](#) reports that violence against women in politics includes all types of aggression, coercion, and intimidation against women with the goal to exclude them from politics because of their gender. Online violence against women in politics targets women to push them out of political life and to signal to other women that politics is not a place for them. The chilling effect on women and girls is real as it effectively reduces their presence and engagement in public life.

Freedom of expression is not freedom of aggression, reminds [Maggie Alonzo](#). During the 2018 elections in **Zimbabwe**, social media was used for smear and disinformation campaigns to turn public opinion against women candidates, reports [Antonetta Lovejoy Hamandishe](#). Under the banner of freedom of expression, hate speech directed at women candidates and women leaders had turned social media into a 'poisonous' platform for women politicians, she adds. Social

media, usually hailed as an accessible tool for politicians to conduct campaigns and reach their constituencies, has not served women politicians in Zimbabwe to advance their political participation. Because it is toxic for women in politics to be on social media, many have given up using it, shares [Antonetta Lovejoy Hamandishe](#).

A recent study by the Women of Uganda Network found that although online gender-based violence can significantly affect those subjected to it, it tends to be normalized and taken lightly by others, reports [Dr Florence Ebila](#). In **Uganda**, many women politicians were criticized for speaking up about their experience with online violence, such as former parliamentarian [Sylvia Rwabwogo](#). In this case, a young male stalker cyber harassed the MP for months, and when she came forth with the case publicly, she received backlash from the media and the public, which ultimately cost her re-election, argues [Dr Florence Ebila](#). Although the perpetrator was initially sentenced to two years in prison for making love requests and obscene, indecent, and rude suggestions to MP Rwabwogo online, he was [set free](#) after an appeal.

Stopping and preventing online violence against women in politics is not just important for women's political participation, but essential to democracy as a whole, says [Dr Santosh Kumar Mishra](#). Laws and proper enforcement have a central role to play in achieving this, argues [Maggie Alonzo](#). In **Guatemala** for example, bullying and cyberbullying are not classified as crimes, she reports, which gives violence against women in politics unlimited space to spread. Lawmakers should pass specific laws on violence against women in politics, including online violence, and governments and law enforcement should be empowered to enforce them, says [Dr Florence Ebila](#). Without strong legal measures, people will continue to underestimate and ignore violence against women in politics, she adds.

According to the participants of the discussion, social media companies have a responsibility for the growing online violence against women in politics as they have consistently allowed and enabled the sexism and violence women in politics experience in person to mutate and migrate online. Although tech companies cannot end sexism and gender-based violence, they can have an impact on stopping sexism and gender-based violence online.⁷ This can be done from a tech perspective, argues [Claudine Cordani](#), if social media companies work on improving their moderation systems and algorithms to better detect and block violent content.

In addition to raising awareness about online violence against women in politics, [Dr Santosh Kumar Mishra](#) argues that a multi-stakeholder approach is needed. Social media companies, media outlets, governments, and lawmakers should work together to put in place effective and sustainable initiatives to adequately regulate media spaces and make them inclusive and safe for everyone, he says.

⁷ Ending online violence against women in politics, NDI. ndi.org/ending-online-violence-against-women-politics (accessed on 5 December 2022)