

Media Framing Of Women Politicians In Ethiopia during Covid 19 Pandemic: A Case Study of South Radio And Television Agency.

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The bias in media framing of women politicians is a relatively new research area gaining importance in recent years. This study explores how the South Radio and Television Agency framed prominent women leaders during the Covid 19 pandemic in Ethiopia. Firstly it examines the quality of media coverage and level of prominence given to stories about women in politics, and secondly, identifies the significant gender frame and stereotypes used in news content. The Media Framing Theory stands to support this research. The qualitative research data was collected through content analysis and in-depth interviews. The study sample included SRTA's prime time television and radio news for one month. The sample size for the content analysis included all the broadcasted information that mentioned any of the women involved in higher political leadership in Ethiopia. A total of seven experts from related fields were purposively selected for the in-depth interviews. A key finding is that the news coverage of women in politics is low, making them invisible. The researcher concludes that the influence of the culture, barriers of communication, sex of the media personnel, and the hidden framing agendas is the reason for low coverage of women politicians during covid 19 pandemic.

Key words: Covid 19, Corona, Political Communication, Media Communication, Women Politicians, Ethiopia.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The COVID-19 pandemic was confirmed to have reached Ethiopia on 13 March 2020. The national government led Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed declared a five-month state of emergency in April 2020 but allowed economic activities to continue during the public health crisis (Wikipedia 2020). From history, it is evident that women's role in a nation's political system is considered immense for a country's growth. However, the number of women in elective political leadership globally remains low. Only around fifty women have been elected heads of state in the modern world (Perse, 2001). According to the report of the International Parliament Union, there is only 23.3 percent of female parliamentary seats in the world (Bruktawit, 2008). This minimum representation shows that women need to go a long way to achieve equality in politics. Globally less than one in five parliament members are women, and the 30 percent mark for

women's representation in parliament has been reached or exceeded in only 28 countries. According to the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment data, only 14.88 percent of Ethiopian women hold a political position as of 2014. Though women have come a long way in penetrating through the male-dominated political arena, the number is still low, with only 27.9 percent in parliament. However, the number of women seeking elective public office has gradually increased over the years (Shimelis, 2015).

The gender bias in the media and its effect on news coverage are significant, which leads to electoral consequences. When politics is thoroughly media dependent, voters respond to candidates mainly following the mass media's information (Bruktawit, 2008). In Ethiopia, the Broadcast Media is said to give politicians and political issues much attention and coverage. A superficial glance of the SRTA reveals that coverage of political stories is predominant compared to other topics. The media coverage trends show that men have received more media coverage globally than women politicians, which proves that media plays an essential role in shaping public perception (Entman, 1993). There appears to be general agreement that the press often frames women as stereotyped, portraying women as homemakers and politics reserved for men. It is also evident that the media construct women in politics as women who have stepped out of the gender norms of remaining private (Croteau & Hoynes, 2014). Many media houses in Ethiopia have developed professional guidelines that help eliminate blatant sexism from the news, but they have not ensured to cover women in politics on par with men. The Ethiopian mainstream media is said to portray politics in a male-dominated way (Muhammed, 2017). The increasing number of women participating in politics in Ethiopia creates an opportunity to explore the media's role in framing women politicians.

The research on media frames is young and controversial, and more studies are required to build on the views of media effects (Bernisky and Kinder, 2006). The researcher reviewed information broadcasted about women politicians in Ethiopia during the Covid 19 pandemic. To understand the level of coverage and the prominence of the media coverage a content analysis was undertaken. To understand the framing types and gender stereotypes in-depth interview with experts in the field was administered. The study uses framing theory as a theoretical framework; this departs from most studies focusing on women's representation based on gender and feminist theories. The study's general objective is to examine the level of coverage and the prominence of the news covered on women politicians and to understand gender bias and framing strategies during the Covid 19 pandemic in Ethiopia.

RESEARCH DESIGN

To determine the purpose of the study, a qualitative research design was employed. The primary data source is the news's content, and the secondary data was from the experts in the field. The researcher used content analysis of the prime time news to analyze the duration of coverage and prominence of women politicians. The purposive interview technique was used to collect data from media personnel to understand the gender bias and framing strategies. A chief editor, news producer, reporter, media and communication academician and gender expert was chosen for the purpose. In-depth interviews were conducted with the media personnels to understand their opinion on media framing and gender bias. The interviews were transcribed before a detailed analysis. This study confined itself to analyzing coverage, prominence, framing and gender bias and did not attempt or explore audience reactions, attitudes or perceptions. The study focused on Radio and Televisions news on SRTA in the prime time (1 pm to 2 pm) from 1st August 2020 to 31st August 2020. The researcher selected SRTA because it is the oldest and government-owned news agency in Ethiopia. The time range was chosen because it has maximum listenership and is considered as the prime time news in Ethiopia. All the news stories during the time slot were converted into written words before it was analyzed. Thus, the researcher did not face challenges categorizing news that falls under women in politics. From the total population of 350 Journalists in SRTA, for an in-depth interview, seven experts consisting the chief editor, news editor, news producers, two reporters, academician and women activist were selected purposively from SRTA. Information-rich informants are those from whom one learns plenty of vital

information to the research's purpose (Snait, 2012). The researcher categorized the content into the following criteria: placement of stories, duration of news coverage, and type of issues associated with women in politics and the use of frames and gender stereotypes to describe women politicians. The data was then analyzed to find out the objectives of the research. The face to face interview with the media personnel is presented in a narrative format. The content from the primary data was analyzed, transcribed, categorized and coded according to recurring criteria. Finally, the findings are discussed with the respective categories to respond to the research questions. The discovery is triangulated and correlated with primary data, secondary data, and the theoretical frameworks to make the results meaningful and healthy.

DATA PRESENTATION AND FINDINGS

The study sought to answer the following question: What is the coverage duration of women politicians'? What is the level of prominence given to these women politicians? Does SRTA follow a framing norm while covering women politicians? Is there gender bias and stereotyping while covering women politicians?

1. Duration of Coverage of Women Politicians in Daily News during Covid 19

The researcher finds out that SRTA daily news gave less coverage to women politicians during the covid 19 pandemic. In comparison to the previous month, the data showed that the news coverage about women politicians in August 2020 was comparatively high, when the corona spread was climbing significantly high in Ethiopia. Despite the increased range in August 2020, the duration of women politicians on the news was bare minimal. Only 50.6 percent of stories were equal to, or little more than 60 seconds, 25.4 percent was equal to or more than 45 seconds and 24 percent was for less than 30 seconds covered as news stories. The interview found no significant consideration was given by the media to cover women in politics. They are treated equally as news sources like male counterparts. This means that when women in politics do not make the news, there are no deliberate efforts to seek them. "We do not practice affirmative action when it comes to news making in politics. Women in politics should come out of their cocoon and stop thinking that they are entitled to media coverage just because they are women. They must also seek coverage by commenting on topical public issues (corona) in a manner that makes news," commented one news Editor. Besides, the respondents noted that female politicians often were inaccessible, hostile and suspicious of media and avoided interviews in many circumstances. Another reason for low coverage is that women avoid controversies and stay away from journalists. Another respondent noted that some women responded to the media's questions, which did not sound newsworthy. Another reason cited for low coverage was that some women use disrespectful language to downgrade other politicians, and therefore SRTA ignores such individuals. The respondents believed that many women in politics did not have a good grasp or knowledge of topical Corona issues. Another observation by the respondents was that women get more coverage when accompanied by male politicians. However, the content could just be sound bites or a mention compared to the prominence given to accompanied male politicians. It is evident from these opinions that the governing principle guiding news coverage is newsworthiness and not gender considerations.

2. The prominence in media coverage given to women politicians during Covid 19

The news's content analysis proved that the media coverage of women in politics could be described as low and stories not given prominence. From a total of 2,040 news items broadcasted during the study period of one month, only 11.76 percent (240 news items) was about women politicians. Amongst which 90 percent was related to women politicians speaking about Corona pandemic. Within this category, 80 percent of the news items just mentioned the women politicians' names, and only 20 percent of the women politicians were actually seen on the television screen or their interviews aired on the radio. The prominence given to women politicians' stories can be classified as "hardly visible" during prime time. The interview proved that most women politicians maintained a cordial working relationship with the news producers and news editors but shy away from media for personal and cultural reasons. "Male politicians seek us, whereas the women in politics expect journalists to seek them. If they want to see themselves covered, they must get contacts of some editors and reporters and be proactive." commented a senior news chief editor. The respondents believed that women in politics should voluntarily come forward to be covered in the interviews. The interview found that women respond to media in an unprofessional way compared to their male counterparts. Generally, women in politics were said to approach media in a friendly manner while the male politicians approached it in a business style. It is evident from the above facts that only a few female politicians enhanced their media relations effectively, and therefore their prominence in the news is minimal.

3. Framing norm while covering women politicians

The content revealed that women from the ruling party had better coverage in the news than the opposition party. The data showed that 90 percent of the news was about the ruling party women, and only 10 percent was about opposition party women. Within the ruling party women, 97 percent of the news was about women holding high political positions and only 3 percent was about ruling party women politicians not in power. To specify Muferihat Kamil (the Former Speaker of the House of People's Representatives and the current Minister for Peace) got the most coverage, followed by President Sahle-work Zewde, Adanech Abebe, and Dagmawit Moges, respectively. The interviewees voiced a common opinion that, ruling party women in power have been in politics for an extended period of time and active in politics, and therefore they make the headlines. The least covered were from opposition political parties, obviously because they are not in the limelight daily. As respondents explained, the media house chooses specific people according to the need of the hour, which becomes the public discourse list that revolves around the plan. It can be concluded that the media does not have a specific norm while framing a person for a particular news. It rather follows a universal style of

covering the leading politicians prominently than others, highlighting some politicians' attention and sidelining others.

4. Gender bias and stereotyping while covering women politicians

The content proved that SRTA's news had a majority of news related to men politicians than women during the covid pandemic period. A significant difference was observed in the content; 98 percent of the story highlighted men, and only two percent carried news related to women politicians. This proves that women are not considered newsworthy in many circumstances. The interviewed women news producers explained that they occasionally remind their colleagues on editorial policy and gender-balanced coverage informally, which is not always followed for various reasons. Secondly, they said male domination within SRTA plays a significant role in the low selection of news related to women politicians. Editors and reporters favour men as news sources compared to women despite the policy, which is against bias. The interviewees also indicated a tendency amongst news producers to cover men politicians more than the women. One news editor explained that "it comes naturally for a news producer to cover a man compared to a women politician even when that female politician has a more exciting story. The interviewees also shared their views on how women politicians portray themselves in public, impacting the coverage "women cabinet ministers reduce themselves to serving tea during public functions while the male counterparts talk business"; hence are quoted more by the media. "They should simply maintain their dignity and uphold their leadership qualities so that the media can portray them as such," commented one interviewee.

Regarding the use of stereotyping frames by the media while covering women in politics, the respondents explained that this was meant to create a specific mental effect among the audience and not diminish women's status. "We use such words as "iron lady" to describe women politicians in Ethiopia." The explanation given for the linguistic use of masculinity was that the culture, language and society give it prominence. Therefore, journalists are part of this society; they pick up the masculine language and stereotypes. Nonetheless, the respondents emphasized that the media is interested in newsworthy stories and avoid using words that promoted gender stereotypes. Some respondents also observed that women in politics no longer respond to questions touching their personal lives. Therefore the above points prove that it goes beyond media policies and journalistic principles that pave a significant gender preference and minor stereotyping.

Conclusion

This study concludes that women in politics received dismal media coverage at SRTA during the corona pandemic period. Their names hardly make it to headlines or lead. Their stories are not in prime time; therefore, their coverage is minimal. Nevertheless, women politicians make a headline only when they are into controversy, corruption, or political nomination. On the other hand, women in politics have failed to get media coverage because most of them regularly avoid engaging with the media. However, the extent of coverage differed between women leaders based on their position and consistency in politics. A negligible number of women were said to have professional media advisers compared to their male counterparts who have invested in hiring media consultants to handle and advise media relations, resulting in better coverage. Another aspect that could have contributed to the low coverage is that women play safe politics while media is always looking out for controversial news. Women often appear media-shy, less confident and barely knowledgeable to comment on issues of national interest. They are also said to be mindful of their reputation to the societal gender expectations or nuances of how women behave in public.

Another finding is that SRTA news stories rarely use gendered terms such as marital status or focusing on women's private lives in politics. The results also challenge the dominant view that media uses personal traits to frame women in politics. The study found that the selected media rarely use such unique characteristics to describe or state women in politics. The only woman in politics who seems to receive coverage touching on her personality was Burtaken Mideksa. The references made to her traits were more positive such as "ብርቅ" (Iron lady). The researcher believes that women in politics also have a responsibility for the kind of coverage they receive from the media. Women politicians need to proactively engage with the press if their coverage is to be substantial. Secondly, the media is still male-controlled, operating along with the dominant cultural values making women politicians less prominent even during the covid pandemic.

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