

Chapter 3

Media Representations of Women Candidates in Kenya's 2022 General Elections

Denis Ikachoi^a and Joseph Njuguna^b

^aMaasai Mara University, Kenya

^bMurang'a University of Technology, Kenya

Abstract

The media shape public opinion during elections by providing a lens through which voters assess their candidates. The media attention and discourse on such candidates have attracted increased scholarly interest, and this chapter explores how selected Kenyan print media covered and represented female candidates during the 2022 election campaigns. A content analysis of 52 news stories from the *Daily Nation* and *The Standard* newspapers drew insights from media agenda-setting, framing, and feminist theories. Eight 'popular' female candidates dominated coverage (especially those in gubernatorial and senatorial races), with most featuring on the hard news and a few on profile stories. The candidates were represented as electoral 'victims', self-effacing, coming of age, and as leaders. Despite some cases of humiliation and violence, media coverage generally portrayed Kenyan women leveraging their power to defeat age-old stereotypes of women's unfitness to lead as part of a gradual shift towards the one-third gender rule of women's political representation in Kenya. The study recommends all-inclusive coverage of different female candidates (i.e. that does not focus only on the most popular), balanced gender reporting of

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electoral issues, and a broader analysis of female candidates' campaigns involving different media formats.

Keywords: 2022 elections; Kenya; print media; female candidates; representation; feminist theories

Introduction

As agents of education and socialisation, the media shape and reflect public opinion on issues like political participation of women and electoral politics. While media are expected to be fair arbiters and watchdogs in elections, they sometimes reinforce rather than curtail stereotypes and prejudices against women candidates (Llanos & Nina, 2011). Moreover, media are blamed for partisanship in their coverage of women candidates when they perpetuate conflicting narratives that oppose gender equality efforts (McRobbie, 2009). Thus, as more women run for higher political offices, gendered coverage of election matters has spiked scholarly interest.

One concern has been the amount of media attention given to candidates and how gender roles shape their representation. Biased coverage led to such international forums as the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, which cited media as complicit in perpetuating gender inequality. Male-dominated media were accused of developing stories from patriarchal perspectives that foreground narratives about the 'unfitness' of women to lead and prop up the male candidates depicted with inborn leadership traits (Anaya, 2023). Female candidates are more often featured for superficial qualities, like physical appearance, than the substance of their campaigns. On the one hand, one study showed that the media's underreporting and biased coverage of female candidates makes them invisible, muted, and underdogs in the electoral process (Barasa & Gitau, 2021). Fair and balanced coverage, on the other hand, enables voters to make better judgements about the merits of each candidate. This study contributes to the literature by focusing on media coverage of Kenya's 2022 elections.

Study Context

Kenya is a budding democracy characterised by a liberalised media space and heightened public awareness of citizen's rights and fundamental freedoms (BBC News, 2023). Elections are highly contested, and women are emerging as powerful disruptors to the traditionally male-dominated political space. Administratively, Kenya is divided into 47 counties, each led by a governor. Each county is also represented by one senator and a woman representative (a lady). In addition, there are 349 members of parliament representing constituencies. These are elected directly by the voters. Results released by the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (2022) showed that seven women won governor positions, three were elected senators, while 26 took parliamentary seats. Forty-seven women representatives, including Linet Chepkorir, the youngest MP in Kenya's electoral

history, were elected in the counties. Of the four male presidential candidates, three selected women as their running mates. Article 27 of Kenya's 2010 Constitution envisages gender equality through a gender quota: 'State shall take legislative and other measures to implement the principle that not more than two-thirds of the members of electoral or appointive bodies shall be of the same gender'. Implementation, however, has been slow, and women are still underrepresented in decision-making, especially in competitive politics. During the 2022 elections, women accounted for only 11% of all candidates for elective posts nationally ([Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission, 2022](#)).

Kenyan media wielded significant influence in shaping public perceptions of the electoral process because they played an important role in constructing narratives around the candidates. Media coverage of elections in Kenya (especially from a gender perspective) has received mixed reviews. While some scholars ([Anaya, 2023](#); [Koin, 2023](#)) applaud media's efforts at ensuring fairness and transparency, a report by the [Media Council of Kenya \(2022\)](#) showed that 2022 reporting fell short of being balanced and, in some cases, was leading to incitement. Because women play such significant roles in development, it is imperative that we investigate how media influences the political achievements of women through coverage of their campaigns. This chapter provides a case study of Kenya's 2022 elections to explore how female candidates were covered and represented by the media and what this means for the mediated struggle for gender equality in Kenya's political space.

Empirical and Theoretical Framework

Voters get information about a candidate's electability from the media. Without such information, voters fall back on stereotypical perceptions of the candidate, which may lead to wrong choices. Biased media representation impedes efforts at gender parity during elections, especially when superficial traits are used to demonstrate female candidates' incompetence ([Miller & Peake, 2013](#); [van der Pas & Aaldering 2020](#)). In his research, [Markstedt \(2007\)](#) illustrates this phenomenon through an analysis of the 2007 handbag debate in the UK, when a leader was accused of allegedly spending GBP 10,000 'on a handbag' at the expense of the struggling poor. After US Senator Elizabeth Warren declared her intention to run for president in 2019, the *Independent* magazine immediately commented on her 'unlikability' as the only hindrance to her goal ([Zoellner, 2020](#)).

Scholars argue that superficial traits like physical attractiveness form only a small fraction of the ability of a candidate. Although the way women present themselves can influence how media will tell their story, [Krijnen \(2020\)](#) argues that their issues are not as adequately captured as those of their male counterparts, and this makes women politicians more susceptible to gender biases that diminish their ability. Some progressive media outlets now evaluate their coverage in accord with established gender equality guidelines to create news environments more inclusive of women ([Llanos & Nina, 2011](#)).

Since low media coverage of a candidate can impact for whom a ballot is cast, studies on the relationship between gender and the amount of media coverage have become more prevalent. The focus has been on the prominence of coverage

as well how candidates are represented as suitable or not for the positions (Mpofu, 2017). Media representation often reinforces traditional gender roles, depicting women in subordinate roles and objects of sexual aggrandisement (Santonniccolo et al., 2023), while portraying men as dominant, aggressive, and authoritative (Krijnen, 2020). Such representations perpetuate masculine supremacy and the subjugation of women by confirming misplaced perceptions about women's leadership abilities (Seluman et al., 2024).

Merouani (2019) argued that media has a powerful influence on voter attitudes based on the balance of coverage given to candidates and their stories. Ruiz Vidales and Muniz (2017) demonstrated the pervasive use of stereotypes against women running for elective posts in Mexico. While van der Pas and Aaldering (2020) found no differences in the political coverage of gender issues in the American and Canadian elections, research in Sweden and Norway showed lower media visibility for female politicians despite these countries' strong promotion of gender equality in media. China, Japan, and South Korea receive a mix of gender portrayals, where women politicians with steady careers receive more favourable media coverage (van der Pas & Aaldering, 2022). Media often reflect deeply entrenched patriarchal values in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, where women (especially in Bollywood films) feature in more peripheral roles, like beauty icons, rather than in politics (UI Huda & Ali, 2015).

Research conducted by CFI Media Development (2022) on sexist media stereotypes in Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Niger revealed that female politicians were often portrayed as mere tokens of gender equality. In Ghana, an intimidating environment of male dominance in the press discouraged women from participating in electoral interviews. In Côte d'Ivoire and Niger, media usually highlight the marital status of female political candidates alongside their names. By foregrounding marital status, the women are considered 'real and eligible' for leadership positions. Koin's study (2023) of television coverage of women politicians in the run-up to the 2022 general elections in Kenya showed that women politicians received 65% of the total coverage, with seasoned politicians more visible than newcomers. About 56% of the women politicians were framed under the economic empowerment narrative.

The current study draws on agenda-setting, media framing, and feminist media theories. By giving prominence to certain issues, the media shapes audience perceptions and what people consider a priority (Entman, 2007). Thus, the more attention a candidate receives, the more the media will influence how voters perceive them. In addition, the media selects and emphasises certain attributes of an issue to make these attributes more salient than others – a process called framing (Entman, 2007). Frames employed by the media influence how audiences interpret the issue. If the media gives little attention to female candidates' issues or portrays them through a parochial lens, then society is likely to adopt these media cues and judge them unfit for leadership. Thus, gendered differences in election coverage can not only shape voter opinions about candidates but also hinder certain candidates from achieving their political goals.

Feminist media theorists explore how media portrayals of women can perpetuate gender inequalities. They argue that excluding women from the news creates

power imbalances within male-dominated political systems that largely ignore women's issues (Hawkesworth, 1989). Feminists claim that the media tends to focus on the superficial rather than the substantive when covering women, but they also position media as key to supporting feminist causes and disrupting patriarchy. Given that media coverage can sway voters, this study is a timely contribution to the academic debates about media representation of female candidates based on Kenya's 2022 elections.

Methodology

The data set for this content analysis was drawn from two Kenyan daily newspapers: *The Daily Nation* and *The Standard*. Content analysis provides a systematic and objective means to make valid inferences from verbal, visual, or written data to describe and/or quantify specific phenomena (Berelson, 1952; Gallagher, 2014). The newspapers were selected for their depth of coverage and wide circulation (Media Council of Kenya, 2024). Stories included in the analysis were published between May 29 and 6 August 2022, the gazetted campaign period for elections that occurred on 9 August 2022. The stories were identified from the print versions of the newspapers, readily accessible as part of the Maasai Mara University library collection. The unit of analysis was the individual article.

A total of 52 stories were identified for analysis. Stories were read and coded for the female candidates' story placement, news genre, and frequency of coverage. Open coding was employed, meaning that each of the stories were read several times to identify themes as they emerged from text that represented different aspects of how the female candidates were represented in print media.

Results and Discussion

Media Attention to Female Candidates

Out of the 52 stories about the upcoming elections and candidates that were analysed, 31 stories (60%) from the *Daily Nation* and 22 stories (40%) from *The Standard* covered female candidates. Out of the three women who were running mates on the presidential ticket, Martha Karua dominated with 78% headline mentions in both newspapers. Other candidates with considerable frontpage exposure included a candidate for a county woman representative seat, Linet Chepkorir, and county governor hopefuls Cecily Mbarire, Ann Waiguru, and Kawira Mwangaza. Most of the candidates for county woman representative and member of parliament featured in the middle sections of newspapers as passing mentions, in electoral disputes, and in association with popular male candidates. This supports prior findings that media tends to negatively portray and deprioritize women candidates (Padovani et al., 2022).

The frequency of coverage of the female candidates was erratic, and only 'popular' candidates like Martha Karua, Susan Kihika, Kawira Mwangaza, and Anne Waiguru received almost daily coverage. Male candidates (especially the presidential candidates) were more frequently covered (by more than 60%) in the

front pages and editorials than the female candidates. Martha Karua, the opposition candidate's running mate, had media space in 45% of the stories, followed by Susan Kihika (38%), and Anne Waiguru (35%). Among gubernatorial candidates, Cecile Mbarire received the fewest mentions (12%). Most candidates were discussed in hard news presenting factual stories of the candidates' campaign events. A few, like Cecile Mbarire, Susan Kihika, and Gladys Wanga, received profile coverage. Some, like Kawira Mwangaza, were featured in editorials after allegations of forged academic documents and misappropriation of funds.

Most of the female candidate's stories were presented in a broader narrative about women in leadership and the implementation of Article 27 of the Constitution's one-third gender quota rather than on specific examples or profiles of the individual candidates. Profiled candidates gave episodic accounts of their experiences and achievements that had motivated them to seek elective positions. Although some candidates suffered character assassination from rivals, the content was mainly issue-based. Such story contents have been seen to minimise women's underrepresentation especially where media systems drop their male-oriented interpretations of female issues (Santoniccolo et al., 2023).

Statistical analysis of the campaign coverage by gender reveals a significant difference in how male and female candidates were covered ($M = 3.7$, $SD = 2.4$; $t = 0.834$, $p = 0.001$). Male candidates were more likely to be prominently covered than the female candidates, which supports prior findings that media relegates women to the political periphery as voters and not voices during campaigns (Mpofu, 2017; van der Pas & Aldering, 2020). When media obscures women in the political arena, the candidates' lack of visibility compromises the likelihood of their election to office.

Representations of the Female Candidates

Victims of the Political Game

Electoral campaigns in Kenya have repeatedly reflected a disregard for the laws prohibiting women's fair accessibility to political positions (Media Council of Kenya, 2022). Candidates (especially men) employ verbal abuse and physical assault to demean and intimidate women into abandoning the electoral race as victims of a male-orchestrated scheme to shunt their voices from political representation (Media Council of Kenya, 2022). The 52 stories illustrate several narratives of such victimhood. For example, stories had demeaning allusions of Martha Karua as a divorcee, Cecily Mbarire as an 'outsider' for having married outside her community (Mugo, 2022), Martha Wangari as a 'prostitute' for being a single mother of children with different fathers and Mary Mugure as a 'sexual worker' (see Gaitho, 2022a; Ndonye, 2022). This extent to which women candidates went to address stereotypes against them was captured in a BBC news article by Musambi (2022) which indicated that the candidates had decided to take the sexist bullies by their horns. In the story, one female candidate castigated men's unfair targeting of women with foreign spouses, which did not count when male candidates married from outside their communities.

Candidates were also disparaged for allegedly presenting fake academic credentials (see Wangui, 2022; Wanyoro, 2022). For example, Kawira Mwangaza,

Aisha Jumwa, and Wavinya Ndeti were considered not fit to be nominated by their parties, despite having been cleared to vie by relevant government organs (like Ethics and Anti-corruption Commission and the Commission for Higher Education) which are charged with verifying the credentials of candidates before they submit nominations. While Ndeti considered the resulting petitions against her nomination a witch hunt only meant to discredit them as women, Mwangaza credited God for survival from a barrage of similar media attacks on her childless status and conflicting roles as bishop and aspiring politician.

Umra Omar, a CNN Hero of the Year in 2016 (see [CNN, 2016](#)) and the founder of Safari Doctors, who was running for county governor in Lamu, was once framed as sympathetic to the LGBTQ course and potentially dealing in drugs for working with an organisation that rehabilitated youth and promoted gender equality ([Kazungu, 2022](#)). The source further suggested that Umra had seemingly punched above her weight by running for the governorship position ([Praxides, 2022](#)). In another story, one male opposition leader sarcastically questioned Martha Karua's ability to succeed Raila as president in 2027 instead of experienced men like himself ([Maundu, 2022](#)). A Muslim candidate for governor position, Fatuma Achani, suffered religious bigotry where opponents promoted the narrative that Muslim women could not lead (see [Maundu, 2022](#)). Charity Ngilu, a seasoned politician, was coerced to resign from the race for governor of Kitui in favour of a male candidate in exchange for the promise of a government appointment should he win ([Mutua, 2022](#)). These examples demonstrate a male-dominated discourse that legitimises male hegemony and women's tokenism in politics consistent with the findings of [Llanos and Nina \(2011\)](#).

Stereotyping abounds in the data set. Female candidates depict men as 'envious' of their progress (e.g. [Muiruri, 2022](#); [Otieno, 2022](#)), while male candidates mostly dwell on personal and character attacks – claims about dysfunctional homes, questionable morals, weak personalities, and inexperience. Experienced female candidates consider the men's approach an old gimmick to intimidate female candidates, blaming the culture of negotiated male-led 'democracy' where elders determine who runs to the disadvantage of qualified and competent women (see [Muiruri, 2022](#)). A June 7 *Standard* article, 'The raw deal for women in Kenya Kwanza and glaring contradictions', explicitly covered how veteran male politicians imposed sanctions on candidates whom they found incompatible with their ideals ([Maritim, 2022](#)). From a feminist theoretical point of view (see [Krijnen, 2020](#)), the media's prioritisation of a candidate's gender over capability perpetuates and legitimises patriarchal values. This bias is evident among male journalists who cover women from a perspective of male dominance. These stereotypes may be ingrained in journalists' subconscious and enacted with time rather than intentional acts of discrimination ([Ruiz Vidales & Muniz, 2017](#)).

Female Candidates as Self-effacing

Despite media debates portraying men as barriers to women's political emancipation, some female candidates attributed their political careers to their spouses' support. This self-effacing technique deflects attention away from the candidates

themselves and highlights instead such social qualities as ‘humility’, ‘people-centredness’, ‘shared responsibility’ and ‘regard for shared success’ (Hawkesworth, 1989). Female candidates’ reliance on men has been associated both with indecisiveness and with strong social bonds and shared values that endear them to voters.

Consider, for example, Kawira Mwangaza’s description of her husband as her ‘campaign champion’ to the extent that she attributed half her campaign success to his guitar performances for her audiences (Mutembei, 2022). Fatuma Achani of Kwale County similarly acknowledged that her campaigns would not have succeeded without her husband’s support (Nation Team, 2022). Martha Karua credited Raila Odinga’s selection of her as his presidential candidate running mate with her impeccable record of fighting human rights abuses and inefficient governance. She described them as a safe pair of hands to fight corruption (Njaaga, 2022). Other candidates used self-effacing language to shore up commonality of purpose too. Susan Kihika considered her voters ‘great’ for seeing the good leadership potential in her (Mureithi, 2022). Gladys Wanga considered her impending triumph in the elections as belonging to the electorate (Odhiambo, 2022b), and Mwangaza delivered a clarion call for ‘respect for the people of Meru’ among the male candidates (Mutembei, 2022).

While backing formidable male candidates may seem like taking on the role of spectator, scholars argue that female candidates who support strong male candidates and their manifestos gain voter approval when they decide to run for office (Barasa & Gitau, 2021). These examples underscore the female candidates’ awareness of the need to deflect voter attention from them as women to the supporting mechanisms that resonate with the electorate. Winning an election is not an individual feat and acknowledgement of the role of external stakeholders like family, social groups and the media shores up a candidate’s support base. Critics, however, advocate for media space portrayals of women candidates as decisive and independent, not as men’s supporters (Anaya, 2023).

Women with Appeal

The media used different labels to characterise the personality and appearance of the candidates. Such labels were associated with their physical appearance, and nurturing traits. For instance, A *Daily Nation* story described Martha Karua’s ‘good sense of style and sartorial finesse’ as an evolution from power suits to tastefully designed ‘African attire’ (Chege, 2022a). Studies show the media’s preference for using traits-based appeals to promote candidates (Padovani et al., 2022) that focus on physical traits like dress risk stereotyping female politicians through their appearance. The media also portrayed her as the ‘iron lady’ of Kenya’s political landscape due to her long-standing frontline fight against gender imbalance in power in the male-dominated political space in Kenya. However, in a CNN interview, Karua sought to dissociate herself from the ‘iron lady’ moniker, considering it misogynistic because it portrays women’s power as given by men (see Ambani, 2022; Madowo & Feleke, 2022).

Anne Waiguru adopted the campaign slogan *Minji* (Kikuyu for ‘green peas’) to appeal to the voters in Kirinyaga County by associating herself with the ‘soft and sweet’ delicacy in central Kenya (see Omulo, 2022; Sanga & Inyanji, 2022). Her

youthful, brown complexion added to her *minji minji* appeal, especially among her male constituency who might prioritise ‘beauty’ and ‘tenderness’ when choosing a candidate (Omulo, 2022). What is more, Waiguru described her political rival, Martha Karua, as ‘green grams’, which are more difficult to cook and less tasty (Sanga & Inyanji, 2022). In other words, name-calling is common in political campaigns among both men and women. An incumbent woman candidate for MP, Mary Waihera, adopted the slogan *Wa Mahua* (Kikuyu for ‘the flowery one’) a reference both to her flower business and to the degree of her appeal (‘beauty’) to the voters (Muiruri, 2022).

During the campaigns, female candidates used gendered slogans in their campaign materials in order to gain leverage over male candidates in themes such as ‘development-oriented’, action-oriented and ‘motherliness’ to their advantage. Although media mainly frame mothers through the cultural lens of domesticity such as housekeeping and family care, candidates leveraged a mother’s compassionate, nurturing and productive nature to position themselves as pillars of society (Obwogi, 2022). For example, the women candidates appealed to voters with such slogans as *Kaba maathe* (better a mother) for Ms Gathoni wa Muchomba who was vying for a member of parliament position in Githunguri constituency. M/s Millicent Omanga, who vied for Nairobi women county representative position used the slogan *Mama miradi* (mother of development projects). M/s Aisha Jumwa used the slogan *Shangazi wa taifa* (the nation’s aunt) while vying for Kilifi County governor position. In Kirinyaga County, Wanguri Ngirici used the slogan *Mama wa kazi* (Mother of tasks) and Faith Lukosi used the slogan *Mama sanitizer*, a term that she was accorded by the youth in informal settlements when she donated sanitisers during the COVID-19 pandemic (Obiria & Maichuhie, 2022). The candidates positioned themselves as the face and cornerstone of the nation and promised to be leaders who would prioritise voter interests as they would their children’s.

Despite some stories that used ‘woman’ as a derogatory term in headlines like ‘Women defying odds in bid to run counties’ (Beja, 2022), the female candidates chose to leverage their womanliness to appeal to the electorate to vote for change from the male-dominated politics. *The Standard* newspaper portrayed Linet Chepkorir, a county gubernatorial candidate, as so small and young as to have shocked ‘the old politicians in the party primaries’ (Kimutai, 2022). Such descriptions perpetuate the stereotype of the ‘normal’ woman leader as tall and mature (Mwaura & Oiruria, 2017) even as they appear to celebrate Chepkorir’s youthful vigour and gumption. Using feminised traits of appearance, personality, and familial background to describe female candidates reinforces how women’s deviation from traditionally ascribed roles is frowned upon and can hurt their campaigns (Van der Pas & Aaldering, 2020). What is more, traits-based appeals may reduce candidates’ accountability since voters find it more difficult to remove from office those with good traits who later fail to meet expectations (Mpofu, 2017).

Women as History Makers in Electoral Politics

Media coverage during the period of political campaigns up to general elections was perceived as a positive shift and time for reflection and awakening for not only the

voters but also the respective female candidates (UN Women, 2022). Veteran politicians took to the media to advise and position upcoming female candidates as the needed changes agents. In one story, Fatuma Achani, the current Governor of Kwale County, narrated how she overcame various hurdles in a male-dominated society and won as a result of the new-found political space anchored in the 2010 constitution that is progressive (Muiruri, 2024). Mary Wangari, the incumbent for Gilgil MP, also encouraged candidates to leverage the one-third gender rule as the entry point in the fight for their inclusion (Parliament of Kenya, 2022). Linet Chepkorir, who was on the ticket for Bomet County, said she was too resilient and had to overcome those who laughed and scoffed at her, almost making her lose focus (Chege, 2022b).

By focussing on issues rather than personalities, most female candidates presented themselves as hands-on, tried-and-tested agents of change. Fatuma Achani campaigned on her experience as the first deputy governor and promised to solidify her legacy (Muiruri, 2024). Kawira Mwangaza appealed to voters by talking about her philanthropic initiative, *Operation Okolea* (Operation Save) which distributed free cows to poor households in her county, and positioning herself as a prudent manager who could be ‘trusted with a bigger county budget of 12 billion’ (Muchui, 2022). Gladys Wanga presented herself as forward-thinking and a planner by campaigning on the several agreements she had signed with professionals for the development of Homa Bay should she become governor (Maombo, 2022). By taking strong, political positions, women dismantle their exclusion from decision-making (Seluman et al., 2024).

The media ran headlines that confirmed women’s onslaught on the male political space. Examples include ‘Game on! Women candidates in epic poll contest’ (K’onyango, 2022); ‘Why 2022 election could be the defining moment for women leadership’ (Odhiambo, 2022a); ‘Gachagua vs Karua will make for a riveting debate’ (Gaitho, 2022a); ‘Take-homes from Rigathi Gachagua, Martha Karua “deputies” debate’ (Gaitho, 2022b) where Martha Karua and Rigathi Gachagua as female and male running mates, respectively, were to engage in a live media debate. These stories represented the candidates as ‘history-makers’: Karua as the first female deputy president, Susan Kihika as the first female governor of Nakuru County, Tabitha Karanja as the first female senator for Nakuru, and Liza Chelule as a re-elected female MP for Nakuru. Indeed, Nakuru County was positioned as the model of a safe space for women’s leadership, where women would seize six elective posts.

Conclusion

Media portrayed the new generation of women candidates as both a product of the affirmative action enshrined in Section 27 of the 2010 Constitution and as sincere, passionate challengers to the patriarchal mindset that relegated women to political periphery. Some candidates saw the August 2022 election as ‘a moment of women vindication’, when the country would witness women leading the much-desired change in Kenya (UN Women, 2022). While feminists extol the breaking of the glass ceiling of power and historic ‘firsts’ in Kenya’s political leadership, critics argue that voters may not necessarily regard the candidates as qualified to hold office given the structural barriers that reinforce women as outliers in the

struggle for leadership (CFi Media Development, 2022). It is crucial to observe that when media emphasises women's achievements, experiences, and abilities, it can raise these issues on the public agenda and improve female candidates' polling (Anaya, 2023). By giving voice to the candidates (e.g. through profile stories), the media provides a platform from which voters get to know and can evaluate the candidates. Such spaces also support policy efforts aimed at eradicating gender inequalities and socio-economic and political emancipation of women.

Results of this content analysis of mainstream media coverage and representation of female candidates in Kenya's 2022 elections show that popular candidates like Martha Karua, Anne Waiguru, Kawira Mwangaza, and Susan Kihika received more media coverage and more frontpage coverage than newcomers. Although a few newcomers were given profile coverage (e.g. Linet Chepkorir), most of their coverage was hard news and editorial opinions rather than feature-length stories. Only a handful of high-profile female candidates were given extensive coverage by the media, which supports the marginalisation discourse on the media attention given exclusively to known and popular news sources (Barasa & Gitau, 2021). Moreover, scant attention to women's issues on the front pages while prioritising male candidates reinforces women's issues as peripheral. It was evident that Martha Karua gained top media coverage as a running mate (an unelected position) to a male presidential candidate, which may portray women as unable to stand and fight on their own. A gendered analysis showed that male candidates received more issue-based coverage than their female counterparts, whose coverage instead focussed on proving their ability and fighting stereotypes about their place in politics.

The media portrayed women candidates as victims of a political system intent on marginalising their political voices and representation. Other stories presented female politicians as victims arising from the ashes of gender discrimination, courtesy of seasoned political role models, who are broadening the recognition of women's rights among a growing, critical mass of electorate who desire and believe in socio-economic and political change that female political leadership will bring. The media also represented the candidates with physical and character traits that emphasised their struggles to overcome misogyny. Some candidates used campaign slogans to represent themselves as both womanly and as worthy competitors. Labels that underscore the physical characteristics of the candidate may pander to the male stereotypes that judge women as 'political ornaments' (Mpofu, 2017, p. 43).

While Kenya saw a surge in elected female politicians in 2022, the media coverage of only a handful was a disservice to many 'ordinary' candidates who may have lost elections due to their lack of visibility. From an agenda-setting perspective, the issues raised by a few prominent candidates seemed to shape the narrative for the rest of the women candidates and undermined the media's duty to provide balanced coverage. Although the media aligned with feminist views by giving attention to female candidates and highlighting their role in nation-building, the extent to which it dismantled patriarchal tendencies remains debatable. To gain deeper insight into the media's role in shaping gender empowerment during the campaigns, further research is needed. This should include an analysis

of how various media formats (broadcast, online, and print) represented the candidates, which issues were prioritised, and how coverage influenced candidates' performance. Additionally, an in-depth study of gendered media coverage during elections would help uncover disparities in media access, messaging, and representation, guiding future media practices during elections.

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