

Chapter 7

The Media and Social Media

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Key points

- Women politicians and civil society need to hold the media accountable for its coverage during elections. Importantly, the media must be encouraged to report on women in politics in a fair and accurate manner, where the gender of the politician does not influence in any way the quality, or quantity, of the coverage afforded to them.
- Gender, elections and media training and monitoring should be factored into all strategies for enhancing gender-aware elections.
- Media training for women candidates should include content on how to interact with both the positive and the negative elements of social media.
- New media use must be accompanied by checks and balances that curb online gender-based abuse and trolling.



The ability to impart and receive information, without the unwarranted interference of the state or of other powerful institutions, is a fundamental characteristic of any free society.

While media freedom has improved in Commonwealth Africa over the past decade, the continual threat to a free media is heightened in covering crucial events like elections, particularly when the media begins to probe and investigate difficult issues.

The media plays a key role in determining how women and men in politics and decision-making, among other areas, are viewed by society. During elections, the media has a responsibility to give equal access to women and men. However, women are grossly under-represented, misrepresented and often treated unfairly in the media coverage of elections. This chapter covers key areas and issues concerning gender, the media and elections. It includes a section on social media, recognised in the Commonwealth *Election Compendium of Good Practice* as a crucial new area in election management (Commonwealth Secretariat 2016b).

7.1 Women in the news and in election coverage

Gender equality and equality of all voices is intrinsic to freedom of expression. Yet studies have repeatedly shown that women's voices make up

less than one-quarter of those whose views and voices are heard in the news media. This ‘silent censorship’ has given rise to a global gender and media movement demanding gender equality ‘in and through the media’.

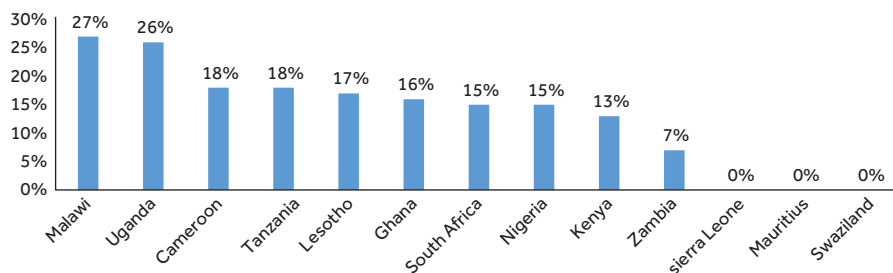
Inclusivity, especially in the media, is central to elections. Journalists are often encouraged to seek a diversity of perspectives and interview sources representing different sexes, races, classes, age, ethnicity and socioeconomic backgrounds. An important role of media in a democracy, and particularly during an election, is not only to inform the public, but also to ensure that all these voices and opinions are heard.

Even though women make up more than half of the population in many countries, their voices are often missing in election coverage. Male dominance of politics is underscored by their dominance in news coverage of the elections and the magnification of their voices.

Figure 7.1 is extracted from the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) 2015 results. It shows the under-representation of women in coverage of politics. This one-day monitoring, which has taken place every five years since Beijing, shows that, among the 13 African Commonwealth countries that participated in the study, Malawi had the highest proportion of women subjects in political coverage (28 per cent). Women’s views and voices were not heard at all in the coverage of political topics in Sierra Leone, Mauritius and Swaziland. Even where women are present as politicians, their voices are not heard in proportion to their representation.

Media monitoring during elections shows that, generally, women’s voices are still grossly under-represented and that gender does not really feature as a topic in the media, although there are some variations across countries. For example, according to Media Monitoring Africa, in Lesotho’s 2015 general elections women constituted 20 per cent of media sources, while in South

Figure 7.1 Women subjects in political coverage in Commonwealth African countries



Source: GMMP (2015)

Africa's 2014 general elections women constituted 25 per cent of those whose voices were heard in the media.

7.2 Women politicians and the media

As one of the most powerful tools for politicians, the media is a critical factor in the efficacy of women in politics. Most politicians have a love/hate relationship with the media. For women in politics, this relationship is that much more troubled.

An IPU study found that only a slight majority of women (53 per cent) said they had good relations with the media; 10 per cent had a bad relationship; and 22 per cent expressed ambivalence (IPU 2003, p.166).

The issues confronting women politicians and the media are two-fold. The first is that they are for the most part simply ignored. The Gender and Media Baseline Study carried out by Gender Links and the Media Institute of Southern Africa showed that, while on average women comprise 19.4 per cent of Members of Parliament in the region, only 8 per cent of politicians whose views are sought for comment are women. In South Africa, the Media Monitoring Project found that men constituted 87 per cent of the news sources in the 1999 elections (Media Monitoring Project 1999).

The second issue is that, to the extent that the views of women in politics are sought, they are sometimes trivialised. According to the GMMP study:

Women entering the political sphere provide the news media with a 'problem'. They embody a challenge to masculine authority. They also defy easy categorisation. The scrutiny of women's work in our society, therefore, is closely tied to their traditionally defined roles as 'women'. Their images fit in well with prevailing cultural perceptions of women. These images also help to maintain the patriarchal structure by inculcating restricted and limited images of women (Gender Links 2010).

The media is a terrain most women politicians feel threatened by, as the coverage seems to push them off the news agenda. Women politicians in elections face constant public scrutiny, cutthroat smear campaigns and numerous sexist and insensitive portrayals. According to the Ethical Journalism Network 'media have contributed to gender discrimination and hate speech that is characterised by stereotyping. The first yardstick for judging women seeking political office therefore becomes morality, regardless of how male counterparts may behave. The hate speech has been repeatedly used as a weapon of gender-based violence meant to intimidate women into silence' (Nakitare 2017).

'Women who wish to succeed in politics are forced to define themselves outside of patriarchal definitions of femininity in order to be taken

seriously. Consequently, the media and our society represent these women as unfeminine, as “iron women”, ruthless, going against what is expected of them. These are positive attributes in men, in fact the media frequently call for “strong” leadership, yet when this leadership emerges from women in cabinet and parliament, they are criticised and vilified in the media’ (Media Monitoring Africa 1999).

Below are some examples of headlines from Kenya, South African and Rwanda in the lead up to elections:

- ‘The Iron Lady of Kalenjin Politics Does It Yet Again’ – Kenya (*Daily Nation* 2013)
- ‘Xhosa King Tells Dlamini-Zuma “Women are Too Weak to Lead”’ – South Africa (*The Citizen* 2017)
- ‘Rwanda: “It’s Not Good for a Girl to Go into Politics”’ – Rwanda (*The East African* 2017)

7.3 Gender-responsive reporting

According to Media Monitoring Africa, the inadequacy of reporting about women and the marginalisation of women – related issues in the media – contributes to the treatment of gender equality as being of secondary importance in elections.

There is a tendency to assume that any story that has a woman as its subject, is automatically a gender story. This approach misses the point that gender is about power relations between men and women, as well as the dynamic nature of these relations, which change from time to time and place to place. Good gender reporting not only focuses on events and issues, but also looks at how men and women are differently affected by these. The point is that all stories can be viewed through a ‘gender lens’.

One study notes that:

Gender-aware reporting requires journalists and editors to ensure that an event or issue is told through the voices of both women and men. It requires journalists and editors to seek and use data disaggregated by sex, to ensure that background information (context) and analysis reflect the perspectives of both women and men. Such an approach would help illustrate how the particular issue, policy or event being reported on affects diverse members of a society, including male and female citizens. Good research, in-depth reporting and analysis, a diversity of sources and perspectives together bring about gender-aware reporting. Clearly these characteristics are also the basis of good journalism (Made 2011).

Table 7.1 Gender-responsive reporting versus gender-blind reporting

Gender-aware reporting	Gender-blind/ gender-biased reporting
Gender balance of sources (voices)	Lack of gender balance in sources (voices)
Gender-neutral language (e.g. chairperson rather than chairman)	Gender-biased language
Awareness of differential impact	Lack of awareness of gender dynamics
Fairness in approach to issue: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No double standards • No moralising • No open prejudice • No ridicule • No placing of blame 	Biased coverage of issue: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Double standards • Moralising, e.g. being judgmental • Open prejudice, e.g. women are less intelligent than men etc. • Ridicule, e.g. of women in certain situations • Placing blame, e.g. on rape survivors for their dress etc.
Challenges stereotypes	Perpetuates stereotypes
Gender-disaggregated data	Aggregated data

In effect, gender-responsive reporting requires journalists to ensure that they are not perpetuating stereotypes, and that equal voice and space are given to issues affecting women. Best practice in gender-responsive coverage addresses subjects that have traditionally been sidelined and challenges male and female stereotypes and norms. Additionally, it is sensitive to the impact of the story on both genders and recognises the power of the media to influence (see Llanos and Nina 2011). Table 7.1 provides a comparison between gender-responsive reporting and gender-blind reporting.

7.4 Social (new) media and elections

Alternative media platforms such as blogs, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and many others provide an alternative communication platform to mainstream media, and are fast becoming a powerful vehicle to advance news and uncensored information. The 'local' is becoming 'global' in an instant, by the click of a button. This is helping society gain an understanding of the realities of people on the ground in different environments.

Social media permits everyone (or at least many people) to broadcast their views (not to mention their prejudices) and to co-ordinate their political activities via the internet, without recourse to traditional outlets. Social media has provided political parties, women's movements and gender advocates with a significant and powerful new communication tool. On the other hand, these new media also bring their own problems and challenges.

The reliability and quality of such information, comment and analysis is often difficult to verify. Furthermore, the interactivity of the new media, and the

ability to comment online (including on the websites of the traditional press) can prove to be a double-edged sword. Where social media is employed as a tool for vilifying women in politics through ‘trolling’ or ‘twitter storms’, for instance, the impact can be damaging and traumatic, given the reach of these platforms. Media training for women candidates should include content on how to interact with both the positive and the negative elements of social media. Additionally, mechanisms to deter VAWE in all its forms, including political parties’ codes of conduct, should explicitly recognise and address the misuse of social media as a vehicle for perpetuating such abuse.



7.5 Checklists

Mainstream media

- ✓ Does the media afford equal voice to women and men voters, candidates and officials?
- ✓ Does the reporting include the views and voices of those most affected, including women, and especially the most marginalised groups in society?
- ✓ Does the reporting provide and analyse sex-disaggregated data on candidates and voters?
- ✓ Are women and men described in ways that either promote or challenge gender stereotypes?

New media

- ✓ Is new media used equally by women and men candidates to convey their message?
- ✓ Do other parties in the election (the EMB, civil society, the media, election observer missions) use new media to highlight gender dimensions of the elections?
- ✓ Do women and men voters participate equally and actively in new media discussions relating to the elections?
- ✓ Are there instances of sexism or misogyny perpetuated through new media? What is the effect of this?

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