Voices of Change

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Introduction

"*Human rights are women's rights, and women's rights are human rights, once and for all.*"
– Hillary Clinton, 1995, Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing.

The intersection of gender and politics is a critical area of study, particularly in how the press and news media portray political figures. This intersection becomes even more significant when considering the impact of such portrayals on public perception**.** Media coverage is not merely a passive reflection of societal attitudes; it actively shapes the way leadership, authority, and credibility are perceived. By choosing what to highlight, what to downplay, and how to frame stories, the media becomes a powerful force in shaping political discourse and, by extension, societal norms (Baum & Potter, 2008). Its influence on public opinion is profound, making it a vital area of inquiry for understanding the perpetuation or disruption of gender inequality in politics. "*Among the many sources of influence on gender representations, media occupies an important space and its relevance can be assessed across many different phenomena*" (Santoniccolo, Trombetta et al,. 2023). This issue is particularly pressing when examining prominent figures such as Kamala Harris and Donald Trump, whose portrayals in the media offer contrasting narratives rooted in gendered assumptions.

Kamala Harris, as the first female Vice President of the United States and a woman of color, represents a historic breakthrough in American politics. Her ascent to one of the highest offices in the country has brought renewed attention to issues of representation, gender equality, and racial

justice. However, her trailblazing role has also subjected her to unique challenges in how she is portrayed by the media. Media narratives often emphasize her gender and race, subjecting her to stereotypes and heightened scrutiny (Harris, 2024). Coverage of her actions, decisions, and demeanor frequently reflects a double standard that undermines her authority and leadership. For example, articles focusing on her attire or tone during debates detract from substantive discussions about her policies or achievements. This phenomenon illustrates how deeply ingrained biases influence the framing of female leaders, often to their detriment.

In contrast, Donald Trump's media portrayal highlights attributes traditionally associated with masculinity, such as strength, dominance, and assertiveness. As a former President and a polarizing figure in American politics, Trump's media coverage has often focused on his unconventional leadership style, bold rhetoric, and controversial actions (Coyle, 2015). These traits are frequently framed as evidence of his strong leadership, even when they elicit criticism. Such portrayals align with societal expectations of male leaders, reinforcing traditional gender roles. The disparity between the media's treatment of Harris and Trump underscores the persistent influence of gender stereotypes in shaping public perceptions of political figures. By examining these contrasting portrayals, we can better understand the ways in which media narratives perpetuate or challenge gender norms in politics.

Media's Influence on Public Opinion

The media's power to shape public opinion lies in its ability to control narratives and influence how audiences interpret political events and figures (Gamson, Croteau et al,. 1992). Media coverage serves as the primary source of information for many people, shaping their understanding of leaders and policies. This power is amplified in the age of social media, where news spreads rapidly, often without the critical context provided by traditional journalism. "*Media organizations often formulate and adopt self-regulatory measures. This results from the belief that, given the role of media institutions in democratic contexts, governments should secure a balance between the media freedom of expression, publication, private ownership, and enterprise, and the positive freedom of citizens to access information. Governments have, in fact, historically avoided regulating aspects of the sector's functioning, particularly in relation to media content*" (Padovani & Bozzon, 2020). When reporting on male and female leaders, the media tends to emphasize different traits that align with societal expectations of gender roles. Men are frequently portrayed as strong, decisive, and authoritative, while women are more likely to be scrutinized for their appearance, emotional expressions, and personal lives. This discrepancy not only reinforces traditional gender stereotypes but also influences public opinion about a candidate's competence or suitability for leadership roles.

For instance, Kamala Harris's media coverage often highlights her identity as a woman of color, framing her achievements as groundbreaking but sometimes reducing her to a symbol rather than a leader in her own right. This framing can have a dual effect: while it draws attention to issues of representation and diversity, it also subjects her to heightened scrutiny. Articles focusing on her demeanor during debates or her choice of words during speeches often overshadow discussions about her policies and leadership qualities. This reflects a broader trend in media coverage of women in politics, where emphasis on gendered traits undermines their authority.

Conversely, Donald Trump's media portrayal often focuses on his assertiveness and leadership style, traits traditionally associated with masculinity. Even when his actions or rhetoric are controversial, they are frequently framed as evidence of his strength and decisiveness. This framing reinforces the societal expectation that male leaders are natural decision-makers, while female leaders are scrutinized for traits perceived as weaknesses. By perpetuating these stereotypes, the media plays a significant role in shaping public opinion and influencing electoral outcomes.

Interviews and the questions posed to political leaders further reflect biases and inequalities. Female politicians, for instance, are often asked about their family responsibilities, appearance, or emotional resilience, questions that rarely arise for their male counterparts (Massuchin, Marques et al,. 2020). Such questioning subtly reinforces stereotypes, suggesting that women must justify their presence in politics in ways men do not (Makulilo, 2020). Kamala Harris, for example, has faced questions about her ability to balance her role as Vice President with her personal life, while Donald Trump's interviews frequently focused on his business acumen and leadership style. This disparity not only skews public perceptions but also perpetuates the idea that women in politics are exceptions rather than the norm.

By analyzing the contrasting portrayals of Kamala Harris and Donald Trump, this paper aims to shed light on the ways media narratives influence public perceptions of leadership, authority, and credibility. Through this analysis, we seek to contribute to ongoing discussions about the role of the media in shaping political realities and addressing gender inequality.

In addition, by examining these portrayals we hope to uncover the extent to which media coverage perpetuates or challenges gender disparities in politics and contribute to a broader understanding of the media's role in shaping public opinion and political discourse.

Research objective

The primary aim of this research is to uncover the gender discrimination embedded in media portrayals, revealing how media framing is shaped by gender-based biases. By examining the

representation of figures such as Kamala Harris and Donald Trump in the press, this study seeks to highlight how stereotypes and societal norms influence public narratives. The focus on the interplay between gender and media aims to expose how these portrayals perpetuate inequality and hinder progress toward equitable and inclusive representations of leadership.

Media Stereotypes and Their Implications

A key focus of this study is to identify and analyze the recurring stereotypes that dominate media coverage of political figures. Women, like Kamala Harris, are frequently scrutinized for their appearance, emotional demeanor, or perceived "likeability," whereas men, such as Donald Trump, are often framed in terms of their strength, authority, or decisiveness. These disparities in framing not only reinforce outdated gender norms but also shape societal perceptions of leadership in ways that maintain structural inequities. The study examines how these biases influence the public's understanding of what constitutes effective leadership.

The Role of Media in Shaping Public Perception

Media does not merely reflect societal attitudes—it actively influences them. This research emphasizes the critical role of the press in framing public perception of leaders. By analyzing the coverage of Harris and Trump, the study explores how the framing of their achievements, controversies, and leadership styles contributes to broader societal narratives about gender and power. Understanding these mechanisms demonstrates the significant impact of media framing on the perceived credibility and authority of political figures.

Aligning Media Practices with Gender Equality Goals

This research aims to bridge the gap between global gender equality goals and current media practices. International frameworks, such as the Beijing Platform for Action, underscore the importance of balanced and inclusive portrayals in the media. By identifying patterns of bias in the media's treatment of Harris and Trump, this study seeks to provide actionable insights that promote equity and representation. The findings aim to encourage media practices that reflect and support the principles of inclusivity and gender fairness.

Encouraging Critical Media Literacy

Beyond exposing biases in media portrayals, this study aspires to empower audiences through critical media literacy. By uncovering the subtle ways in which language, tone, and framing perpetuate gender stereotypes, it encourages media consumers to question and challenge these

narratives. This critical awareness is positioned as a catalyst for fostering a more informed audience, capable of demanding and supporting equitable media practices.

Toward Balanced Media Representations

Ultimately, this research contributes to both academic understanding and practical efforts to transform how the media portrays political figures. By advancing knowledge about the interplay between gender and media framing, the study lays the groundwork for creating a media landscape that champions fairness and inclusivity. This transformation is essential for fostering a more equitable perception of leadership and promoting societal progress.

Presentation in News Outlets: The differences in Headlines

This section provides a detailed analysis of newspaper headlines to examine how Kamala Harris and Donald Trump are portrayed in the media. The analysis highlights recurring patterns in language, tone, and emphasis, revealing how gender dynamics shape the public perception of leadership. By focusing on a diverse range of U.S. media outlets, this study uncovers how media framing reflects and perpetuates societal gender norms.

The analysis is based on a diverse sample of media outlets, including liberal, conservative, and centrist perspectives, such as The New York Times, Fox News, CNN, The Washington Post, The Guardian, and The Wall Street Journal. Headlines were collected from key moments in Harris's and Trump's political careers, including election campaigns, televised debates, and policy announcements. This selection ensures a balanced perspective and captures how different ideological leanings influence media framing.

First, Media coverage of Kamala Harris often highlights her clothing choices, framing them as symbolic expressions of her identity and leadership. While this narrative celebrates her historic role, it also reveals the persistent gendered lens through which women in power are evaluated.

For instance, The New York Times observed that Harris's white suit during her victory speech was "a deliberate nod to the suffragist movement and a testament to the women who paved the way for her historic achievement" (The New York Times, 2020). This interpretation connects her attire to a larger story of progress, portraying her as a symbolic figure rather than focusing on her policies or leadership style. Similarly, CNN posed the question, "Why does it matter what Kamala Harris wears?" in a video analyzing the scrutiny placed on her fashion, subtly critiquing how such attention detracts from substantive discussions about her work (CNN, 2021).

This theme extends into her broader public image. A 2024 piece in The New York Times titled "Kamala Harris Is Dressing to Be President" emphasized how her polished wardrobe choices signal presidential ambition, suggesting that her attire is as much a strategy as it is a statement (The New York Times, 2024). Meanwhile, the Yale Daily News described her campaign wardrobe as "an intentional showcase of strength, confidence, and readiness for leadership," reinforcing the idea that her clothing choices are scrutinized not just for style but for what they signify about her capacity to lead (Yale Daily News, 2024).

By contrast, media coverage of Donald Trump rarely focuses on his appearance unless tied to controversy. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, *CNN* noted how Trump's refusal to wear a mask became "a defining symbol of his political defiance," reflecting his broader persona as a disruptor rather than inviting detailed commentary on his attire (*CNN*, 2020).

This disparity exposes a persistent double standard. Women leaders like Harris are often scrutinized through a lens that emphasizes their symbolic value, linking their clothing to narratives about gender and representation. Men, however, are evaluated primarily on their policies and actions, with little regard for how their appearance might reflect their leadership.

Second, The persistent focus on Harris's wardrobe reflects broader societal biases, where women in leadership must navigate expectations to embody both competence and symbolic progress. While her fashion choices are celebrated as statements of empowerment, they also risk overshadowing her substantive achievements. Meanwhile, Trump's leadership is framed in terms of his decisions and actions, perpetuating traditional power dynamics that place men's performance above their presentation.

This imbalance not only shapes public perception but also reinforces unequal standards, highlighting the challenges women leaders face in breaking free from symbolic representations to be recognized for their policy achievements and leadership style.

The media's portrayal of controversial behavior highlights a significant gender disparity in how male and female leaders are evaluated. Donald Trump's polarizing actions are frequently framed as evidence of his strength and authority, while similar behaviors from Kamala Harris are often scrutinized or portrayed as unprofessional.

For example, *BBC News* described Trump's leadership style as "aggressive but effective," with the headline "Trump's Aggressive Approach Sparks Debate, but Secures Results" suggesting that his combative tactics are a hallmark of his ability to deliver (*BBC News*, 2017). Similarly, *The Wall Street Journal* praised his defiance of political norms with the headline, "Trump Adopts

Strong-Arm Approach to a Second Term," framing his forceful approach as a sign of his authority (*The Wall Street Journal*, 2020).

In contrast, when Harris displays assertiveness or challenges norms, the media often frames her actions differently. The Guardian described her role in the Democratic party with the headline, "Kamala Harris is no dominating leader – and that may be her biggest strength," highlighting how her leadership style differs from more traditional, dominant forms of authority (The Guardian, 2024). Similarly, New York Magazine covered Trump's confrontational persona with the headline, "Trump Wants to Remind the World He's Still a 'Madman,'" illustrating how his aggressive tactics are seen as part of his identity as a powerful leader (New York Magazine, 2024).

These differences reveal a gendered double standard in media narratives. Trump's controversies are often reframed as demonstrations of power and resolve, reinforcing traditional notions of masculinity and leadership. Harris, on the other hand, is constrained by societal expectations that prioritize approachability and decorum for women leaders. This disparity diminishes Harris's agency while elevating Trump's persona as a bold and decisive leader.

The media's framing of Kamala Harris and Donald Trump exposes deep-seated gender biases in leadership narratives. Harris is often portrayed through a symbolic lens, with her appearance and demeanor analyzed as reflections of her identity rather than her policies or achievements. In contrast, Trump's controversies are framed as evidence of his strength and authority, reinforcing traditional gender norms that equate masculinity with power.

These contrasting portrayals not only shape public perception but also perpetuate unequal standards for evaluating leaders. Women like Harris must navigate a double burden, proving their competence while embodying symbolic representation. Meanwhile, male leaders like Trump benefit from narratives that prioritize their actions and downplay the scrutiny of their behavior. Addressing these biases is essential for fostering a more equitable and accurate representation of leadership in the media.

Behaviours in Interviews: Posed Questions to each candidate

Kamala Harris and Donald Trump face distinctly different types of questions during interviews and debates, reflecting their contrasting political roles, public personas, and the media's framing of each figure. Kamala Harris often encounters questions that probe her policies, qualifications, and experiences as a woman in leadership. For instance, interviewers frequently ask her to elaborate on her positions regarding social justice, healthcare reform, and women's rights,

aligning with broader discussions around gender equality and representation in politics. Questions directed at Harris may also focus on her experiences as the first female Vice President and how her identity influences her policy decisions. This line of questioning tends to emphasize her qualifications and the challenges she faces as a woman in a predominantly male political landscape. In contrast, Donald Trump is often asked questions that are more confrontational or focused on his personality and leadership style. Interviewers frequently challenge him on his past statements, controversial policies, or his approach to governance. Questions may revolve around his handling of specific crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or immigration policies, often framed in a way that invites him to defend or justify his actions. Trump's interviews typically include inquiries about his relationship with the media or his views on political opponents, which can lead to more combative exchanges. This difference in questioning not only highlights the media's approach to each figure but also reflects broader societal attitudes toward gender and authority, where Harris's inquiries often seek to validate her role while Trump's questions may challenge his credibility and decision-making processes. Overall, these contrasting question types contribute significantly to how each politician is portrayed in the media and perceived by the public.

Donald Trump frequently encounters a variety of challenging questions during interviews and public appearances. One common type of inquiry is confrontational and accountability-focused, where he is asked to defend his past statements, policies, and actions. For example, he might be questioned about his handling of specific crises, such as natural disasters or economic downturns, or controversies surrounding his administration, like allegations of misconduct or conflicts of interest. These questions aim to hold him accountable for his decisions and actions, reflecting the public's desire for transparency and responsibility. By scrutinizing his responses, the public seeks to understand the reasoning behind his choices and ensure that he is being truthful about his intentions and outcomes.

In addition to accountability questions, Trump is also probed on policy and governance issues. Interviewers typically ask him to clarify his stance on various policy matters, such as immigration reform, healthcare policies, and economic strategies. They often seek detailed explanations or justifications for his decisions, pushing him to provide clarity on complex issues. For instance, he might be asked to explain his approach to border security, including how he plans to manage immigration flows and protect national borders. Similarly, he could be questioned about his plans for healthcare reform, such as how he intends to improve access to healthcare services or reduce costs. These policy-focused questions help the public understand Trump's vision for the country and assess whether his policies align with their values and needs.

Trump's outspoken nature also leads to personal and behavioral questions. Given his frequent use of social media and his often contentious interactions with the media, he is frequently asked

about these aspects of his communication style. For example, he might be questioned about specific tweets that have sparked controversy or his interactions with journalists, which often lead to heated exchanges. These questions reflect the public's interest in understanding how his communication style impacts his governance and relationships with other leaders. By examining his responses to these personal inquiries, observers can gain insights into his leadership approach and how it affects his ability to work with others and address national challenges effectively. Overall, Trump's interviews typically involve a mix of policy scrutiny, personal inquiries, and accountability challenges, reflecting both his leadership style and the public's expectations of transparency and responsibility.

Kamala Harris, as a prominent figure in American politics, frequently faces a range of questions during interviews and public appearances. One common type of inquiry is policy and legislative-focused, where she is asked to elaborate on her positions regarding issues such as social justice, healthcare reform, and women's rights. Interviewers seek detailed explanations of her legislative proposals and how she plans to implement them, reflecting a desire to understand her vision for policy change. For example, she might be asked to explain her plans for expanding healthcare access, including how she intends to improve affordability and accessibility for all citizens. Similarly, she could be questioned about her approach to criminal justice reform, such as how she plans to address systemic inequalities and improve community safety. These policy-focused questions help the public understand Harris's vision for the country and assess whether her policies align with their values and needs.

In addition to policy questions, Harris is also asked about her personal and professional background. As a woman in a high-profile political role, she might be questioned about her personal experiences, her career path, and how her background influences her policy decisions. This line of questioning highlights the interest in her unique perspective and how it shapes her political approach. For instance, she might be asked about how her experiences as a prosecutor inform her views on justice reform, or how her background as a woman of color influences her stance on social justice issues. By exploring these personal and professional aspects, the public gains insight into what drives her policy decisions and how her life experiences have prepared her for leadership roles.

Harris is also asked leadership and vision questions, which aim to understand her strategic thinking and ability to lead effectively. Interviewers may ask her to outline her vision for the country, including her approach to addressing major challenges like economic inequality or climate change. For example, she might be asked to describe her strategy for building bipartisan support for legislation, which is crucial in a divided political environment. Additionally, she could be questioned about her leadership style, such as how she manages her team, makes tough decisions,

and communicates with the public. These questions help assess her ability to inspire and unite people across different political spectrums, which is essential for effective governance. Overall, Harris's interviews typically involve a mix of policy scrutiny, personal inquiries, and leadership assessments, reflecting both her political approach and the public's expectations of transparency and leadership.

One of the key differences in how Donald Trump and Kamala Harris are questioned during interviews lies in the focus on identity and experience. Harris's interviews often delve into her identity as a woman of color and how this shapes her political perspective. For instance, she might be asked about how her experiences with racism or sexism influence her policy priorities, such as her stance on social justice or women's rights. This line of questioning highlights the interest in understanding how her personal background informs her political decisions and vision for the country. In contrast, Trump's interviews tend to focus more on his actions and policies, with less emphasis on his personal identity. While he might be questioned about his policy decisions, these inquiries rarely explore how his personal experiences or identity shape his political views.

Another significant difference is the tone and approach of the questions directed at Trump and Harris. Questions posed to Trump are often more confrontational, challenging his statements and actions. For example, he might face aggressive questioning about his handling of a crisis, such as how he responded to a natural disaster or economic downturn. This confrontational tone reflects the public's desire to hold him accountable for his decisions and actions. In contrast, questions for Harris tend to be more exploratory, seeking to understand her vision and policy approaches. She might be asked more open-ended questions about her vision for the future, such as how she plans to address economic inequality or improve access to healthcare. This difference in tone reflects the unique public perceptions and expectations surrounding each candidate. Trump is often seen as a polarizing figure who sparks intense debate, while Harris is viewed as a leader who can bring people together around shared goals. Overall, the types of questions posed to Trump and Harris during interviews reflect the distinct contexts and public perceptions surrounding each candidate, influencing the nature of political discourse and the questions that shape it.

Behaviors and postures

Examining the debate of Kamala Harris and Donald Trump reveals certain postures and behaviors that may reflect gender dynamics on new outlets from the US. Harris initiated the debate by confidently approaching Trump for a handshake. This move not only demonstrated her confidence and authority but also helped foster trust with both Trump and the public, signaling her readiness to engage directly. Regarding the postures and gestures, Kamala Harris often used open and controlled gestures by placing her hands on the podium or using deliberate movements to

strongly emphasize her points. These traits demonstrated confidence and command, which is more scrutinized in women due to the societal expectations of women appearing "agreeable" or soft. Meanwhile, Trump's gestures displayed expansive gestures, such as spreading his arms or leaning forward, which are associated with dominance and power. His physical presence was amplified by his presentation, reflecting a traditional and masculine approach to asserting authority.

In terms of facial expressions, Harris's expressive reactions were diverse, often involving smirks and raised eyebrows that slightly conveyed her disapproval and skepticism. This expression was a strategic way to assert dominance without overly interrupting or raising her voice, which women in leadership often balance to avoid being labeled as "aggressive". In contrast, the reactions of Trump's face clearly showed his dismissive expression and conveyed condescension through his Joker-like smile, eye-rolling or looking away. Such behaviors may subtly reinforce gendered power dynamics, implying dismissal of an opponent's authority or arguments.

Additionally, Trump's repeated interruptions of Harris during the debate exemplified a lack of respect, a behavior the interviewers allowed to continue unchecked. This reflects a broader pattern in professional and public contexts, where women are interrupted more frequently than men, potentially undermining their authority. In comparison Kamala, she frequently maintained her direct eye contact with Trump, signaling strength and willingness to engage on equal footings. For women, direct eye contact in confrontational settings can counteract stereotypes of submissiveness.

These behavioral differences are amplified by media narratives that influence public perception. Trump's interruptions and dominant gestures align with traditional masculine norms of control, which can reinforce gendered power dynamics in the audience's mind. Meanwhile, Harris's composed and deliberate demeanor highlights the additional pressure on women in leadership to be both "likeable" and strong—a double standard rarely applied to male leaders.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that media framing plays a critical role in shaping public perceptions of political leaders, particularly through the lens of gender. The portrayal of Kamala Harris often emphasizes symbolic aspects of her identity, such as her attire and demeanor, overshadowing her policy achievements. Conversely, Donald Trump is framed through a lens of strength and authority, reinforcing traditional masculine leadership norms.

The findings underscore the urgent need to address media biases that perpetuate gender inequality. By aligning with the Beijing Platform for Action's goal of eliminating gender stereotypes in media, this study highlights the gap between its aspirations and current media

practices. The upcoming 30th anniversary of the Beijing Platform serves as a reminder of the work still required to achieve balanced and inclusive portrayals of leadership.

By exposing these disparities, this study aims to foster greater critical awareness among media creators and consumers. Addressing biased narratives is essential to building a media landscape that promotes equality and fairness, contributing to a more inclusive representation of leadership in politics and beyond.

Application to the Beijing Platform

Our results highlight the persistence of gender bias in media portrayals, aligning with the Beijing Platform for Action's Section J, which calls for balanced and non-stereotypical representations of women. Despite the platform's emphasis on equitable media portrayals, our study shows how gender stereotypes continue to shape public narratives, hindering progress toward gender equality.

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