

# Equal Airtime?:

*Analysis of Media Coverage of Women Candidates in the 2024 Lok Sabha General Elections*

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# NARISHAKTI@BALLOTBOX:

## WHAT AND WHY?

NariShakti@BallotBox is a unique series 3 of Research Briefs published by Mandonna Research Consultants on the key issues and challenges surrounding women and their participation in the Indian General Elections of 2024.

India has been gloriously distinguished as the largest democracy of the world. With around 96 crore eligible voters set to decide the trajectory of our nation, it is crucial to acknowledge that the historic gap between male and female voters has significantly decreased over the years. An SBI Research Report (2024) has indicated that the number of female voters are on the rise and will reach the inflection point by 2029. In fact, projected trends indicate that by 2047, women may outnumber men as voters by 10% (SBI, 2024).



Women's participation in elections, either as voters or as poll contestants, is crucial for sustainable and equitable development of the country along with achieving transformational economic and social changes. However, women continue to be marginalised in election activities, ranging from campaigns to popular perception and from representation to party manifestos.

To this end, the aim of the NariShakti@BallotBox series would be to throw light on some of the key aspects and issues at the intersection of the Lok Sabha elections of 2024 and women's issues. We envision to empower key stakeholders through data-backed research and analysis for further action.



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## ABSTRACT

Media coverage of women candidates is crucial in shaping voter perceptions and influencing electoral outcomes. The following paper seeks to analyse the media coverage of the 2024 Lok Sabha general elections through a gender lens, focussing on the visibility and framing of women candidates. Through a comprehensive content analysis of electoral coverage by the press, broadcasting, and online news media sources, the paper unearths a systematic gender bias and sexist narratives underlying the electoral airtime. In pursuit of substantive gender justice and democratic participation, the paper concludes with a call for gender-neutral election coverage practices and the fostering of feminist media literacy among voters.

## KEYWORDS

Media Coverage, Women Candidates, General Elections 2024

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# INTRODUCTION

Media, often regarded as the fourth pillar of democracy, is crucial to the survival and vitality of electoral politics. The media, the candidates, and the voters intersect in the realm of election campaigning and coverage thereof, which plays a crucial role in shaping voter perceptions and electoral outcomes (Usman 2013). It acts as a decisive channel of political communication, contributing to the formation of public opinion by disseminating information on candidates, their past accomplishments, future programs, agendas, and ongoing debates (Lange and Ward 2004).

However, this electoral coverage is often influenced by prevailing social structures, including race, class, gender, and geography, leading to media bias characterised by “significantly and systematically distorted (portrayals of reality)” (Groeling 2013). It is especially pertinent to examine the issue of media bias through a gendered lens since gender bias in electoral coverage has been theorised as a significant hurdle to women’s success at the ballot and their institutional representation (Rohrbach et al. 2020). Research suggests that women candidates are frequently marginalised in election coverage, being subject to issue stereotyping<sup>1</sup> in “soft” policy areas, personalisation<sup>2</sup> of their candidature, and the outright peddling of sexist stereotypes and behaviours towards them (Harmer 2021).

As the world’s largest democracy prepares to undergo the electoral test, the 2024 Lok Sabha general elections emerge as a critical juncture where gender, media, and political dynamics intersect. The intricacy of these dynamics is underscored by the prevalence of narratives of “Nari Shakti” and women empowerment in the election coverage leading up to the polls, juxtaposed with the Election Commission (ECI) data, which reveals the stark reality that a mere 8% of women candidates contested in the first phase of the general elections, with at least six

states fielding zero women candidates. It is imperative to examine the role of the media in shaping the discourses of gender and political representation, in an attempt to critically discern between hollow claims and substantive victories.

Hence, this paper aims to investigate whether media coverage of women candidates, particularly during the 2024 Lok Sabha general elections, has been influenced by gender biases and stereotypes. It seeks to support or refute this hypothesis through secondary data and content analysis of election coverage, primarily by the press, broadcasting, and online news media sources. Accordingly, the paper proceeds in two main sections:

- The first section assesses the equality of airtime or lack thereof: Do women candidates receive equal airtime as compared to their male counterparts?
- The second section delves into the gendered narratives within this airtime: How does women candidates' airtime qualitatively differ from that of men?

The paper concludes with the call for employing gender-neutral strategies in the media coverage of elections. It advocates for a feminist perspective on media literacy, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between media, gender, and electoral democracy.

- ***Research Questions***

The paper seeks to address the following primary research questions, particularly within the framework of the 2024 Lok Sabha general elections:

1. How are women candidates portrayed in the media coverage of elections?
2. Are there any patterns of bias, stereotypes, and gender narratives prevalent in the media coverage of women candidates?

In addition, the paper seeks to address the following secondary research question:

1. How does the gendered nature of media coverage potentially impact the electoral prospects and political careers of women candidates?

- ***Methodology***

The paper involves secondary data and content analysis of election campaign coverage in mainstream media outlets, including newspapers, television news programs, online news websites, and social media platforms through a gender lens. Prominent sources for the content analysis included national media outlets like The Indian Express, The Hindu, The Economic Times, and India Today, along with local and regional outlets like the Kerala Kaumudi and Janata Se Rishta. A comprehensive literature review was undertaken to provide a theoretical foundation and empirical grounding to the study's findings.

## **GENDER, VISIBILITY, AND REPRESENTATION: UNEARTHING THE COVERAGE DISPARITY**

The most empirically rigorous approach to ascertaining gender disparities in media coverage of elections involves quantitative analysis that focuses on women candidates' visibility in electoral coverage. Although the same lies beyond the scope of this paper, an extensive literature review suggests pertinent insights and highlights areas for further research. Van der Pas and Aaldering's (2020) meta-analysis of 90 studies, encompassing over 750,000 media stories covering over 25,000 politicians, finds a systematic gender difference in media visibility, whereby women politicians receive approximately

17% less media attention. In another meta-analytical study, Rohrbach, Aaldering, and Van der Pas (2022) assert that this gender disparity and its impact on voter bias is conditional rather than universal. Their analysis suggests that voters respond similarly to most media portrayals of male and female candidates, however, media portrayals that reaffirm gender stereotypical beliefs (for instance, media coverage that draws attention to appearance and family lives) are likely to disproportionately impact the latter.

Although widespread research has been conducted on gender-differentiated media coverage in elections across the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and other high-income democracies, the literature review revealed a comparative dearth of similar studies situated in the Indian context. Several studies underscore the significance of media coverage in India's electoral process, analysing the policy issues and discourses prioritised or shaped by the media (Anas 2021; Barclay et al. 2016; Chattopadhyay 2012; Mazumdar 2016; Verma and Sardesai 2014). However, the number of studies examining the role of media in Indian elections through a gender lens stand far and in between. Among the limited studies that have delved into this area, notable contributions include those by Bathla (2004), Golder (2012), Guha (2018), Ahmed (2020), and Spary (2020).

Earlier studies, such as those by Bathla (2004) and Golder (2012), focus on the press coverage of the 1998 and 2004 Lok Sabha elections respectively. While Golder unearths a consistent disparity in the amount of press mentions received by prominent women candidates compared to equivalent men, Bathla conducts a comparative study of Jayalalitha Jayaram and Sushma Swaraj to examine their media portrayal as masculine versus feminine leader ideal-types. Recent studies analyse the emerging role of digital media in the Indian electoral landscape, including the mobilising-reinforcing effect<sup>3</sup> it may induce in relation to gender-based political participation (Ahmed 2020).



Spary's (2020) analysis of "the gender politics of India's 2019 parliamentary election" juxtaposes media narratives of increasing power of women voters with the challenging terrain of political participation encountered by women candidates. Notably, she observes a "perceptible but intangible change" in media coverage of women candidates during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, where many senior journalists were seen discussing women's participation, condemning acts of violence perpetrated against women candidates, and debunking sexist stereotypes and myths (Spary 2020, 224).

These two insights offer valuable perspectives for understanding media coverage of the 2024 Lok Sabha general elections. The content analysis revealed similar and ongoing trends in media coverage during the current election season, where numerous publications like Times of India, The Indian Express, Hindustan Times, The Economic Times, and Frontline Magazine, among others, dedicated entire pieces to analysing the "female voting bloc." While this attention may be attributed to women-centric policies in party manifestos and legislative advancements like the Women's Reservation Act, 2023, it also signifies heightened gender awareness among audiences. Recent studies from across the world suggest that increasingly media content that is blatantly sexist and misogynist does not escape audience scrutiny anymore (Rohrbach, Aaldering, and Van der Pas 2022).

However, this positive shift in gender-based participation discourse retains the contradictions highlighted by Spary nearly four years ago. The chasm between rhetoric and reality is apparent when one contrasts the emphasis on "Nari Shakti" in electoral coverage with the persistent systemic barriers and overt threats of violence faced by women candidates. Incidents like the Prajwal Revanna sexual assault case and the controversial candidacy of Brij Bhushan's son stand testament to the masculinised and heteropatriarchal nature of electoral democracy in India. The media bears a crucial responsibility in bringing much-needed nuance into the conversation, advocating for

substantive gender justice, and demanding accountability from those in power. Accordingly, the following section critically analyses the role of media coverage in the 2024 Lok Sabha general elections through a gender lens, scrutinising the narratives, stereotypes, and potential biases it may perpetuate.

## FROM STEREOTYPES TO SCANDALS: GENDERED NARRATIVES IN ELECTION COVERAGE

One of the most striking and compelling findings that indicate gender differentiation in the 2024 Lok Sabha electoral coverage emerges when reporting on women candidates consistently delves into their family background and private lives—a phenomenon often referred to as “personalisation.” In the Indian context, this may relate to the fact that women’s access to politics, especially influential women leaders, has been historically tied to their dynastic and familial connections (Sharma and Singh 2021). Hence, when Bansuri Swaraj, the late politician Sushma Swaraj’s daughter, marks an entry into the electoral landscape in 2024, headlines frequently draw attention to her familial ties. While The Indian Express entitles her “My Mother’s Daughter,” outlets like NDTV, The Print, and Mint precede Bansuri’s name with that of her mother.

When legitimation for women political candidates is frequently sought in their private or family lives, it reinforces the patriarchal dichotomy of the masculine public sphere and the feminine private sphere (Golder 2012). This is especially evident in the local news coverage of lesser-known candidates or new entrants into the electoral sphere. Local media outlets often devote paragraphs to introducing women candidates through the connections of their fathers, husbands, and children, rather than focusing on their political competency

For instance, an article in the Malayalam daily ***Kerala Kaumudi***, dated 21 February 2024, introduces the candidate K.J. Shine as thus,

*“She is the daughter of Gouthuruth native Joseph and Mary. Her husband is Dyneus Thomas, who was a senior superintendent in the LSGD Joint Directorate, Kakkanad. The couple has three children—Aromal, a bank officer, Alan, an MBBS student, and Amy Shine, a degree student at St. Xavier’s College, Aluva.”*

Another article in the Chhattisgarh-based Hindi e-newspaper, ***Janta Se Rishta***, describes the two female candidates from the Davangere constituency in what was also pejoratively termed by The Hindu as **“a battle of wives.”**

*“And interestingly, for the first time in Davanagere, there will be a contest between two women—Prabha is pitted against BJP’s Gayatri Siddheshwara... Prabha, 48, is a dentist, wife of district-in-charge minister SS Mallikarjuna and daughter-in-law of veteran Congress leader and Davanagere South MLA Shamanur Shivashankarappa. Gayatri is the wife of four-time MP and former Union Minister GM Siddheshwar.”*

This dichotomy between women candidates’ feminised social roles and masculinised leadership roles is best encapsulated by Eagly and Karau’s (2002) “role incongruity theory.” According to this theory, there exists an incongruity between the masculine ideals of political leadership and the feminine social roles placed upon women under a patriarchal society. Consequently, women candidates face a dilemma: they must either conform to the masculine leader archetype or adhere to gender norms of family life. In either case, however, they risk

violating stereotypes, garnering backlash for being “unwomanly leaders” or “too womanly and unfit for leadership” (Eagly and Karau 2002; Harmer 2021; Rohrbach, Aaldering, and Van der Pas 2022).

While instances of such incongruity are plentiful, India Today’s coverage of “2024 Warriors: Mahua Moitra vs Amrita Roy, Battle of Krishnanagar” serves as an epitome. On one hand, Trinamool Congress’ (TMC) Mahua Moitra is described with “fiery,” “spicy,” and other masculine descriptors of ambitious leadership; on the other hand, Bharatiya Janata Party’s “Rajmata” Amrita Roy is showcased as a docile debutante far detached from the “tough world” of politics. This representation strikes as one of many examples to cast competing women candidates into dichotomous “masculine versus feminine” gender constructions (Guha 2016; Harmer 2021).

## CONCLUSION

The media coverage of women politicians and electoral candidates carries profound implications for their political ambition, electoral support, and mobilisation and fundraising capabilities (Haraldsson and Wängnerud 2018; Rohrbach, Aaldering, and Van der Pas 2022). Apart from shaping gender-based representation and political participation, it also carries the potential to reinforce or challenge the perception of electoral politics as a masculine realm.

This study analysed the extent and effect of media sexism in the 2024 Lok Sabha general elections coverage, unearthing pertinent cases of patriarchal norms and traditional gender roles influencing the same. It is imperative to take cognizance of and dismantle these underlying biases towards a feminist conception of journalistic ethics and media literacy. This research presents a promising avenue for study, with future iterations potentially incorporating primary data and first-hand perspectives from journalists and women political candidates to delve deeper into the gendered dynamics of electoral coverage.

## ENDNOTES

1. Issue stereotyping is the practice of associating traditionally masculine issues, such as foreign policy and the economy, with male candidates, while traditionally feminine issues, such as childcare and education, are linked with female candidates (Harmer 2021, 23-24). Issue stereotyping reinforces the gender binary in media coverage of political candidates by associating them with specific policy areas.

2. Personalisation is understood as a form of political communication whereby the focus is shifted on “a politician’s individual story, background, and characteristics rather than on political issues, positions, and arguments” (Geise, Maubach, and Eli 2024). Although personalisation can also be a mode of self-representation for political candidates of all genders, in the case of women candidates, personalisation often takes place through media coverage that overemphasises on aspects of their private lives, often detracting from their political competence and candidature (Harmer 2021, 11).

3. The mobilising-reinforcing effect pertains to the media’s capacity to mobilise more women and decrease gender-based political participation gaps, while also potentially reinforcing existing gender inequalities. The term implies that these two outcomes may occur simultaneously. For example, one of the prominent findings of the study suggests that social media leads to higher participation rates overall but reinforces the gender gap in online participation (Ahmed 2021).

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