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Women In The Spotlight: Analysing Media Portrayal Of Female Politicians In Nagaland

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Abstract:

Media plays a significant role in shaping public perception and influencing societal behaviours, with the power to promote progress and social norms. Ideally, the media should maintain accuracy and impartiality, yet there are notable disparities in its coverage, especially regarding women and their viewpoints. Female politicians, in particular are often underrepresented in media. Studies show that when a man enters politics, his gender is rarely mentioned, whereas a woman's gender becomes a central theme in media discussions. Research also suggests that female politicians are less visible in the media compared to their male counterparts and are often portrayed through biased lenses, involving stereotypes or discrimination. Media coverage of elections is crucial not only for the public, civil society, state institutions and political parties but also for the private, nongovernmental sector, and the international community. Nagaland is no exception to this media bias, particularly concerning the focus on women candidates.

This paper focuses how media projects women candidates in Nagaland, assess the portrayal of women candidates in the media, and make a brief comparison of media treatment of male and female candidates during elections in Nagaland. The study is primarily based on secondary data.

Keywords: Media, women candidates, media bias, election coverage, Nagaland

Introduction:

In a democracy, the media serves to educate, enlighten, and entertain through many formats, including news, opinion, analysis, satire, and drama. This is a crucial channel via which the public receives information about politics, significantly influencing the public agenda and affecting public opinion. It establishes a forum for the exchange of viewpoints, discourse, and deliberation — a domain often termed as the 'public sphere'. It establishes a communication conduit between politicians and the public, enabling politicians to convey their ideologies and plans, supplying the public with necessary information for participation, and facilitating the expression of popular opinions to politicians. It aids in holding politicians accountable by reporting and direct scrutiny, including interviews.

The media has a crucial influence in shaping public opinion. Through its substance and tone, it can shape public perception of issues, determine which topics are deemed significant, and affect the information utilised in developing comprehensive political evaluations.

During election campaigns, the media must disseminate information about candidates and their manifestoes broadly, irrespective of gender, while striving for equal and impartial treatment. Given that the majority of voters lack direct connections with electoral candidates, the media and journalists are

tasked with articulating popular concerns and ensuring that politicians address both their own agendas and issues of societal significance. Journalists are tasked with finding pertinent topics and persuading politicians to address them. One of these challenges is gender equality.

Considering the significance and the role of media during elections, women in politics frequently encounter biased, sexist, and discriminatory media coverage. Recent research indicates that women in politics are disadvantaged regarding media attention. Journalists frequently employ terminology that accentuates women's conventional roles and prioritises their beauty while reporting about women in politics. They reinforce preconceptions of female politicians as feeble, indecisive, and overly emotional. Sexist media coverage adds to the under-representation of women in politics. A global survey revealed that although women's status has generally advanced, improvement in media representation and politics remains comparatively sluggish. Moreover, it determined that an increase in media sexism correlates with a decrease in the number of female candidates. The media exerts significant influence on voters, and disparities in media coverage based on gender can yield tangible electoral outcomes. It not only deters women from participating in politics but also dissuades political parties and elites from nominating women as candidates.

Research indicates that despite a global rise in the number of women employed in the media, leadership roles such as producers, executives, chief editors, and publishers remain predominantly occupied by men. The Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) indicates that globally, female journalists are predominantly assigned 'soft' topics, including family, lifestyle, fashion, and the arts. Women are significantly less likely to write or cover 'hard' news, such as politics and the economy.

Importance of Media for women candidates

Media serves as a medium of communication through which injustices against women are being exposed in the world at large. The influence of media has encouraged many women, instilling optimism that they can lead their lives according to their own terms. Contemporary women no longer require dependence on others. Armed with awareness of their rights and responsibilities, women need not rely on others. The media plays a significant role in spreading awareness among women. The media has consistently served as a potent instrument for highlighting social and political issues. Contemporary media, encompassing traditional heritage outlets and digital platforms, profoundly influences people perceptions and opinions regarding the status of women and girls in society.

The endorsement, promotion, and implementation of gender equality in the media is essential for any democratic society, as it influences the advancement of women's involvement in all spheres of life, particularly within decision-making institutions.

Jennifer Lawless and Richard Fox assert that engagement with the media is one of the campaign activities that deters potential female candidates more than their male counterparts from pursuing political office. The differential coverage of male and female candidates by the news media may impact the electoral success of female candidates for public office.

In a democracy, the media and press are crucial as they significantly influence public opinion, serving as a reflection of governmental issues and the political system. Gender should be regarded as a consequence of communication rather than a precursor, as communication shapes gender, which in turn influences communication, despite the media's awareness of biases in the portrayal of women. Media serves as the medium via which politicians and candidates engage with the public and exert influence on the masses. Media is a potent instrument that can portray an individual in either a favourable or unfavourable manner. Considering the significance of the media's role, women require affirmative reinforcement from this medium. Women require equitable exposure and significance from the media in disseminating their manifestos, ideas, and perspectives. Particularly in the realm of politics, women do not receive adequate representation from the media.

The degree of involvement and impact of women in the media significantly affects media content, as female media professionals are more inclined to represent the needs and viewpoints of other women compared to their male counterparts. It is also essential to recognise that not all women in the media possess gender awareness or are inclined to address women's needs and views; furthermore, men can also competently report on gender issues. Recent research from eighteen diverse countries indicates that the attitudes of male and female journalists do not differ much. Nevertheless, the representation of women in radio, television, and print is more likely to offer positive role models for women and girls, to instil confidence in women as sources and interviewees, and to engage a female audience.

Through a Gendered Lens: How Media Represents Women in Politics

Media plays a pivotal role in shaping perceptions and influencing public opinion. In democratic societies, it is an essential tool for informing the public, highlighting issues, and providing a platform for political candidates to express their views. However, the way media represents women, particularly in politics, often reflects underlying gender biases and stereotypes. On the one hand, the media provides an avenue for female politicians to amplify their voices and engage with voters. On the other hand, the media often portrays women through a gendered lens that can undermine their political capabilities. Research on media representation suggests that female candidates often face stereotypes, which can hinder their ability to present themselves as authoritative leaders, as opposed to their male counterparts who are more frequently evaluated based on their political ideas, competence, and leadership. Written media, visual media and social platforms such as newspaper, television, YouTube, twitter, instagram and facebook reinforce conventional interpretations of male, female and gender roles. Media becomes a formidable force both in practice and through its inherent goal. Its mission is not only mechanical. When women candidates are profiled, the media, particularly local outlets, frequently emphasize personal matters or physical attributes notably attractiveness rather than substantive campaign topics. There exists a notable disregard for media coverage regarding women's rights and their political inclusion. This occurs because the majority of media editors are male, who generally overlook such issues, neglecting the fact that women constitute approximately 50 per cent of the population.

Globally, female politicians often face media scrutiny that is distinct from their male counterparts. While men are typically evaluated based on their political positions, strategies, and leadership abilities, women often find their appearance, family lives, and emotional states being prioritized by the media. Research on media representation suggests that female candidates often face stereotypes, which can hinder their ability to present themselves as authoritative leaders, as opposed to their male counterparts who are more frequently evaluated based on their political ideas, competence, and leadership. According to The International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF), female political figures are frequently portrayed in stereotypical and biased ways. In many cases, media outlets focus more on their physical appearance, attire, and emotions, rather than their political agenda or leadership skills. A study by Lori Young (2014) found that the media frequently criticized female politicians for their fashion choices, hairstyles, and even their posture, while male candidates were often given a free pass on such personal matters. Another study conducted by The American Psychological Association (APA) showed that in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Hillary Clinton's media coverage was largely focused on her appearance and gender, with fewer stories concentrating on her political policies compared to her male counterparts. This phenomenon is not limited to Western media but is a widespread global issue. Kira Sanbonmatsu (2006) highlighted how coverage of women politicians in the United States frequently included references to their families, positioning them within traditional gender roles. Male candidates, in contrast, were rarely subjected to similar scrutiny regarding their family life. For Simmons and Jaffe (2005), the portrayals of media contribute to the underrepresentation of women in political offices, emphasizing the lack of media support for female candidates as one of the key barriers.

In India, this media bias is compounded by social and cultural expectations, where women in politics are often expected to fit into traditional roles of caretakers or emotional figures rather than rational and authoritative leaders. There is limited research on how Indian media represents women politicians, yet a gap is evident in the coverage. News outlets often overlook gender issues or, at times, perpetuate patriarchal views, presenting political news in an insensitive manner. While politics is frequently discussed, it is seldom approached from a female viewpoint. This gendered portrayal can impact the voting behavior of the public, thereby affecting the electoral success of female candidates. According to Rupal Jha and Nishant Sharma (2016), the female political candidates are more likely to have their personal lives, such as marital status, discussed in the media, and while male candidates are generally evaluated based on their political qualifications and leadership potential. Additionally, emotional portrayals of female leaders can diminish their authority and credibility, reinforcing traditional gender roles that align women with maternal and emotional characteristics rather than strong leadership. Stereotyping of female candidates in Indian media leads to their marginalization in political campaigns. Female candidates are more often depicted as part of the "background" of political dynasties rather than as individual political agents capable of leading the nation.

In Nagaland, as in many parts of India, the portrayal of female candidates in the media during elections is often shaped by gendered perceptions and stereotypes. Media coverage of women in politics tends to be more limited and less substantive compared to their male counterparts. Female candidates frequently face coverage that emphasizes personal characteristics, such as their appearance, family background, and emotional appeal, rather than their political ideologies or capabilities. This reflects a broader trend in which women are often depicted in media as being less competent or less suited for leadership roles, a stereotype that significantly affects their public perception and electoral success. Through a gendered lens, it becomes apparent that women candidates are often subjected to a form of media scrutiny that is rooted in traditional gender norms. For example, while male candidates are typically discussed in terms of their policies and political experience, female candidates may be reduced to their physical appearances or family roles, undermining their qualifications and leadership skills. Moreover, the media's tendency to focus on women's personal lives can detract from the serious political discourse that is essential during election periods. This pattern is compounded by cultural factors that contribute to the underrepresentation of women in political offices. Women's participation in politics has traditionally been limited, and media coverage often reflects this, perpetuating a cycle of marginalization. Male candidates, on the other hand, receive more extensive coverage and are more often portrayed in a way that affirms their political legitimacy and authority.

Media representation of female politicians in Nagaland

Women in public life continue to encounter biased, sexist, and discriminatory treatment by the media. Research conducted over recent decades indicates that women in politics remain disadvantaged regarding media attention. Journalists frequently employ terminology that accentuates women's conventional roles and prioritises their beauty while reporting about women in politics. They reinforce preconceptions of female politicians as feeble, indecisive, and overly emotional. Women politicians are occasionally held accountable for the activities of their children or husbands, although male politicians are seldom subjected to the same situation. Nagaland is not unfamiliar with the marginalisation of women or their limited representation in the media, particularly as candidates.

Having a significant turnout of female voters, the socio-cultural environment in Nagaland effectively marginalises women from decision-making positions, constraining their political participation. It is commonly perceived that women are confined to domestic spheres, including familial obligations and home tasks, hence lacking a place in politics. This patriarchal perspective not only diminishes women's confidence but also serves as an impediment to their presence in the Legislative Assembly, maintaining the belief that electoral politics in Nagaland would continue to be male-dominated. Historically, no woman has ever secured a seat in the Nagaland state legislature until the 2023 State legislative Assembly election, during which two women were elected, marking a historic milestone for the state. This marginalised condition among women is also prominent in the Parliamentary elections. Since the establishment of the State in 1963, just one woman, Rano M Shaiza, has served in Parliament, in 1977. In 2022, PhangnonKonyak made history as the inaugural female representative of Nagaland in the Rajya Sabha.

In the Naga society, women frequently encounter a deficiency of support and empathy from political parties, which tend to choose male candidates due to cultural and hereditary obstacles. The prevalence of patriarchy and rigid customary laws frequently deterred women from presenting themselves as candidates. Consequently, the limited number of female candidates resulted in insufficient media coverage and exposure compared to their male counterparts, while political parties also failed to provide adequate visibility during campaigns. Naga Women constitute a formidable influence on electoral campaigning. A limited number of women in politics primarily serve as auxiliaries, supporting male leadership. They are mobilised by some individuals for support, however few have participated in the State Legislative elections. Voters in patriarchal countries are inclined to regard women candidates as less competent than men for public office. The impact of gendered socialisation should not be overlooked. Gender role stereotyping remains widespread and accepted in our society. Society conditions women and men to assume distinct roles. The primary function of women is predominantly perceived as domestic, while leadership positions are regarded as the domain of men in modern culture. They are shown as leaders, while women are portrayed as followers. Consequently, the electorate may regard women as less qualified and less suitable for politics than males, often resulting in a preference for the male candidate. This widespread attitude towards women undermines the faith that many voters possess in female candidates and has emerged as a significant obstacle to the election of women to public office. Consequently, the limited number of women interested in contesting may hesitate to do so, and if they proceed, they may struggle to garner adequate support to succeed. Naga women candidates received neither equal nor

sufficient media exposure during their campaigns. The lack of media exposure has hindered women's ability to connect with a broader electorate, so serving as a significant obstacle to their election as lawmakers. Women candidates were unable to completely demonstrate their abilities or effectively garner votes and influence voters due to insufficient media assistance. Although voter turnout among both men and women is relatively equal, voters did not support female candidates, especially women who refrained from voting for their own gender. From 1964 to 2023, there were women candidates in the Nagaland State Legislative Assembly, but none succeeded in winning until the 2023 election. The table below illustrates the representation of women in the Nagaland Legislative Assembly from 1964 to 2023.

Table 1: Female candidates in the Nagaland Legislative Assembly, 1964-2023

Year	Total Seats	Number of Contestants			Elected Candidates		Percentage of Elected Candidates	
		Male Candidates	Female Candidates	Total	Male	Female	Male	Female
1964	40	70	0	70	40	0	100	0
1969	40	142	2	144	40	0	100	0
1974	60	219	0	219	60	0	100	0
1977	60	204	0	204	60	0	100	0
1982	60	244	1	245	60	0	100	0
1987	60	211	3	214	60	0	100	0
1989	60	140	0	140	60	0	100	0
1993	60	177	1	178	60	0	100	0
1998	60	80	0	80	60	0	100	0
2003	60	222	3	225	60	0	100	0
2008	60	214	4	218	60	0	100	0
2013	60	185	2	187	60	0	100	0
2018	60	190	5	185	60	0	100	0
2023	60	180	4	58	58	2	96.66	3.33

Source: Election Commission Nagaland

In Nagaland, there were twenty-five women candidates, of whom just two succeeded. The victory may be attributed to the evolving mind-set of the general public and society regarding women as their representatives. The male-dominated political sphere is gradually becoming more receptive to women candidates. As time progresses, media has begun to prioritise women candidates and acknowledge the disparities concerning elected officials.

The significant distinction between the prior election and the recently concluded Nagaland State Assembly election is that women candidate's garnered extensive media coverage, a feature absent in the previous elections. The media landscape has expanded beyond television, radio, and print and now includes internet platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Podcast which have popularised women candidates through interviews and various activities. These platforms are widely accessible to the public, enabling candidates to effectively communicate with voters. When the public were unable to physically attend campaigns, they could listen to and view the events via the specified online platform. The local news channels have grown over time into many types of news outlets that are readily accessible to the public.

However, this does not justify the fact that female candidates receive the same level of media attention as their male counterparts. The media attention directed towards women is not equivalent with that afforded to male candidates. The media's hypocrisy is evident, as it often prioritises attention to women post-election rather than affording them same focus prior to elections.

Conclusion

The media's role in raising awareness of women's issues is undeniably significant. The media could convey the notion that women's involvement in political life is a fundamental aspect of democracy. However, the media portrays a superficial representation of women. It portrays them as disinterested in political matters and, as a result, will be deemed incapable of assuming leadership roles as men do. The media frequently perpetuates gender stereotypes by depicting women in traditional roles, rendering them less visible than men, particularly in positions of authority. Women politicians who have received some media attention appear to have worked hard to prove their worthiness for coverage. They need to be trained in handling media interactions to enhance their visibility and broaden their media exposure, while also addressing negative stereotypes and online criticism. This will enable them to strengthen their leadership abilities and establish themselves as prominent social leaders. Additionally, the media should provide more comprehensive, unbiased, accurate, and clear coverage of female candidates before, during, and after elections.

Both political parties and society at large regard women politicians with diminished seriousness due to their depiction as 'fashion commodities' and the adverse media coverage they receive; nearly all media outlets perpetuate these stereotypes to enhance their viewership ratings. The print media disseminates articles when controversies involving women legislators arise within the parliament or during television talk shows. This unfavourable view results in a declining number of votes for women MPs, with the majority occupying reserved seats in parliament. In today's 24/7 media environment, there is undoubtedly an opportunity for non-traditional newsmakers, such as women in politics, minorities, and marginalized groups, to gain visibility. However, this media space is largely controlled by male politicians who often manipulate the narrative. Therefore, a well-planned media strategy is highly recommended to ensure better representation of women in politics. To address these disparities, it is crucial for media outlets to adopt a more gender-sensitive approach to reporting. This includes ensuring that women candidates are represented on equal terms with their male counterparts, with coverage that focuses on their qualifications, political platforms, and contributions to public discourse, rather than reducing them to stereotypical portrayals.

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