

Grandmothers, Ministers, or Political Agent? Competing Media Narratives of Women Politicians in Malaysian GE15

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ABSTRACT

How women politicians are portrayed in the news can significantly impact public perception of their legitimacy and competence. This study compares how two Malaysian news outlets – mainstream The Star Online and independent Malaysiakini – covered women politicians during Malaysia’s 2022 general election. Through content analysis of news articles, we found notable differences in coverage approaches. The Star Online tended to highlight women’s personal attributes (like motherhood and age) over their policies and often presented women as passive recipients of political opportunities granted by men. In contrast, Malaysiakini more frequently emphasized women’s professional backgrounds, policy positions, and acknowledged barriers women face in politics. Despite these differences, both outlets shared problematic patterns, including primarily identifying women by their gender and treating their political participation as unusual. The study reveals that women politicians face contradictory standards – needing exceptional qualifications while facing heightened scrutiny. While both outlets reflect gender biases, independent media showed more balanced coverage of women politicians. This research helps us understand how media coverage shapes public perception of women in politics and suggests ways to improve political reporting.

Keywords: gender representation, women politicians, media framing, Malaysian elections, GE15

INTRODUCTION

Gender representation in political media coverage continues to be a significant issue globally, with challenges in Southeast Asian countries where cultural, religious, and social factors intersect with media practices. Despite gradual progress in women's political participation worldwide, the way women politicians are represented in the media continues to shape public perceptions of their legitimacy and competence (Umar, 2023; Pink, 2020; Kiki, 2015).

The media influences public trust by shaping perceptions through framing and agenda-setting, presenting facts that can either bolster or undermine confidence, and either propagating or opposing misinformation and disinformation (Happer & Philo, 2013). The dissemination of clear, credible information by media fosters institutional trust; nevertheless, the spread of misinformation, biased reporting, and information overload can lead to significant distrust.

The political sphere has historically been regarded as a male-dominated domain, where women's involvement is often viewed as "unnatural" or incompatible with femininity (Pink, 2020). Politics is associated with power struggles, competition, and mass mobilization—traits traditionally coded as masculine—whereas women are more frequently linked with peace, harmony, and domestic responsibility (Kiki, 2015). This patriarchal framing continues to limit women's access to equal participation.

Gender inequality has been a longstanding issue widely debated across disciplines. Evidence from the Global Gender Gap Report and the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) demonstrates that disparities persist in politics, the economy, society, and the media (Pink, 2020). As highlighted by Daniela Ligiero of the United Nations Foundation, gender inequality remains a global challenge, and Malaysia is not exempt from this reality (*ibid*).

In Malaysia, women's political participation has improved over the decades, yet persistent structural barriers remain. During the 15th General Election (GE15) in 2022, the gap between the promised candidate quotas (30%) and the actual proportion of women candidates (approximately 13.5%) reflected ongoing institutional and party-level challenges to achieving gender parity in politics (Umar, 2023). Although gender equality and non-discrimination are enshrined in legal and policy frameworks, the reality often falls short, as quotas are frequently treated as symbolic commitments rather than mechanisms for substantive change. This disjuncture between legal provisions and political practice continues to hinder women's opportunities to assume meaningful roles in decision-making.

Beyond these systemic constraints, cultural stigma continues to shape women's political participation. Women are frequently stereotyped as less professional, irrational, or too emotional to handle leadership roles, and their public roles are often marginalized in favor of men, regardless of merit (Eti, 2013). Such stigma reinforces the view that men are "naturally" suited for leadership while women, even when equally competent, are excluded from positions of power.

Media plays a critical role in reinforcing or challenging these inequalities. It functions not only as a transmitter of information but also as an active agent that shapes public perception, influences policy, and frames public discourse (Sofian et al., 2022). Yet, media representation of women politicians often reflects patriarchal norms, where women are objectified, framed in domestic roles, or reduced to their appearance (Umar, 2023; Pink, 2020; Kiki, 2015). In

Southeast Asia, including Malaysia, the media has the potential to either perpetuate these stereotypes or highlight narratives that recognize women's equal rights and political competencies.

Recent research (2019–2024) has identified persistent patterns of gender bias in political media coverage globally. Women candidates receive less coverage than men, and when covered, the emphasis often shifts to personal life or appearance rather than substantive policy issues (Tahsini & Duci, 2022; Van der Pas & Aaldering, 2020). Women politicians are also frequently described using gendered stereotypes such as “beautiful” or “emotional,” terms rarely applied to their male counterparts (Gibbons, 2022). In the Southeast Asian context, studies of Indonesian news sites concluded that female politicians were consistently framed within the domestic sphere and depicted as “emotional and weak” (Susilo et al., 2019). Similarly, the repeated framing of women as “the first woman” to hold a position tends to otherize female candidates rather than normalize their political participation (Tahsini & Duci, 2022).

While existing research has documented gender bias in Malaysian political media coverage, there is limited comparative analysis of how different media outlets with varying editorial orientations frame women politicians. This study addresses that gap by examining coverage of women candidates in GE15 across mainstream (The Star Online) and independent (Malaysiakini) media. Specifically, it analyzes how different framing practices affect the portrayal of women's political agency and legitimacy, and what this implies for public trust in both media and political institutions.

Despite these challenges, it is important to recognize that women's political representation is not only shaped by structural and institutional barriers but also by the way media organizations set agendas and frame political actors. To understand how these portrayals take shape, the next section examines the agenda-setting and framing role of news media in shaping public perception.

Agenda Setting and the Role of news media in Shaping Public Perception

In this context, the media—whether in the form of traditional newspapers or digital news portals—plays a powerful role in shaping public perception. Newspapers have long been influential in disseminating information and constructing public opinion, but their influence can also intensify conflicts if issues are inaccurately framed (Loo & Mustafa, 2010). As Nafi (2006) observes, every element in news reporting—whether headlines, story angles, or images—carries emotional and rational weight that shapes how audiences interpret reality. Grill et al. (2012) further highlight that even with equal access to the same facts, newspapers often present divergent narratives, as each outlet interprets data through its own editorial lens. This selective highlighting, omission, and emphasis means that readers rarely consume an objective reality; rather, they encounter a constructed interpretation shaped by journalistic framing.

The rise of digital news portals has further transformed this process, reinforcing the importance of agenda-setting theory. As McCombs and Shaw (1972) argue, the media may not tell audiences what to think, but it significantly influences what audiences think about. Agenda-

setting works on two levels: at the first level, the media decides which issues receive attention; at the second level—framing—it influences how those issues are understood.

As Entman (1993) explains, framing involves selecting certain aspects of reality and making them more salient in a text, in order to “promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation.” In other words, the media not only directs attention to issues but also shapes the interpretive lenses through which audiences perceive them. The media strongly influence public trust by shaping beliefs and attitudes through agenda setting and framing, often highlighting certain issues while excluding alternative perspectives (Happer & Philo, 2013). Negative or uncertain coverage, such as on disability or climate change, can harden public attitudes or create disengagement, limiting meaningful debate and understanding of social change.

Unlike newspapers bound by daily publication cycles, digital portals operate in real time, pushing stories through homepage placement, live updates, and social media integration. Their agenda-setting power is magnified by algorithms that prioritize stories likely to generate clicks, controversy, or virality, often amplifying certain issues far beyond their original scope.

Together, newspapers and news portals shape both the salience and the framing of political issues. Newspapers construct meaning through interpretive choices, while portals accelerate and amplify issue visibility in the digital sphere. This dual process not only guides public attention but also influences democratic engagement, as citizens rely on mediated interpretations to form judgments about political actors. Within this landscape, the portrayal of women politicians becomes especially consequential: the ways in which media outlets—both traditional and digital—frame female candidates determine not only the issues associated with them but also public perceptions of their competence, legitimacy, and political authority.

Building on this understanding of agenda setting and framing, the next section examines how Malaysian mainstream and independent media framed women candidates during the 15th General Election (GE15), and how these framing choices shaped perceptions of women’s political legitimacy.

METHODOLOGY

Malaysia’s 15th General Election (GE15) in 2022 provides a critical case study for examining how agenda-setting and framing practices influenced the portrayal of women politicians. Despite increased awareness of gender equality, the representation of women in GE15 remained disproportionately low, with only 13.5% of total candidates being women compared to the 30% quota promised by political parties.

This gap highlights the enduring structural barriers to women’s political participation, but equally important are the ways in which media narratives shaped public perceptions of these candidates. By comparing coverage from a mainstream outlet (The Star Online) and an independent news portal (Malaysiakini), this study explores how different editorial orientations influenced the framing of women politicians—whether through personal and gendered lenses or more policy-oriented narratives. Such an analysis helps to uncover not only the visibility accorded to women candidates but also the constraints placed on their perceived competence and authority within Malaysia’s political landscape.

This study employed qualitative content analysis to examine how The Star Online and Malaysiakini portrayed women politicians during Malaysia's 15th General Election (GE15) campaign period in 2022. The research utilized a comparative framework to identify differences in framing practices between these media outlets.

Articles were collected from both publications covering the official GE15 campaign period (November 5-18, 2022) and the nomination period (October 29-November 4, 2022). This extended timeframe captured both the initial framing of women candidates during nomination and subsequent campaign coverage. Articles were selected if they mentioned women politicians, covered women candidates or incumbents, or discussed women's representation in electoral contexts.

The analytical framework used a comprehensive codebook specifically developed for analyzing media coverage of women politicians in Southeast Asian contexts. This examined multiple dimensions: story focus; framing approaches (issue-based, personal-trait, appearance-based, family-based, gender-based, religious-based, cultural/traditional, and experience frames); gender stereotype indicators; visual representation; quote analysis; religious references; and tone analysis.

The analytical process followed a systematic approach, with researchers first coding articles using the codebook parameters, then mapping the most frequently mentioned women politicians in each outlet. The third stage involved comparative analysis of framing patterns between outlets, supplemented by thematic analysis of dominant frames and narrative structures. Throughout, findings were cross-referenced with existing literature to situate observed patterns within broader scholarly understanding of gender framing in political media.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Main Differences

The Star Online mostly showed women politicians as having little power, often showing them as passive recipients of political opportunity instead of active contenders. Women were often portrayed as "being fielded" rather than as independently vying for political positions.

The Star Online reported that *"For the first time, Perlis PAS is fielding a woman in the general election."* On the other hand, Malaysiakini showed women in a wider range of ways, with some women shown as having a lot of political power and independence. For example, Zuraida Kamaruddin was portrayed as a strategic politician who made decisions on her own:

"Can Zuraida's brand win over voters, even though she is only the party logo?"

"I am alone, and I like it that way because I have the freedom to choose, speak out, and say what I want." Zuraida Kamaruddin said in Malaysiakini, "I'm alone; I feel more comfortable because I have the freedom to choose and the freedom to speak out and say what I want."

Another big difference is that personal traits were given more weight. The Star Online often focused on women's age, motherhood status, or looks instead of their political views or expertise: "*Ting said she was a 'full-time politician and mother of two.'*"

However, Malaysiakini put more weight on women's political positions and professional qualifications. For example, Latifah was portrayed as actively fighting gender stereotypes and discrimination, with news stories focussing on her "experience as a former director of an anti-corruption agency."

The Star Online also often made women's lack of representation seem like a numbers problem. Reports like "GE15: Political parties failed to field 30% women candidates" mostly talked about representation in terms of percentages and quotas. This made women's participation more visible, but it also took the politics out of structural barriers like party gatekeeping and putting women in seats that were impossible to win. In contrast, Malaysiakini was more open about systemic discrimination. For example, the article "Ignoring Half the Sky" talked about how party elites were purposely leaving women out of the picture.

The Star Online often focused on how strong women are when they "soldier on" in the face of harassment, even when they were writing about sexism. They didn't question the cultures that allowed misogyny to happen. Malaysiakini took a stronger stance by openly supporting public anger at sexist comments. For example, in "YOURSAY: PAS leader Sanusi's misogyny is obnoxious," readers called patriarchal attitudes "chauvinist" and "regressive."

There were also different ways of looking at religious identity. The Star Online talked about religion, but it didn't go into much detail about how religious duties limited women's campaigns. Malaysiakini gave more information about these kinds of restrictions. For example, they wrote about Zahida Zari Khan's campaign limits during her Islamic mourning period (*idah*), quoting the Perlis Mufti's ruling that campaigning was "not a life necessity." This made religious expectations a structural barrier that affected women's ability to participate in democracy.

Finally, Malaysiakini put the voices of women who disagreed with party structures front and centre. Stories like "*Wanita UMNO kecewa BN gagal terjemah kuota 30 peratus calon wanita*" and "*Malacca Bersatu women's chief quits party*" made it easier for female leaders to speak out against tokenism and broken promises about quotas. The Star Online, on the other hand, framed similar events more as signs of internal instability than as proof of structural exclusion.

The Star Online alternated between progressive recognition and conservative reinforcement of gender stereotypes, whereas Malaysiakini more consistently highlighted women's agency, systemic obstacles, and resistance to patriarchal norms.

Similarities

Even though these two places were different, they both showed a lot of the same framing patterns that were problematic. The Star Online and Malaysiakini often referred to women using gender-specific party roles, like *Wanita chief* or *Srikandi chief*, instead of general leadership roles.

Both outlets also tended to focus on gender as the most important thing about women politicians before talking about their qualifications or political platforms. In this way, women were often labelled as "women first, politicians second."

Both outlets focused a lot on numbers, like whether gender quotas were met or how many women were running, instead of looking at whether women were given real chances in winnable seats or set up for long-term leadership. Also, both publications added to the feeling that women's participation was new by focussing on "firsts" and exceptions instead of treating women's candidatures as normal. Even when framed positively, this idea kept the idea that women are still outsiders in politics alive.

Finally, women politicians in both outlets were often linked to policy areas that are typically seen as feminine or to personal traits like resilience, sacrifice, or family roles. This meant that even when women were in the news, their coverage was still based on gendered expectations instead of fully focussing on their political strategies, policy positions, or leadership potential.

Three interrelated paradoxes

This study uncovers three interrelated paradoxes that fundamentally influence the portrayal of women politicians in Malaysian media, thereby expanding existing theoretical frameworks in political communication and gender studies. These paradoxes illustrate how media framing systematically disadvantages women politicians, despite the appearance of equitable coverage.

The Paradox of Competence

Our analysis reveals a fundamental contradiction: women politicians are held to higher standards to demonstrate their exceptional qualifications, yet their competence is simultaneously scrutinised due to their gender. This paradox manifests as the "double qualification burden," wherein female politicians must emphasise their educational credentials and professional experience to achieve legitimacy in ways that male politicians do not. But these same qualifications are being looked at more closely.

The competence paradox was especially clear in the coverage of seasoned politicians like Rina Harun, whose ministerial performance was analysed through gendered lenses that prioritised her communication style over her policy choices. The Star Online's habit of describing women candidates by personal traits, like calling Ting a "full-time politician and mother of two," shows how personal traits are more important than professional skills. This pattern results in what Eagly and Karau (2002) characterise as role incongruity, wherein women in leadership positions contravene conventional gender norms and encounter adverse assessment. Our findings expand this theory by illustrating how media framing exacerbates role incongruity through the selective emphasis on gender-stereotyped attributes, even in the presence of evident political competence in women.

The Paradox of Authority and Visibility

The second paradox comes from the fact that women are often visible in political coverage but don't have much power in political discussions. Our analysis indicated that female politicians often feature in news articles and photographs but are cited considerably less frequently than their male counterparts. Even in articles about women politicians, they are quoted much less often and less fully than men politicians. This is what we call "tokenistic inclusion," which is a way of representing women that seems to encourage them to get involved in politics while actually taking away their power.

Women politicians are not the ones who start political conversations; they are the ones who are talked about. The Star Online's portrayal of women as "being fielded" by parties instead of actively "contesting" elections illustrates this passive positioning. These linguistic patterns indicate that women's political participation is framed as extraordinary rather than normative (Tahsini & Duci, 2022). This paradox undermines conventional metrics of media bias that emphasise coverage volume, indicating that equal visibility does not inherently equate to equal authority in political discourse.

The Agency/Passivity Paradox

The third paradox concerns the conflict between the clear strategic agency of female politicians and media representations that characterise them as passive recipients of political opportunities. Although our analysis identified instances of women politicians deliberately subverting gender norms—exemplified by Latifah Md Yatim's rhetorical inversion of pregnancy stereotypes—mainstream media frequently neglected to acknowledge or highlight this agency.

Latifah's clever use of pregnancy metaphors to argue for women's greater resilience shows sophisticated political messaging: "*Percayalah ketahanan diri wanita lebih hebat, sebab itu Allah beri wanita mengandungkan anak... Kita tanya dia (Sanusi) mampu ke tak?*". This rhetorical approach transforms perceived weakness into political strength, exemplifying what feminist scholars term "strategic essentialism"—the intentional use of gender stereotypes to advance women's political objectives (Spivak, 1988).

Plus, Zuraida Kamaruddin's unequivocal assertion of political independence—"Saya solo, saya rasa saya lebih senang kerana saya ada kebebasan untuk memilih, saya ada kebebasan untuk bersuara dan cakap apa saya mahu" ("I'm solo, I feel more comfortable because I have the freedom to choose, the freedom to voice out and say what I want")—confronts passive narratives yet received greater prominence in independent media compared to mainstream outlets.

These three paradoxes collectively augment the theoretical comprehension of gender and political media by illustrating how ostensibly neutral journalistic practices can sustain persistent gender bias. Framing theory (Entman, 1993) elucidates the influence of media selection and emphasis on public perception; our paradoxes, however, delineate the precise mechanisms by which gender bias manifests in modern political coverage. The paradoxes show that women still face structural disadvantages even though they are becoming more visible in political discourse. This is useful information for both media practice and democratic

representation in Malaysia, where patriarchal traditions and democratic institutions come together.

Ownership and Control of the media

Understanding the differences in framing between The Star Online and Malaysiakini's coverage of women politicians during GE15 requires looking at Malaysia's media ownership structures and their relationship with the country's political economy. These underlying factors have a significant impact on editorial decisions, sourcing practices, and the narratives that develop around women's participation in politics.

The Star Online operates within a media ownership structure that directly limits its editorial independence. The Star is owned by the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), a component party of the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition (Abbott, 2011). This ownership setup positions The Star as establishment-oriented media that maintains close ties to ruling political interests. When political parties own media outlets, they tend to produce narratives that are establishment-friendly and avoid challenging existing power structures.

This ownership influence is clearly reflected in The Star's coverage patterns during GE15. Our analysis showed that The Star primarily depicted women politicians through descriptive, event-driven reports that heavily relied on official party sources and press releases. Coverage consistently highlighted women's appointments or nominations as passive recipients of political opportunities, as in the headline "For the first time, Perlis PAS is fielding a woman in the general election." Such framing presents party leadership as the active agents, while women are shown as objects of political decision-making rather than as subjects who shape political processes.

The ownership structure also explains The Star's tendency to treat women's underrepresentation merely as statistics rather than recognising it as a structural issue requiring careful analysis. The Star's coverage avoids examining parties' failure to meet gender quotas or questioning the systemic barriers that hinder women's equal participation, normalising rather than challenging existing political arrangements.

In contrast, Malaysiakini operates as an independent subscription-based online portal that preserves editorial independence from direct political party ownership. This structural independence grants "strategic autonomy" in editorial decision-making (Abbott & Givens, 2015). Malaysiakini's business model, which relies on subscriber revenue rather than advertising from political actors, provides greater freedom to conduct critical journalism that challenges establishment narratives.

The differences in media ownership led to distinct sourcing practices that fundamentally influence how women politicians are portrayed. The Star Online's dependence on official party sources and press releases results in what we call "mediated patriarchy"—the reproduction of gendered power structures through seemingly neutral journalistic practices.

Our analysis showed that The Star's coverage consistently reflected official party framings that portrayed women within traditional gender roles. The emphasis on women's family status by describing candidates as "mother-of-two" or highlighting their domestic responsibilities reproduces the party leadership's own gendered expectations of how women

should be portrayed to voters. When media outlets rely on party sources, they unintentionally amplify the gender biases embedded in party communication strategies.

Malaysiakini's independent status enables more diverse sourcing, including voices from civil society, direct quotes from women politicians, and critical analysis of party practices. This range of sources creates space for alternative narratives that challenge dominant gender frameworks. For example, Malaysiakini featured extensive direct quotes from women politicians asserting their independence, such as Zuraida Kamaruddin's statement: "Saya solo, saya rasa saya lebih senang kerana saya ada kebebasan untuk memilih, saya ada kebebasan untuk bersuara dan cakap apa saya mahu."

The Malaysian media landscape highlights the intersection of political control and patriarchal culture. Barisan Nasional effectively governed the mainstream media for six decades, using media ownership to sustain political power while shaping public discourse on appropriate gender roles and women's political involvement (Rajaratnam et al., 2020).

This political economy establishes what we call "institutional patriarchy," where formal media institutions perpetuate gender hierarchies through their structural ties to political power. Party-owned media outlets like The Star operate within editorial boundaries that discourage challenging gender norms or questioning male political leadership. This institutional dynamic explains why mainstream media coverage tends to normalise women's underrepresentation and portray women's political participation as exceptional rather than expected.

Market pressures generate different incentive structures. The Star Online, relying on advertising revenue and political connections, faces incentives to maintain good relations with political advertisers and to avoid controversial coverage that could threaten business interests. This economic reality restricts editorial independence and encourages conventional reporting that reflects familiar gender narratives.

Malaysiakini's subscription-based model creates different incentive structures that reward investigative journalism and critical analysis. Subscribers who pay for independent journalism expect coverage that challenges establishment narratives and offers in-depth analysis of structural issues. This market dynamic explains why Malaysiakini can provide more scrutinising coverage of parties' failures to meet gender quotas and highlight systemic barriers to women's representation.

CONCLUSION

Our comparison of The Star Online and Malaysiakini's coverage of Malaysia's GE15 reveals a disturbing reality: even as female politicians show remarkable strategic skill in challenging gender stereotypes, the media's framing undermines their political credibility through seemingly neutral journalistic practices. The three paradoxes identified—competence, visibility/authority, and agency/passivity—show how contemporary gender bias works not through overt discrimination but through subtle mechanisms that position women as perpetual outsiders in politics.

Our structural analysis reveals that media ownership has a significant impact on democratic discourse around gender equality. While The Star Online's party ownership creates a "mediated patriarchy" that normalises women's marginalisation in politics, Malaysiakini's

independence allows for a critical examination of systemic barriers. The voice deficit, where women politicians gain visibility without corresponding authority, represents a particularly insidious form of tokenistic inclusion that appears progressive while maintaining male-dominated power structures.

This study highlights women politicians as strategic actors who resist gender stereotypes rather than accept media portrayals. Examples include Latifah Md Yatim's inversion of pregnancy stereotypes and Zuraida Kamaruddin's independence, showing agency in challenging patriarchy. These findings imply that when women's political participation is seen as exceptional, Malaysian democracy's full potential is hindered.

The title's question—"Grandmothers, Ministers, or Political Agents?"—reflects the core debate over how women politicians are perceived in Malaysian democracy. While media coverage often limits women to family roles or views their ministerial postings as unusual, women politicians themselves insist on their identity as independent political agents capable of strategic action and democratic leadership. As attitudes across generations evolve and women continue to challenge gender stereotypes strategically, Malaysian media faces a crucial decision: adapt to shifting democratic values or cling to patriarchal traditions that increasingly distance their audiences. The future of Malaysian democracy is at stake—and it will be shaped not by those questioning whether women should be in politics, but by those acknowledging that democracy relies on their full participation as equal political agents.

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