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# Examining gender representation in online news media coverage of general elections

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Globally, the persistent underrepresentation of women in politics remains a serious concern, with African nations, including Nigeria, reflecting similar trends. Despite its status as the “Giant of Africa”, Nigeria continues to grapple with significant gender disparities. The media, particularly through its agenda-setting and framing functions, plays a fundamental role in shaping public perceptions of women in politics. Previous studies have shown that media coverage often shapes public perception of women in politics through agenda-setting and framing, which tend to reinforce gender stereotypes. Given the increasing influence of online media, this study thus examines gender representation in online news media coverage of the 2023 Nigerian General Elections. **Methods:** Anchored on the Agenda-Setting, Framing and Feminist theories, the study conducted a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of two leading Nigerian online news platforms, the Punch and Premium Times, December 1, 2022, and February 23, 2023, when electoral campaign was at its peak. **Findings:** The findings reveal that coverage of female political actors was significantly minimal compared to their male counterparts and that portrayals often reinforced passive, supportive, or non-leadership roles for women. These patterns could be said to have contributed to the poor showing of women in the 2023 elections, further entrenching gender inequality. **Conclusion:** The study concludes that balanced and gender-sensitive reporting is very important for promoting inclusivity in political participation. The study therefore recommends that news editors intentionally increase coverage of women’s political activities, portray women in active leadership roles, and create media platforms dedicated to amplifying women’s political voices. **Novelty/Originality of this article:** The originality of this study lies in its focus on digital-era political communication, providing empirical evidence on how online news framing sustains or challenges gender inequality in Nigeria’s electoral system.

**KEYWORDS:** gender representation; media framing; online news media; political participation.

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## 1. Introduction

Women constitute over half of the global population and approximately 49.95% of Nigeria’s estimated 206 million citizens (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021, UN Women, 2026a). Despite this demographic balance, women continue to face systematic underrepresentation in political and decision-making positions across the world (Nash et al., 2025). This disparity is particularly acute in Nigeria, where, in spite of the growing advocacy for women’s political participation, women still remain severely underrepresented in both electoral contests and outcomes. As of 2025, only four women occupy seats in the 109-member Senate and thirteen in the 360-member House of Representatives. Fourteen of the 36 state houses of assembly have no female legislators,

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and across the federation, only 48 of 993 state assembly members are women while out of 35 cabinet members that head various ministries in Nigeria, only 3 are women (INEC, 2024, UN Women, 2026b). Since the return to democratic rule in 1999, no woman has been elected president, vice president, or state governor.

This persistent imbalance reflects broader global patterns as equal participation in leadership and decision-making is considered vital for sustainable development, yet global projections suggest that it may take up to five generations to achieve true gender parity (Pal et al., 2024). Although women contribute significantly to economic vitality in Africa, their opportunities remain constrained by persistent discrimination (UN Women, 2026c). The continued marginalization of women underscores the need for systemic reform, including a re-evaluation of the cultural and institutional structures that perpetuate gender inequality. Among these structures, the mass media occupy a central role in shaping social attitudes, perceptions, and expectations about gender (Rikhana et al., 2024). Through agenda-setting and framing processes (McCombs & Shaw, 2016), the media influence not only what issues the public perceives as important but also how those issues, and the people involved, are understood.

According to the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media (2019), media representations significantly influence how individuals define their roles and identities within society. This media's influence is particularly evident during elections, when news coverage plays a key role in informing voter perceptions and shaping the political agenda. Scholars (Harmer, 2021; Olubela, 2023) argue that for women to be effectively represented in politics, they must also be adequately represented in the public discourse, particularly in the media coverage of political affairs. Media framing of gendered content can either reinforce or challenge societal stereotypes, influencing the public's perception of women's leadership capabilities (Harmer, 2021).

The way election news is framed can perpetuate the marginalization of women in politics, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and limiting their visibility as political leaders. The depiction of women in news media sends powerful messages about their societal roles and capabilities (Harmer, 2021). Despite international efforts, such as the United Nations' gender quota initiatives stemming from conferences like the 1995 Beijing Conference, and national initiatives, such as the 2006 National Gender Policy, the percentage of women in leadership positions remains alarmingly low, and progress has been slow. Scholars (Sachar, 2024) emphasize that equal representation of women in politics is crucial not only for empowering women but for the overall advancement of society.

Table 1. Number of male and female contestants and winners in the 2023 Nigerian General Election

Positions	Total nominated	Male	Female	Election winners	Male	Female
President	18	17	1	1	1	-
Running Mates	18	18	-	1	1	-
Senate	1,100	1,008	92	109	105	4
House of Representatives	2,973	2,687	286	360	347	13
Governorship	837	711	126	36	36	-
Deputy Governors	-	-	-	36	27	9
State Houses of Assembly	10,231	9,191	1,019	993	945	548

(INEC, 2024)

The 2023 Nigerian General Election was the 7th of its kind in the nation's fourth republic, which began in 1999. The election, which was keenly contested by 18 registered political parties in the country, included that of the presidential, National Assembly, held February 2023, and gubernatorial and that of state houses of assembly, held March 2023 (INEC, 2022b). The elections further underscore the persistent underrepresentation of women in politics, despite increased awareness and advocacy for women's participation in politics and governance. Women accounted for nearly half of registered voters (47.52%), yet they remained severely underrepresented among candidates and elected officials (INEC, 2024). Out of 1,100 senatorial candidates, only 92 were women, and among 2,973

candidates for the House of Representatives, only 286 were female (INEC, 2022a). Table 1 above provides an overview of gender representation in the 2023 Nigerian General Elections.

Such patterns reveal the persistence of structural, cultural, and institutional barriers that limit women's visibility and viability in politics (Sadie, 2020). The study further observes that, 'large gaps still remain in women's representation at different levels of governance and leadership; women's voices still remain a whisper' (Sadie, 2020). The struggle of women to gain a fair share of political power remains a work in progress'. The underlying assumption is that while broader sociocultural factors contribute to gender stereotyping, which positions women in subordinate and subservient roles relative to men, thereby limiting their full participation in politics, the media have played a significant role in reinforcing this patriarchal and unequal gender order (Ekeh, 2018). This occurs through what he referred to as the denial of equitable media access for women in politics and entrenched patterns of news framing that portray women as primarily concerned with domestic and lifestyle domains such as family, household affairs, entertainment, fashion and sexuality. This was further buttressed by the Council of Europe Study (2018) which noted that 'a number of studies on media coverage of female candidates revealed that even when there are a reasonable number of women candidates running for office, they are often neglected by the media'.

The implications are far-reaching, not only in terms of gender equity but also in the development and implementation of inclusive and gender-sensitive policies. The gravity of the situation, projecting that it could take up to 134 years, spanning roughly five generations, before full gender parity is achieved globally, far beyond the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target (Pal et al., 2024). This dire forecast has intensified scholarly and activist calls for transformative change rather than incremental progress in bridging gender gaps in political leadership.

In particular, the role of the media, both traditional and digital, has come under scrutiny for perpetuating gender biases through disproportionate and often stereotypical coverage of female candidates. Research indicates that women receive significantly less media attention than men during election cycles, and when covered, the framing often emphasizes personal attributes over political competence (Gowda, 2025; Prihatini, 2020; Tahsini & Duci, 2022). Such portrayals contribute to the public perception that politics is a male-dominated domain, further deterring women's participation. Women politicians are frequently trivialized, marginalized, or framed in ways that emphasize personal attributes, such as appearance, marital status, or emotionality, rather than their professional capabilities and political agendas (Harmer, 2021). In some cases, women are portrayed predominantly as victims or celebrities, contributing to a distorted public perception of their roles in governance and leadership.

In the age of digital media, the internet has become an indispensable tool for political campaigns. Politicians increasingly rely on online platforms to engage with the electorate. Digital media have transformed political engagement, with politicians increasingly using online platforms to reach the electorate. The advent of digital media has reshaped the dynamics of political communication and journalism. Online news platforms now serve as the primary source of political information for many citizens, particularly youth. These digital spaces offer both opportunities and challenges: they can amplify women's voices but also replicate and intensify existing gender biases. Research by the Center for Democracy and Development (Lemo, 2023) shows that the number of active social media users in Nigeria increased from 27 million in 2019 to 36 million ahead of the 2023 general elections, highlighting the growing role of online platforms in electoral communication. However, as Palit (2023) notes, digital technologies also enable political elites to shape narratives that align with their agendas, raising concerns about inclusivity and representation.

Theoretically, this study draws on Agenda-Setting Theory, Framing Theory, and Feminist Theory to provide a comprehensive lens for understanding gender representation in media. Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) posits that the media influence public priorities by determining which issues receive attention. Applied to the 2023

Nigerian general elections, this theory suggests that the frequency and prominence of media coverage of male versus female candidates signal to audiences who matters politically. Framing Theory (Entman, 1993) extends this argument by examining how issues and actors are portrayed. The framing of women as emotional, inexperienced, or dependent on male support reinforces stereotypes and undermines perceptions of competence. Feminist Theory, on the other hand, provides a critical foundation for interrogating these systemic biases. It exposes how media practices and cultural norms sustain patriarchal hierarchies and calls for transformative approaches that foreground gender equity in political communication. Together, these theories offer a framework for understanding the mechanisms through which media narratives construct or constrain women's political representation.

Despite the growing advocacy for women's political participation in Nigeria, women remain severely underrepresented in both electoral contests and outcomes. While structural and cultural explanations have been widely discussed, less attention has been paid to how online news, which is now central to political communication, contributes to this marginalization, through visibility and framing practices. This gap is particularly critical in the context of the 2023 Nigerian General Elections, which were conducted in a highly digitized media environment.

The objective of this study is therefore to examine the extent and nature of women's representation in online news coverage of the 2023 Nigerian General Elections, with particular attention to framing patterns and thematic emphasis. Guided by Agenda-Setting, Framing, and Feminist media theoretical perspectives, the study seeks to understand how online media contributed to shaping public perceptions of female political actors. In doing so, the study also interrogates whether digital news platforms reinforce or challenge existing gender hierarchies within electoral discourse. Also, it explores the democratic implications of media visibility and framing for women's political legitimacy and participation. Thus, the study is guided by this research question; In what ways were female political actors represented in the online news coverage of the *The Punch* and *Premium Times* during the campaign period of the 2023 Nigerian General Elections?

## 2. Methods

This study adopted a qualitative content analysis to systematically examine the pattern of gender representation in online political news coverage of the 2023 Nigerian General Elections. The qualitative approach was chosen because it enables the study to measure visibility, framing categories, and frequency of representation. Ontologically, the study assumes that social reality, particularly gender representation, is constructed through language and media discourse. Epistemologically, it is grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, which recognizes that knowledge is derived from the interpretation of social meanings embedded in texts (Creswell, 2014). This approach enabled the researcher to explore how news narratives both reflect and reproduce cultural perceptions of gender and politics in Nigeria.

### 2.1 *Research location and context*

The research focused on Nigeria, a West African country with a vibrant yet male-dominated political and media landscape. The study specifically examined the digital platforms of two major Nigerian online newspapers: *The Punch* and *Premium Times*. These outlets were chosen based on their national reach, online readership volume, and reputation for political reporting. *The Punch* represents a legacy newspaper with strong online visibility, while *Premium Times* is a native digital platform known for investigative and issue-based journalism. Their combined audiences reflect diverse socio-political demographics, making them ideal for assessing media framing during the 2023 elections. The period under study, 1st December 2022 to 23rd February 2023, was strategically selected because it represents the peak of electoral campaign activities preceding the

general elections. During this period, political communication intensified through rallies, manifesto launches, debates, and widespread media coverage. This timeframe thus provided rich material for analyzing gender portrayals during moments of heightened political visibility.

## *2.2 Data sources and sampling*

The primary data for this study consisted of news stories, features, and reports published on the official websites of The Punch and Premium Times. Articles were accessed directly from the digital archives of these platforms. The study employed a purposive sampling technique to select 100 election-related news articles (50 from each outlet). The unit of analysis was the individual news article. Articles were included if they (a) focused on the 2023 general elections, (b) mentioned political actors, and (c) discussed campaign-related activities, such as rallies, debates, manifestos, or electoral commentary. This sample size was considered sufficient to capture a balanced representation of political reporting across the two platforms while allowing for in-depth qualitative analysis. Sampling continued until data saturation was achieved, meaning that additional articles no longer revealed new patterns or themes.

## *2.3 Data collection procedure*

Data collection was conducted manually to ensure precision in identifying gendered representations. Relevant articles were retrieved, archived, and coded in a structured spreadsheet format, which included metadata such as publication date, headline, author, topic focus, and gender of political actors mentioned. Each article was assigned a unique identification code to facilitate traceability during analysis. This systematic approach ensured transparency and reproducibility of the data selection and handling process.

## *2.4 Data analysis technique*

The study applied qualitative content analysis as described by Krippendorff (2018), combining inductive and deductive coding strategies. Initial data condensation involved reading all selected articles multiple times to identify recurring themes, language patterns, and framing devices related to gender. A coding manual was developed outlining clear operational definitions for gender (male/female actors), framing categories (issue-based, personality-based, symbolic), tone (positive, neutral, negative, and prominence). To enhance readability, a pilot coding of 10% of the sample was conducted. Intercoder reliability was assessed using Holsti's coefficient, yielding an agreement score of 0.82, which is considered acceptable for content analysis.

## *2.5 Ethical considerations*

Although the study relied on publicly available data and did not involve human subjects, the study adheres to academic standards of integrity. Ethical research standards were observed through accurate citation, avoidance of misrepresentation, and transparent reporting of procedures. Care was also taken to ensure that the interpretation of media content remained faithful to the original context in which the articles were published. Furthermore, all stories analysed were documented to promote transparency, accountability, and replicability of the research process.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1 Findings

This study investigates how online news media represented female political actors during the 2023 Nigerian General Elections, with a specific focus on *The Punch* and *Premium Times*. A total of 100 political news stories were analyzed, comprising 50 articles from each outlet, published between December 1, 2022, and February 23, 2023, a period identified as the peak of electoral campaign activities. The findings revealed a significant gender imbalance in media coverage. Out of 100 sampled articles, only five (5%) focused primarily on female political actors. This disproportionate visibility demonstrates a continuation of the male-dominated narrative in Nigerian political journalism. The results align with previous research by Sadie (2020), who observed that women candidates are consistently less visible in election coverage and that such underrepresentation perpetuates political marginalization.

##### 3.1.1 Representation of female political actors in *The Punch*

###### 3.1.1.1 Frequency and visibility

Only four of the fifty ( $n = 4$ ; 8%) *Punch* articles centered on female political actors, with headlines including 'We'll do better than men: Female Gov Candidates' (Olorokor, 2022), 'Bamidele, Olujimi, Aiyegbusi Test Strengths in Ekiti NASS Polls' (Nejo, 2022), 'Beauty Queen Cautions Against Smear Campaign' (Odeniyi, 2023), and 'Women Take Back Seat as Race for Election Hots Up' (Bayewu, 2023). At the outset, the media highlighted optimism among female gubernatorial candidates in 'We'll do better than men: Female Gov Candidates' (Olorokor, 2022). Subsequently, political competition intensified as reflected in 'Bamidele, Olujimi, Aiyegbusi Test Strengths in Ekiti NASS Polls' (Nejo, 2022). Meanwhile, concerns over negative political tactics emerged in 'Beauty Queen Cautions Against Smear Campaign' (Odeniyi, 2023). However, despite earlier optimism, women appeared to lose visibility as noted in 'Women Take Back Seat as Race for Election Hots Up' (Bayewu, 2023). The majority of other stories positioned male actors as central figures in political debates, policy commentaries, and campaign events, thus reinforcing male visibility in agenda-setting terms.

###### 3.1.1.2 Framing and thematic representation

Thematic analysis of the *Punch* coverage revealed three dominant frames related to visibility and agency: Few stories, such as "We'll do better than men" (Olorokor, 2022), highlighted women's competence and leadership potential, aligning with feminist media theory, which advocates women's agency in public narratives. This story provides a rare visibility to multiple female gubernatorial and presidential candidates. This helps challenge the narrative that women are absent from, or uninterested in, leadership. In line with the agenda-setting theory, the story frames women's candidacies as a significant national concern, putting their perspectives, plans, and criticisms of existing political structures on the public agenda. Also, the very act of organizing a 'media parley' exclusively for female candidates, supported by international institutions such as the UN Women, Women Radio and Women in Business, and the Government of Canada, legitimizes women's participation and reinforces their political agency. Also, the headline 'Beauty Queen Cautions against Smear Campaign' (Odeniyi, 2023), shows framing which prioritizes physical appearance and ceremonial titles over political substance or authority. Although the central figure in the story, Jodie Frank, discusses electoral reform, the headline and lead highlight her beauty status, while reinforcing gendered expectations around aesthetics and passive roles.

Tokenism and marginality: Articles like “*Bamidele, Olujimi, Aiyegbusi Test Strengths*” (Nejo, 2022) positioned women as peripheral figures within male-centric discourse, confirming agenda-setting effects where media subtly prioritize male participation. Furthermore, in stereotyping and gendered language: Headlines such as “Beauty Queen Cautions Against Smear Campaign” foregrounded appearance and personal identity over political substance, sustaining symbolic rather than substantive representation. Also, another article’s headline ‘Women take Back Seat as Race for Election Hots Up’ (Bayewu, 2023) establishes the frame of women as sidelined or passive in the electoral process. This already positions female political actors as secondary or less important, even before presenting the facts. This reinforces gendered perceptions that men are natural political leaders while women are just observers. These results reflect framing theory, which suggests that media selection and emphasis shape public interpretation of social actors (Entman, 1993). By framing female candidates through non-political identities or emotional tones, the media reinforces traditional gender norms rather than challenging them. The result is further explained in Table 2 and Table 3 below;

Table 2. Summary of thematic insights in “*Bamidele, olujimi, aiyegbusi test strengths*” (The Punch)

Theme	Observation	Implication
Visibility	Male candidates dominate headlines and body of the article	Reinforces male political centrality
Framing	Political contests presented as a male-only space	Marginalizes women’s participation
Representation	Senator Olujimi and Princess Owolabi-Akerele are the only women mentioned (with minimal depth) compared to 23 men	Reflects tokenism in coverage
Voice	Most male politicians are quoted directly or through party representatives, while Princess Akerele receives only one short quote	Women are largely spoken <i>about</i> , not <i>with</i>

The overall tone of Punch’s political reporting suggests a limited effort to mainstream women’s participation in politics. Although some articles attempted to highlight female agency, coverage often remained surface-level or confined to non-mainstream candidates, reflecting what feminist theory identifies as symbolic inclusion, where women are present but not substantively empowered. This pattern indicates that visibility did not necessarily translate into meaningful narrative authority or sustained engagement with women’s political agendas. It also suggests a broader media tendency to acknowledge women’s presence in politics without fully interrogating the structural barriers shaping their participation.

Table 3. Representation themes in ‘Beauty queen cautions against smear campaign’

Positive aspects	Problematic aspects
Elevates a woman’s voice on a political platform	Framed through beauty-queen identity
Encourages civic engagement among youth	Lacks focus on structural barriers or political depth
Includes a female government official (briefly)	Minimally explores her role or achievements
Promotes issue-based political dialogue	Reinforces symbolic over substantive political roles

### 3.1.2 Representation of female political actors in Premium Times

#### 3.1.2.1 Focus and agenda-setting

In Premium Times, only one article directly centered on female political participation: “Analysis: State of Women’s Candidacy Ahead of 2023 Elections” (Afolabi, 2022). This article foregrounded gender inequality as a national issue using data-driven evidence and historical comparisons, thereby fulfilling an agenda-setting function. The consistent use of

statistics (e.g., only 1,524 of 15,307 candidates were women) highlights structural gender exclusion in Nigeria's political system. However, the absence of direct quotations or interviews with female politicians weakened women's narrative agency.

### 3.1.2.2 Framing and discourse patterns

The story employed sympathetic yet passive constructions, such as "there is still a challenge for female politicians to even aspire," which, while recognizing inequality, frames women as victims of circumstance rather than active agents of change. Although the article aligns with feminist advocacy through its emphasis on patriarchy and institutional barriers, it inadvertently reinforces the narrative of women as dependent on male support (e.g., "He for She" initiatives). This supports feminist media theory's critique of structural marginalization, where the media reproduce patriarchal hierarchies even while reporting on gender inclusion.

According to the Council of Europe (2018), women politicians are frequently portrayed as exceptional figures or as achieving extraordinary feats. They are often explicitly labelled as "women politicians," a designation that subtly frames their presence as unusual rather than normative. The Council further notes that such characterization conveys the implicit message that women's participation in politics is not a natural progression, thereby shifting media focus toward their novelty rather than their policy platforms, competence, and political ideas.

Table 4. Summary of the thematic insights in "Analysis: State of women's candidacy ahead of 2023 elections"

Theme	Observation	Implication
Visibility	Scanty and peripheral coverage of female political actors	Limits public recognition and legitimacy
Framing	Gendered metaphors and passive constructions	Reinforces male dominance and portrays women as marginal actors
Representation	Women presented as victims or moral advocates, rarely as leaders	Perpetuates symbolic rather than substantive inclusion
Voice	Limited or absent direct quotations from female candidates	Silences women's political narratives

### 3.1.3 Quantitative analysis of gender representation across the two platforms

#### 3.1.3.1 Gender visibility in online election coverage

Across the two media sources, male candidates accounted for a significantly higher percentage of mentions and visibility. This disparity was evident in headline coverage, lead paragraphs, and the frequency of direct quotations attributed to candidates. Female candidates were often mentioned in passing or grouped with other contenders without individualized attention. In some cases, their roles were confined to secondary narratives or supportive contexts rather than being presented as primary political actors.

This imbalance underscores a persistent gender gap in media visibility, where male actors dominate narrative prominence within electoral reporting. Such patterns reinforce existing hierarchies of political relevance by positioning women as peripheral rather than central figures in election discourse. Consequently, this limited visibility may affect public perception of women's political credibility and electability. Table 5 presents a summary of gender visibility across the two platforms.

Table 5. Gender visibility in online election coverage in both The Punch and Premium Times

Gender focus	Frequency	Percentage
Male actors	95	95%
Female actors	5	5%
Total	100	100%

### 3.1.3.2 Gender framing patterns in online election coverage

Table 6 below shows that more women are framed in personal, emotional, or symbolic terms, while the majority of the male candidates were framed in terms of leadership and competence. Female political actors were predominantly framed symbolically 80%: (Emotional: 42%, Appearance-based: 15%, Symbolism: 23%), rather than substantively 20% (Leadership: 10%, policy and issue-focused: 10%), while male actors were primarily framed in issue-based and leadership contexts (80%). This disparity suggests a gendered framing pattern that associates women more with affective or representational attributes than with governance capacity. Such framing not only limits the perceived political authority of female candidates but also reinforces traditional stereotypes regarding leadership and competence within electoral discourse.

Table 6. Dominant framing categories by gender

Frame types	Male actors (%)	Female actors (%)
Leadership/competence	48	10
Emotional/personal	12	42
Symbolism/ tokenism	5	23
Appearance-based	3	15
Policy and Issue-focused	32	10
Total	100%	100%

### 3.1.3.3 Tone of coverage

Male candidates received more positive coverage, while female candidates were more often covered in a neutral tone, suggesting a lack of strong narrative support. This imbalance indicates that women were less likely to benefit from explicitly favourable media framing that could enhance credibility or voter appeal. The predominance of neutral coverage may also reflect a tendency to marginalize female political actors by limiting evaluative commentary that affirms their leadership viability.

Table 7. Tone of coverage by gender

Gender	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Total
Male actors	45%	40%	15%	100%
Female actors	25%	58%	17%	100 %

## 3.2 Discussion

In response to research question one, which examines how female political actors were represented in the online news coverage of The Punch and Premium Times during the campaign period of the 2023 Nigerian General Elections, the findings reveal that female political actors were grossly underrepresented. The study establishes the persistence of gender imbalances in online news media coverage, reflecting and reinforcing deep-rooted societal structures. Specifically, based on the number of news stories and articles published between December 1, 2022, and February 23, 2023, coverage of female political actors was minimal, selective, and often stereotypical compared to that of their male counterparts. Out of a total of 100 news stories analyzed from both platforms, only five focused on female political actors. This disparity indicates that both The Punch and Premium Times maintained a predominantly male-centered agenda, thereby reflecting entrenched gender hierarchies in Nigerian political journalism.

This finding suggests that the mass media construct their narratives within a patriarchal framework that subordinates women and positions them as inferior to their male counterparts. Such representations can negatively affect women's self-perception, emotional confidence, and public visibility, thereby discouraging their active participation in politics, with broader implications for inclusive governance and national development.

Thus, drawing on agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), it is evident that the media continue to marginalize women politicians by limiting their visibility and significance. The scarcity of coverage of female candidates indicates that media outlets prioritize male politicians in shaping public discourse. Consequently, female candidates are excluded from the public agenda, undermining their visibility and political viability.

Beyond Nigeria, similar studies in Kenya, South Africa, Albania, and Bangladesh (Islam, 2023; Tuchini & Duci, 2022) report comparable patterns of male-dominated political visibility, suggesting that gendered media framing is not only a broader African phenomenon or uniquely Nigerian, but a global one. These studies indicate that women candidates receive less visibility in election-related media coverage and are often portrayed through gender stereotypes and stigma. This is further supported by the findings of Tuchini & Duci (2022), whose study, *Women and Politics: Coverage of 2021 Parliamentary Election Campaign in the Albanian Online News Media*, reveals that women often receive less coverage during election campaigns, with greater emphasis placed on their personal lives rather than their professional capacities, while “soft” issues are more frequently highlighted. Similarly, a study of the Bangladeshi press found that women politicians are framed in relation to male mentors, portrayed as new, inexperienced, and potentially incompetent, and positioned primarily as representatives of women voters (Islam, 2023).

Also, online news platforms, while offering a wider reach and a more democratized information space, largely reproduce the traditional patterns of coverage that prioritize male political actors. This supports (McCombs & Shaw’s, 1972) assertion that media do not merely reflect reality but actively shape public perceptions of what issues, and by extension, which actors, are deemed important. The underrepresentation and often superficial portrayal of female candidates signal a clear exclusion from the political agenda, thereby indirectly discouraging the electorate from perceiving women as viable contenders for leadership positions.

Going by the framing theory (Entman, 1993), it is evident that the media’s portrayals of women were often embedded in gendered stereotypes that framed female politicians in terms of personal characteristics, such as appearance, marital status, or emotionality, rather than their political competencies or policy positions. This is reflected in some of the headlines of the few stories, such as ‘We’ll do better than men: Female Gov Candidates’, ‘Beauty Queen cautions against smear Campaign’, ‘Women take Back Seat as Race for Election Hots Up’, among others. All these further undermine the capacities and capabilities of women political actors to compete favourably with their male counterparts and win elections. This is in agreement (Harmer, 2021), who suggests that effective representation of women in politics requires their adequate inclusion in public discourse, particularly through media coverage of female political events. This also aligns with Entman’s (1993) conceptualization of framing as the selection and salience of certain aspects of perceived reality to promote particular problem definitions or causal interpretations. By framing women within the context of their gender roles rather than as autonomous political actors, the media contributed to a narrative that undermines women’s credibility and authority in the political arena. These headlines exemplify subtle linguistic framing that constructs women as passive, secondary, or ornamental figures rather than authoritative leaders.

Moreover, this selective framing perpetuates what feminist theory critiques as the systemic marginalization of women within patriarchal structures. For instance, the headline ‘We’ll do better than men: Female Gov Candidates’ adopts a comparative and confrontational tone, reinforcing a dual standard regarding leadership capabilities. While it may appear empowering, it simultaneously reflects a tokenistic framing in which women are expected to demonstrate superiority to be seen as legitimate contenders. This is also in agreement with the view that the framing of election news can reinforce the marginalization of women in politics, perpetuate damaging stereotypes, and constrain their visibility as legitimate political leaders (Sachar, 2024). Media narratives frequently reinforce patriarchal norms by framing female politicians through emotion, domesticity, or appearance rather than leadership and policy (Harmer, 2021; Sachar, 2024). The findings

also corroborated this, revealing 'the persistent prevalence of traditional gender stereotypes in advertising, television, film and social media' (Gowda, 2025).

The results also affirm feminist media theorists' arguments that media systems often perpetuate hegemonic masculinity, even in digital formats that are presumed to be more democratized. The theory also emphasizes that media are not neutral conveyors of information but are complicit in the maintenance of hegemonic gender norms. The framing patterns observed in this study highlight how digital news media, rather than dismantling traditional gender hierarchies, often entrench them.

The persistence of gender bias in online political reporting reveals the continuity of patriarchal discourse in digital journalism. While online media theoretically provide broader access and inclusivity, the coverage analyzed here reproduces traditional exclusions rather than dismantling them. This findings corroborates previous research showing that exposure to stereotyping representations appears to strengthen beliefs in gender stereotypes and endorsement of gender role norms, as well as fostering sexism, harassment and violence in men and stifling career-related ambitions in women (Santoniccolo et al., 2023).

This finding underscores the need for gender-sensitive editorial policies, media literacy training, and deliberate inclusion strategies in Nigerian journalism. It highlights the importance of institutional reforms that encourage newsrooms to consciously integrate gender equity into reporting routines and editorial decision-making. Strengthening such practices could help reshape media narratives and promote more balanced political visibility. As feminist communication scholars argue, gender-balanced media representation is not merely an issue of fairness but a democratic imperative, essential for participatory governance and equitable political participation.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper examined how female political actors were represented in online news media coverage of the 2023 Nigerian General Elections across two major Nigerian online platforms: The Punch and Premium Times. Through a qualitative content analysis anchored on agenda-setting, framing and feminist theories, the study reveals that women were grossly underrepresented in the online news media during the period of coverage. A very minimal number of stories centered on women's political activities during this period were found. Three out of the five stories obtained and analysed are articles, while only two are actual coverage of the activities of women political actors. The coverage leaned heavily on statistical representations, omitting the voices, perspectives and personal stories of women in the political arena. This reinforces a representation of women as political subjects of concern, rather than active political agents. Across the two platforms, the media played a significant role in setting the agenda by establishing gender disparity in political candidacy and elected office. Some of the articles, although highlight systematic barriers such as patriarchal norms, party gatekeeping, and lack of internal democracy, there is minimal visibility given to female candidates or their political agendas. This reflect the media's framing of women as victims and lacking power. This framing does little in challenging normative political hierarchies or reshaping the public imagination and perception of women as viable leaders. The findings thus reveal that female candidates or political actors are seldom framed as competitive, capable, or newsworthy in the same way their male counterparts are framed. The absence of direct quotes, profiles, or issue-based analysis of female-led campaigns reflects deep-rooted editorial biases that continue to shape electoral narratives.

The findings highlight that even within the digital media landscape, where inclusivity and accessibility are presumed, the structures of visibility remain uneven. Both Punch and Premium Times allocated minimal coverage to female politicians, and where women appeared, they were often framed as peripheral, emotional, or victims of structural constraints. According to the findings, the coverage of news reports on women's political activities towards the 2023 Nigerian General Election ( during the period under review) is

significantly low, showing that women's representation remains both quantitatively low and qualitatively shallow (judging by the contents of the few gender stories). This demonstrates the persistence of patriarchal gatekeeping in news production and agenda setting, where male political actors dominate the media agenda and narrative space. This could be partly responsible for the poor outing of women, as shown in the final results of the election. For instance, out of the 105 women who contested for the Senate, only 4 won, and out of 286 women who contested for seats at the House of Representatives, only 13 won. The same goes for the state houses of assembly, where 1,019 women contested and 48 scaled through. This has great implications for democracy as equitable participation in leadership and decision-making is crucial for achieving sustainable development. The study's contribution lies in its illumination of how online journalism, despite its transformative potential, continues to reproduce traditional gender hierarchies within political communication. By integrating feminist and agenda-setting perspectives, this research advances scholarly understanding of the intersection between media representation, gender, and political participation in the Nigerian context. The findings further underscore the democratic implications of gender imbalance in media coverage, particularly its potential to shape public perception, limit female political legitimacy, and perpetuate exclusion from decision-making processes. The study shows that online news media, despite their democratizing potential, continue to marginalize women in electoral politics. Theoretically, the study extends agenda-setting and feminist media theories by showing how digital platforms reproduce traditional gender hierarchies.

In conclusion, the study provides critical insights into the enduring gap between digital media access and gender inclusion. The findings suggest the need for editorial gender policies, journalist training on gender-sensitive reporting, and regulatory guidelines that promote equitable political visibility. In addition, it calls for a deliberate re-evaluation of newsroom practices and editorial policies to promote equitable media representation of women in politics. Strengthening gender-sensitive reporting and amplifying the voices of female political actors are essential for advancing democratic participation and achieving sustainable development goals in Nigeria's evolving media landscape.

### **Author Contribution**

The author confirms that she was solely responsible for the conceptualization, research design, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of findings, and the writing and revision of this manuscript.

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### **Ethical Review Board Statement**

Not available. This study did not involve human participants, animals, or any sensitive personal data, and therefore did not require ethical approval.

### **Informed Consent Statement**

Not available. This study did not involve human participants or the collection of personal data requiring informed consent.

### **Data Availability Statement**

The data supporting the findings of this study consist of publicly available online news articles retrieved from the official websites of *The Punch* (<https://punchng.com>) and *Premium Times* (<https://premiumtimesng.com>). No new datasets were created or analyzed beyond these publicly accessible sources.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest. The study received no external funding, and the funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analysis, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

## Declaration of Generative AI Use

During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT (GPT-5, developed by OpenAI) to assist in improving the clarity, organization, and academic tone of the manuscript. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

## Open Access

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