

## **How Does Online News Affect Women's Political Participation in Sub-Saharan Africa? A Meta-analysis of Research from 2009- 2023**

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### **Abstract**

Despite the presence of various international frameworks and commitments to achieving gender equality, the underrepresentation of women a significant portion of its population- in its political leadership has endured within sub-Saharan Africa. There is already evidence from scholars that show that traditional news media content serves to simultaneously underrepresent women in politics, while also reinforcing stereotypes against them through discourse. However, as channels and processes of mass communication, including through news get increasingly digitalized, there is not much insight into the effects that online news media have in shaping the perceptions of female politicians and their participation in politics on a regional level. This study applies Feminist (Media) Theory. Conducting a meta-analysis of 20 research papers published between 2009 and 2023, this study provides insight into the effects of online news media on the perceptions of female politicians and their participation in politics in the sub-Saharan Africa context. The findings of the study expand the understanding of the relationship between gender, news media and politics in a digitalized world. They also highlights areas for improved regulation and/or legislation of news.

**Keywords:** Feminist media theory, Gender and politics, Meta-analysis, Online news, Sub-Saharan Africa

## **1. Introduction**

There has been steady but slow progress in achieving gender equality globally in recent years. However, women in sub-Saharan Africa generally continue to be under-represented in terms of economic, social, and political leadership, according to international reports on gender equality gaps (AfDB & UNECA, 2020; African Union, 2022; Gomes & Meyimdjui, 2023; UNDP, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2023). Specifically focusing on political leadership, despite the global nature of gender inequalities, according to scholars, it is rampant in some developing countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (Agbalajobi & Oluwalogbon, 2019; Anigwe, 2014; Esidene, 2009; Fayomi, et al., 2022; Jaiyeola, 2020; Osimosu & Adefisoye, 2023). This situation has contributed greatly to gender discrimination and inequality, with women and girls lacking access to their basic human rights, and a net negative impact on national development (Adu, 2008; Babatunde, 2003; Olonade et al, 2021; Rettig, Fick & Hijmans, 2020). It is noted that increasing representation of women in political leadership is essential for inclusivity and fairness, as well as expanding viewpoints and experiences to the formulation of public policy and decision-making that leads to the development of more creative and practical solutions to problems (Bruno et al., 2023).

Online news media, aside from acting as a surveyor to alert society about phenomena, also aids in making sense of these occurrences and in the socialisation and the construction of social reality (Berry, 2015, 2017; Best & Puzio, 2019; Fayomi et al, 2022; Lasswell, 1984, McQuail, 2010). While online news media is just one part of the puzzle, it is undeniable that it has a growing effect across Sub-Saharan Africa in contemporary times (Gomes & Meyimdjui, 2023). Consequently, it would be expected that it has a direct and indirect impact on women's involvement in politics and leadership empowerment in the region in varying degrees, as scholars such as Perkins et al. (2013) have argued. Given the diversity across sub-Saharan Africa, it is understandable that the context (norms, media practices, political environment) would differ from country to country. Be that as it may, there is a need to gain insight into how online news media directly affects women in political leadership roles in this diverse and complex region (Bruno et al., 2023).

As a way towards deepening the existing understanding of the relationship between online news media and women's political participation in the Sub-African region, this paper aims to highlight the effect(s) of online news media on women's political leadership in sub-Saharan Africa by examining how digital platforms influence public perception, political engagement, and the representation of women leaders in the region.

This meta-analysis focuses on actualizing two critical objectives: The first is to analyze how the online news media portrays public perception and representation of women in political leadership in sub-Saharan Africa. The second is to examine the impact of online media on women's political engagement and participation. In working to meet these objectives, this study asks the following questions:

- How does the online news media portray female political leadership in sub-Saharan Africa?
- How does online news media influence women's political leadership ambitions and their success in elections in sub-Saharan Africa?

## **2. Literature Review**

It has also been established that the press reflects the political and economic status quo in the society where it operates (McQuail, 2010; Muller, 2021; Owolabi, 2023; Siebert et al., 1963). The introduction of digital technology and its application to the processes around news have presented an opportunity for more participation in public discourse and influence of social and political life, as proponents of McQuail's Democratic Participation model of the press would advocate (McQuail, 2010). This is because access to the internet, in principle, is meant to afford and provide opportunities for hitherto underrepresented groups, such as youths and women, to participate more actively in public discussions and shape social reality. The use of the internet is a growing practice, especially as one considers the digitalisation of news production and consumption, such that social media platforms are now part of the ways news media organisations distribute content and engage their audiences. Furthermore, these platforms provide opportunities for members of the audience to engage with each other and the news content in a way and pace that was not possible with non-digital forms of media. Although one may still observe practices online that reinforce gender inequalities (Ahmed & Madrid-Morales, 2021; Alichie, 2023; Gora & Muchenje, 2020; Meusburger, 2018; Ncube & Yemurai, 2020), there is no doubt it is still a trend apparent in the negotiation and resistance of gender inequalities (Hivos, 2021; Kassa & Sarikakis, 2019; Ngaufack, 2021; Omotoso, 2020).

Furthermore, online news media not only acts as a surveyor that alerts society to phenomena but also aids in making sense of these occurrences, socializing societies and shaping social reality (Berry, 2015, 2017; Best & Puzio, 2019; Fayomi et al, 2022; Lasswell, 1984, McQuail, 2010). It has also been established that the press reflects the political and economic status quo in the society where it operates (McQuail, 2010; Muller, 2021; Owolabi, 2023; Siebert et al, 1963). There is evidence of gender disparity in the representation of women in the media with respect to how they are portrayed within news content (Ahmed, 2018; Aladi & Okoro, 2021; Kassova, 2020; Oamen, 2019, 2021). The Development Research and Project Centre (2023) states that Nigerian media, generally, often exhibit bias against women in public appointive positions at the national level, portraying them as weak and incompetent and questioning their credibility. Such portrayals are in sharp contrast to the more balanced and neutral reporting of men in similar positions. Consequently, it could be argued that news media plays a role in building and sustaining the prevailing discourse and practice around the participation of Nigerian women in political leadership. However, news media also can, and has been, a site for the resistance and negotiation of the status quo.

News media and gender equality have several nexi, especially considering the prevalence of news media institutions and the role of gender in the daily lives and interactions of individuals. The key points of connection between media, gender equality and national development revolve around three key factors i) the presence and role of women in media as practitioners, owners and leaders; ii) the representation of girls and women in media with respect to their contributions to public discussions and their social agency; and iii) the representation of issues related to women and girls, particularly around discrimination, sexual and gender-based violence (Free Press Unlimited, n.d.; IMS et al., 2020). These aspects of representation come together to determine the social constructions around gender and by extension, affect national development, especially in the areas of social and human development.

Despite accounting for approximately half of the human population, data shows that on a national and global scale, women make up only 24 per cent of the persons heard, read about, or seen in newspaper, television or radio news (IMS et al., 2020). Even worse, the majority of news stories reinforce traditional gender stereotypes (Aladi & Okoro, 2021; IMS et al., 2020). Furthermore, one in five experts interviewed in the news media are women and in terms of leadership and ownership of news media organisation, men account for 73 per cent of management positions, compared to 27 per cent occupied by women (IMS et al., 2020). Consequently, whether as content or in media houses, female expertise and leadership are represented as exceptions, rather than the norm.

Another aspect to consider is women's access to the Internet. While mobile phones and other forms of digital technology have become increasingly popular and present prospects for democratic participation by all sections of society, women still miss out on the opportunities to access knowledge and shape public discussions due to limited access to the resources required to own and use them (Meusburger, 2018; Miller et al., 2016). According to UN Women (2021), there is a digital gender divide, with men are more likely than women to go online, own and use mobile or smartphones and access online news and information resources. Furthermore, UN Women (2021) states that in terms of share numbers, women and girls account for more than half of the 3.7 billion Africans affected by the digital divide gap. According to Meusburger (2018), girls and women in patriarchal societies are essentially under the authority of the male figures in their families, that is, father, brother, son, husband, which invariably means that their access to the internet and social media is also determined by the extent to which these authority figures allow them to utilise such resources. Therefore, the presence of digital communication technology may not necessary help bridge the gap in access to knowledge and participation in public discourse, much in line with the argument put forward by proponents of the Knowledge Gap Theory. Instead, the gap may be further exacerbated due to other factors, such as those mentioned.

Even when it comes to participation in public discussions and debates in the media, women are taught “to be silent where men are speaking,” with their opinions being dismissed. Accordingly, in keeping with socialisation and social norms, they hardly participate in such discussions, even on social

media platforms, (IMS et al., 2020; Ogbuagu et al., 2017). Without proper access to information, women are in the dark about what their rights are or the ways to advocate for themselves, as well as challenge existing norms and stereotypes. Furthermore, social inequality in the area of gender, negatively impacts the capacity of societies to develop. Inevitably, gender inequality in news media, just as in any other institution in society, constitutes a major obstacle to achieving any national or global agenda for development.

This analysis in this study is based on Feminist Media Theory and is designed to provide an understanding of the effect of online news media on women in political leadership in sub-Saharan Africa. Feminist Media Theory is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of mass media that draws from Feminist Theory (Dosekun, 2021; Lazar, 2023; Nartey, 2021). As a result, it explores how gender intersects with other social aspects such as race, class, and culture (Crenshaw, 1989). It applies philosophies, concepts, and logic articulating feminist principles and concepts to media processes such as hiring, production, and distribution; to patterns of representation in news and entertainment across platforms; and reception. Unlike approaches that hide their politics, feminist theorizing is explicitly political. As a critical approach, it addresses questions around power and control and assumes that the state of affairs is not naturally occurring, but rather the product of ideological confrontations.

Feminist Media Theory takes gender seriously – as a factor that structures identity and experiences – without assuming permanent or static gender differences. Like Feminist Theory, Feminist Media Theory is dominated by the assumption that if women had more control over the processes and structures around media production, the content would be different and more egalitarian as a result. It also assumes that the media serves as a site for constructing social reality on gender and is part of the socialisation process and cultivation of values and culture.

Feminist Media Theory has evolved over time, critically examining the intersection between gender, media, and power since its origins in the mid-twentieth century. In the period spanning the 1960s and the 1980s, which coincided with the Second Wave Feminism, researchers began to interrogate the relationship between media and gender. According to Mendes and Carter (2008) and Krijnen (2020), the focus of research here was the questioning of media representations, stereotypes and the exclusion of women's voices. Notable studies, such as that by Friedan (1963, 2001), highlighted the role of the media in the perpetuation of traditional gender roles. Other feminist media theorist, such as Mulvey (1975), introduce key concepts, such as the “male gaze.” While Mulvey's study initially analysed the objectification of women in cinema for male viewers, this concept is now applicable across media studies in general. Tuchman's work on “symbolic annihilation” (Tuchman, 1978; 1978a), brought to the fore the underrepresentation of women in news.

Third Wave Feminism, which ran from the 1990s to the present expanded the discourse to include diversity and challenged essentialist approaches to gender. According to Bachman et al. (2018),

Cukanz (2016), Krijnen (2020) and Mendes and Carter (2008), during this period, one can observe the globalization of feminism, with scholars such as Chandra Mohanty critiquing the dominance of Western feminism's assumptions and advocating for transnational feminism, which takes into the diversity of women's experiences, including those in postcolonial contexts. Furthermore, while intersectionality was a known concept since the 1980s, during this period, the need for intersectional analysis in feminist media theory by scholars like Patricia Hill Collins, Bell Hooks, and Teresa de Lauretis became mainstream in feminist media theory.

With the rise of digitalization, feminist media scholarship has expanded its scope to include the study of gendered experiences in online spaces, the role of social media and online media in the representation of women, and cyberactivism from feminist media theorists like Diana Haraway. Contemporary issues now include algorithmic bias, online harassment and misogyny. Feminist media theorists also explore how digital media shape perceptions of gender, sexuality, and identity.

As Krijnen (2020) states, Feminist Media Theory and the entire field of Feminist Media Studies are increasingly explicit about the importance of international and multidisciplinary work seriously addressing media convergence and globalisation, delving into social psychology, psychoanalysis, cultural studies in relation to the various forms of media and how they contribute to the social construction and experiences of individuals in terms of their gender. Moreover, it provides insight into how systemic gender inequalities are perpetuated or challenged by online media narratives and how these narratives influence women's political participation and representation. It remains a dynamic field, adapting to technological advancements and global contexts.

### **3. Methodology**

The methodological approach to this meta-analysis is a content analytical tool inherent in quantitative and qualitative research studies that enables researchers to examine variables such as media representation of women leaders, audience engagement with online content about women in politics, and subsequent effects on women's political participation and success. This method also allows researchers to derive results from the study as well as outline findings and analysis, leading to a conclusion (Mikolajewicz & Komarova, 2019). This study took a qualitative approach to the meta-analysis.

While there has been extensive discussion on the ideal sample size for meta-analyses, as Vasileiou et al (2018) show, there is no set rule in stone, even for multi-year studies. Furthermore, as Ames et al. (2019) and Myung (2023) demonstrate, any sample size larger than two is deemed acceptable. Additionally, in qualitative research, it is not uncommon to sample data until saturation point is reached (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). The studies were selected based of the researcher's perception of the relevance of the research objectives with those of this study. While primary focus was given to papers that primarily focused on sub-Saharan countries, the selection criteria also included



papers whose scope might have been also included countries outside Sub-Saharan Africa in cross-national analyses. This study adopted a qualitative content analysis approach to highlight how women leaders are represented, and the effects that these might have on their participation in politics as found in the studies selected. While this study recognizes that it might have excluded some papers that were relevant to the study, as Ames et al. (2019) demonstrate, this does not necessarily translate to an adverse effect on the overall quality of the study. On this basis, a meta-analysis was eventually done using 20 purposively selected research papers and reports spanning 2009 to 2023, focused on the representation of women leaders in online news, the engagement of audiences on online news platforms, and their subsequent effects on the perception of women in politics, their political participation, and their success in 40 of the 48 sub-Saharan African countries.

#### **4. Results and Discussion**

##### **4.1 Online News Representations and Public Perception of Women in Political Leadership Roles**

The findings of this meta-analysis suggest that how online news media portray women in political leadership determines public perceptions of them in Sub-Saharan Africa. For instance, Saka, Amusan and Aluko (2017) demonstrate that the issue of women in politics has become part of the agenda in mainstream news media. The study, which adopted a bi-theoretical framework drawing from Liberal Feminist and Agenda-setting Theory perspectives, provided evidence that the question of women's involvement in political leadership had been successfully mainstreamed into news media. Consequently, news media concerns should now be focused on the quality of representation in terms of frequency and prominence, as well as the framing of women leaders in idea and practice. On this point about the quality of representation, O'Neill and Harcup (2009) state that online news media determine the frequency, nature, and context of how women in political positions are described across various online news platforms, and this contributes to the scope and type of visibility women leaders receive and whether it reinforces or challenges existing stereotypes. Building on this, studies, like Ette (2017) which examine the spatial representation of Nigerian women politicians demonstrate, through a content analysis of four prominent female politicians in national newspapers during the 2015 election cycle, that women were not only underrepresented in terms of political participation but marginalized in the way they were covered in news media. Consequently, although there has been a steady increase in women's participation in politics since 1999, they are virtually invisible in political news. This state of affairs serves to further entrench women's marginalisation and reinforce the belief that 'only men do politics'. Ette (2017) concluded that the relative absence of women in media spaces is emblematic of the public's perception of their political status.

This finding is reiterated by studies by Aladi and Okoro (2021), Ekeh (2018) and Van der Pas and Aldering (2020), which show that this ranges from the role of women in news production processes to

the frames (narratives) used in the reporting of women and the topics under which they are represented or reported (news value). There is evidence of gender disparity in the representation of women in the media concerning how they are represented within political news content (Ahmed, 2018; Aladi & Okoro, 2021; Bappayo & Kirfi, 2019; Chikaikpa, 2019; dRPC, 2023; Kassova, 2020; Oamen, 2021; Ojebuyi & Chukwunwike, 2018). Consequently, it could be argued that news media plays a role in building and sustaining the prevailing discourse and practice around the participation of women in political leadership.

Ross, Jansen and Bürger (2020), in the study titled “*The Media World versus the Real World of Women and Political Representation: Questioning Differences and Struggling for Answers*,” carry out a similar comparative interrogation of the relationship between women, political leadership and the news to explore some of the reasons why the representation of political women proves to be problematic. The study draws from Feminist Media Theory and Development Media Theory. In a cross-sectional analysis of secondary data from multiple sources, i.e. World Economic Forum, GMMP, Quality of Government Institute and the International Women's Media Foundation, covering the period 2010-2015, the study specifically looked to determine 1) the visibility of women politicians as subjects or sources in any news story across television, radio, and the press, and 2) the visibility of women in stories coded as politics and government across television, radio, and the press in 129 countries, including 40 of the countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. They found that the representation of women was generally low, a finding in keeping with most research on the topic. They also found that contrary to the strongly held idea that representation in the real world mirrors what is seen in the news, this was not necessarily the case. While there was a positive relationship between the increase of women in political leadership and their visibility in the news, this relationship was weak, with a 1 per cent increase in women's participation in the real world accounting for only 0.3 percentage points in their visibility in news media (Ross et al, 2020). Furthermore, the pattern was found in a majority of the countries that formed part of the study, with the gender of the journalists and editors being insignificant. A possible explanation they presented was that aside from the still low representation of female politicians as a group in politics, those who did end up in political offices occupied portfolios that did not make them newsworthy enough, compared to their male counterparts. Essentially, even with an increase of female journalists and editors in news media, stories about female politicians still fall short of the news values principle, which guides journalistic practice. Therefore, the quality of female political leadership, how much power they get to wield, beyond, and the number of women in such positions, become a key factor in the level of representation they have in the news media.

As a result, biased media representation can influence public perception by limiting the recognition of women's capabilities in leadership roles or discouraging women from aspiring to these positions due to anticipated media scrutiny. Henderson and Jeydel (2014) posited that the interactive nature of online media allows for broader discussions and can enable support networks and advocacy



for women in politics. Despite this prospect that comes with online news media, the study reiterated that the same platforms can also perpetuate negative perceptions through biased reporting or by becoming channels for gender-based harassment and trolling. Similarly, the online media environment in Sub-Saharan Africa presents both barriers and opportunities for women's political representation, as explained by Tufekci (2013). For example, in Niger, where internet penetration is lower compared to other countries, the influence of online media is gradually growing, while in Côte d'Ivoire, women politicians and activists use online platforms to share their messages, mobilise support, and challenge gender stereotypes, harassment, and intimidation (Kang, 2019; IDEA, 2021).

#### **4.2 Women's Political Engagement and Participation**

The findings of the meta-analysis show that the effects of online news media on women's political engagement and participation in sub-Saharan Africa are expanding due to the growing influence of digital platforms in shaping public discourse and political behaviour. Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2019) demonstrate that online news platforms contribute to strengthening the presence of women in politics, offering them a space to articulate their agendas, connect with constituents, and challenge stereotypes. Similarly, Jackson (2018) acknowledged that social media and online news sites provide alternative narratives to traditional media, potentially offering women more opportunities and portraying them positively to the public. Furthermore, online media provide platforms for women in politics to facilitate networking among women as well as organise, mobilise, and advocate for gender-inclusive policies and greater political participation (Tufekci, 2013). Besides, online news media provides a platform for women to engage a broader audience in discussions about women's political rights and participation, raising awareness and support (Henderson & Jeydel 2014). For example, Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal have witnessed a relatively positive impact of online media in promoting women's political engagement as a result of these countries' relatively high rate of internet penetration, which facilitated extensive engagement and discussion surrounding female political leaders and issues (Ette & Akpan-Obong, 2023; IDEA, 2022; Bob-Milliar & Bob-Milliar, 2014).

In contrast, critics point out the challenges and negative impacts associated with the advent of online news media. For instance, Krook and Sann (2016) highlight the negative effects of online media on women in politics, such as harassment and violence, which discourages their participation, especially in most Sub-Saharan countries, and how this negatively impacts their mental well-being. While their study does not provide specific instances of harassment and violence, it outlines the concept of violence against women in politics as a distinct category from general political violence and argues that these are targeted at women simply because they are women. Krook and Sann's study identifies five types of violence against women in politics: physical, psychological, sexual, economic, and semiotic<sup>2</sup>. Physical violence (the use of bodily force and coercion) and economic violence (denial or control of women's access to economic resources) are not necessarily within the scope of online news media when

it comes to women in politics. However, as Krook and Sann (2016) argue, psychological, semiotic and sexual forms of violence can be carried out through the use of language and other sign systems and are observable in online news content. Here, they speak of the use of misogynistic and sexist language, the sexualizing of women and the trivialization of their ambitions through stereotypes. As Krook and Sann (2016) state, these acts of violence violate not only women's political rights but also other laws. Ultimately, the authors emphasise that these forms of violence pose a serious challenge to democracy, human rights and gender equality.

Following on the previous point, it appears that despite the potential that online media has to bring about positive change, it can also reinforce negative stereotypes and biases against women in leadership positions (O'Neill & Harcup, 2009). Also, online news media provide unequal access, thereby creating a digital divide, which means not all women can benefit equally from online media, with those in rural or poorer areas often having less access (Graham, 2011). However, Stromquist (2015) concludes that online news media provides empowerment and personal agency for those with access, providing women with information and resources to engage politically.

A study by the Inter-parliamentary Union (IPU, 2016) titled *Sexism, Harassment and Violence against Women Parliamentarians* aimed to identify the prevalence of sexism, harassment, and violence against women parliamentarians and to understand the nature of these phenomena. Underpinned in Feminist Theory, the study was based on quantitative and qualitative data provided voluntarily by 55 women parliamentarians from 39 countries spread over five regions of the world: 18 in Africa, 15 in Europe, 10 in Asia-Pacific, 8 in the Americas, and 4 in Arab countries. The study used a self-assessment toolkit produced by the IPU and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to evaluate the experiences of women members of national parliaments and their parliaments as institutions. The findings of the study revealed that 27.3% of the participating women Members of Parliament (MPs) said that traditional media had shared highly contemptuous or sexually charged images or comments about them. The percentage rose to 41.8% when respondents were asked about photos or comments disseminated through social media (IPU, 2016). The study found that globally, women in politics, particularly women of non-white ethnicities and races, tended to experience overwhelming levels of abuse and gendered disinformation campaigns, which traditional and social media often fuel and perpetuate through reporting. This has the effect of discrediting, delegitimising, and silencing women in politics, with women often becoming discouraged and dissuaded from getting involved in politics owing to biased gendered media reporting, and general discriminating practices. The findings of this study raise questions about how other factors such as the policy of news media and social media organisations, regulatory bodies, and consumers of news contribute to the phenomena.

Haraldsson and Wängnerud (2019) in their study titled *The Effect of Media Sexism on Women's Political Ambition: Evidence from a Worldwide Study*, aimed to investigate the relationship between media sexism and the share of candidates for the lower chamber of national parliaments who are

women, underpinning their study in the Bystander Effect Theory. The researchers used data on media sexism from the Global Media Monitoring Project, which is the most reliable worldwide source for media coverage from a gender perspective. They analyse data on media sexism from the Global Media Monitoring Project, and data on share of female political candidates from the Inter-Parliamentary Union. They measured sexism as (1) the share of all news subjects that are women, (2) the share of all news subjects portrayed in the function of experts who are women, and (3) the share of women candidates for parliament. Their findings show that even after controlling for variables such as the number of women in parliament, the electoral system, gender quotas, level of human development, level of women's rights, freedom from corruption, and media access, there exists a significant negative relationship between media sexism and the number of women in parliament. In other words, the higher the level of sexism in news media coverage, the lower the number of female candidates. They hypothesised further that the media has a powerful influence on voters and gender differences in media coverage can have real electoral consequences. It can do so, not only by dissuading women from engaging actively in politics but also by discouraging political parties and political elites from selecting or backing women as candidates, as there would be concern about their chances of winning at the polls. The findings of the study raise questions about what could be observable in different political contexts, such as those with presidential or non-democratic systems of government.

In summary, the meta-analysis shows that the effect of online news media on women's political leadership in sub-Saharan Africa is on both the supply and demand sides. The first finding of this analysis shows that the representation of sub-Saharan African women in political leadership online news media negatively influences public perception of them by the public on a general level, thus reducing public support for women as political leaders. Secondly, another finding revealed that the degree of women's access to information through online media in the region will determine their level of political engagement and leadership roles. According to Henderson and Jeydel (2014), increased access to online media for information enables women to connect with higher political engagement, which can translate into more substantial support for female candidates. Still, the negative practices of online news media on women in politics in the Sub-Saharan region, in the form of online harassment, violence and gender bias, which is still prevalent among countries in the region, deter women from seeking political offices (Krook & Sann, 2016). A third finding shows regional variations within Sub-Saharan Africa, with some areas showing more positive effects of online media on women's political leadership than others, potentially due to differences in internet penetration, and cultural norms, particularly around gender roles in society.

## **5. Conclusion**

A meta-analysis of the effect of online news media on women in political leadership in sub-Saharan Africa has proved that the advent of social media across various online platforms provides alternative

channels for women to express their political opinions and challenge the existing structures. Also, this analysis establishes that online media has the potential to positively influence public perception and representation of sub-Saharan African women in politics by providing platforms for social engagement. Despite the challenges of limited access, online harassment, and entrenched gender norms continue to affect the extent and nature of this influence. Furthermore, online news media has the potential to enhance women's political engagement and participation, as reflected in countries like Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal. The persistent digital divide and access issues can limit these opportunities for many women, particularly in rural or disadvantaged areas in Sub-Saharan Africa. Overall, this meta-analysis demonstrates the effect of online news media on women's political leadership in Sub-Saharan Africa by proving how digital platforms influence public perception, political engagement, and the representation of women.

While there is a need to further conceptualize and study how online news and other digital platforms could be optimized to address the poor representation of women in politics, the study demonstrates a need for news media organisations and media regulators to explore and implement ways in which they can effectively mainstream gender considerations into the production, dissemination of news content via online news platforms, that is, social media and websites drawing on best practices around the world. One measure would be the encouragement of women to take up leadership roles in the news media, as is done in Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States, where at least 50% of the top editors in major online news outlets are women, according to Eddy et al., (2022). Eddy et al. (2022) also found that in Finland, half of the new top editors appointed in 2021 were women, whilst, in Kenya, a country in sub-Saharan Africa, 81% of online news users got their news from an online news media outlet that has a woman as the editor in 2021.

Another strategy that online news media organizations could address the poor representation of women in politics would be to aim for an equal representation of men and women in their news content. As shown by the Harvard Business Review (2019), The British Broadcast Corporation (BBC)'s 50:50 Project is a great example of this, where they aim to achieve 50:50 gender representation every month. Building on this point, another practical measure to address the issue would be a deliberate policy and practice of regularly featuring women's achievements in politics. According to the Harvard Business Review (2019), this would help challenge stereotypes, change perceptions and inspire more women to participate in politics. Finally, media regulators, news media and other bodies with an interest in promoting gender and politics can make use of data to track progress and identify areas of improvement. The Reuters Institute, for instance, analyses the gender breakdown of top editors in major online and offline news outlets. These strategies, if employed, could go a long way to addressing the poor representation of women in online news in the context of politics, while also helping to legitimise it offline.

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