



## Broadcast Media and Women Representation in Politics in Lesotho

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**Abstract:** The representation of women in Lesotho politics has always been an inferior one of being supporters of political parties while men thrived as leaders. In the recent years, women in Lesotho are highly active in politics but their numbers in legislative and other decision making bodies is relatively low. Traditionally, women have always been side-lined and excluded in the decision making processes and governance owing to patriarchal nature of Lesotho society. Moreover, customary laws such as the laws of Lerotholi continue to socialise women as minors in the society. The coverage of women news in the media in Lesotho remains negative as women are perpetually portrayed as victims. This paper focuses on examining media and women representation with a focus on Broadcast media (radio and television). The study used qualitative approach of collecting data through interviews with directors of civil society organisations, journalists, women in politics and media audience. It uses the Agenda setting theory to guide the work and to explain the phenomenon. The findings of the study revealed that although women are invited to participate on issues of development, democracy, human rights and empowerment in the broadcast programmes, the media rarely covers news about women in leadership making positive contributions to the society and provide reflections of negative past of women which may discourage and frustrate their efforts in engaging in politics. The study recommends that regular outreaches and awareness about eliminating gender stereotypes through media programmes may set a positive agenda for women in the political sphere.

**Keywords:** Political Representation, Media, Democracy, Women, Lesotho

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Women who have a high level of public responsibility have been questioned because of their gender and criticised for aspects that go beyond their political management. These elements have characterised a coverage with a predominantly negative tone that has, at the same time, contributed to the construction of an additional obstacle for women's access to politics on equal terms with men (Johnstonbaugh, 2018; Quevedo & Berrocal, 2018). Understanding the situation of media portrayal of women in politics in Lesotho is essential to appreciate their contributions in sustainable development as the media agenda setting function (McCombs and Shaw, 1972) prioritise candidates and issues thus influencing public opinion and politics.

Like other countries of the world that embrace gender equality, the constitution of Lesotho guarantees the right to equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex. The government of Lesotho generally respects the rights of all people and other civil liberties through its constitution. In addition, a report by The Ministry of Gender (2004) states that Lesotho is a signatory of numerous international laws that prohibit any form of discrimination and advocate for equal representation of women in civil and political rights. Molapo (2005) states that Lesotho government is a member of the United Nations and has signed most gender conventions that deal with the discrimination against women. Even though the country has enacted these laws, women are still not fully effective in decision-making processes of the country at the national level.

The underrepresentation of women in politics and in the media has negative implications for the achievement of democracy in Lesotho. Women are seen as subordinate citizens and homemakers

while men are perceived as leaders and heroes. In the recent years; there has been an improvement in the news of women unlike in the past where the news of women was related to soft development such as sanitation and maternal health. Women rarely featured in news of politics and economy while men were key players in politics, sports and others (Africa Media Barometer, 2018). The media landscape in Lesotho comprises varied and independent types of media ranging from private, community radio stations, one state owned radio station and television as well as independent newspapers. However, radio remains a popular medium of information (Africa Media Barometer, 2018).

Lesotho is a patriarchal society as women still face harsh realities such as gender discrimination, gender-based violence, HIV/AIDS coupled with poverty and other social injustices that remain a barrier to achieving gender equality and mature democracy. Despite being a patriarchal nation, Lesotho aspires to equal opportunities for and participation by women and men in development, education, economic resources, politics and decision-making (Gender and Development Policy, 2003). Molapo (2005) states that around the years of 1960, women were not allowed to vote in Lesotho and were deliberately left out because it was felt that politics and hard decisions were a sphere of men not women. However, later in the year 1965 after long debates, women were allowed to vote. Moreover, Khabele (1994) states that women became more vocal and active in political issues for the 1993 elections as there were 23 women candidates. Ntho et al. (2015) note that women's participation and representation makes them more audible to the masses. This paper is premised on the following question:

- What is the representation of women in politics in the Lesotho broadcast media?

### 1.1. Objective

- To examine the representation of women in politics in the broadcast media in Lesotho.

## 2. BROADCAST MEDIA

Media is widely recognised as the fourth pillar of democracy, alongside the legislature, executive and judiciary (Chibita, 2011). The media plays a crucial role in upholding democratic principles by providing a platform for information dissemination, public discourse and scrutiny of those in power. The media acts as a watchdog, holding governments accountable and promoting transparency and accountability (Chibita, 2011). Media coverage has the potential to shape public opinions, beliefs and attitudes of individuals and groups within a society (Lippman, 1922); hence, the power of the media and its impact on shaping public opinion should not be undermined and in the case of this study, media representation of women in politics.

Media refers to various channels and platforms through which information and content are produced, distributed and consumed by individuals and society (McQuail, 2010). It ranges in forms including print media, broadcast media and digital media; each with its own unique characteristics and reach (Gasher, 2013). The media plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion by influencing the information and narratives that are presented to the public (Entman, 1993). Ramakhula (2009) highlights that the media plays a fundamental role of informing and engaging the public through debates and in their programmes that increase participatory democracy. Broadcast media are media that are used for communicating, transmitting and broadcasting to the public or masses using a wide range of audio-visual materials as well as electronic or electro-magnetic mediums to share news, information, entertainment to the public. Different examples of broadcast media can be television news, videos and radio programs through satellite signals (Hitesh, 2023). Television is an essential form of media for promotion of democracy as it provides a platform of debates and acts (Curran, 1991). Abati (2016) highlights that radio is the most popular community media in most parts of the world because of its ability to transcend literacy barrier; and its accessibility to many community dwellers. Broadcasting media provides valuable information such as documentaries, speeches, interviews, advertisements, daily news, financial markets and others.

Hitesh (2023) defines radio as a form of audio-advertising that provides the public with pre-recorded content as it conducts various programmes and gives information based on people's interests. Additionally, television is the most advanced form of media as it provides the public with colourful visualised content with audio and motion signals. Odunola et al. (2015) states that radio is an effective instrument for getting messages to a larger number of people at the same time and is an instrument in

the area of enlightenment. Radio plays a very crucial role in enlightening the public about political affairs; radio plays the role of keeping women informed and keeps women informed about politics; it mobilises people through its various programmes thereby radio acts as a secondary mobilisation agent that facilitates the process by which citizens participate in collective decision making (Odunola et al., 2015). Radio helps to reach a wider audience especially in rural areas where there is low literacy rates among people, radio accommodates all people and helps in the transmittal of variety of languages which contributes to the enhancement of socio-economic and democratic development in empowering citizens to exercise their right to vote. Motjamela (2005) states that the inclusion of all people in democracy promotes a sense of belonging and creates interest on the part of audience. Radio plays a fundamental role of providing access to information to the marginalised societies by providing news and discussion programmes that empower women and reshape their beliefs and practices; this can potentially help in the transformation of societies (Heywood, 2020).

### 2.1. Democracy

Molomo (2006) defines democracy as the process of electing leaders in an open and transparent manner and holding them accountable. Cili (2015) argues that gender equality is necessary in every democratic society. Hytten (2017) definition address democracy as a way of social and political organisation involving rules, laws, prohibitions and rights enshrined in documents like the constitution and Bill of rights. Additionally, Dahl (2015) points out that at the heart of democracy involves a belief in the political equality of citizens; they control issues placed on the policy making agenda and inclusion of adults as citizens in all matters that affect them. According to him, democracies are built upon the collaborative interdependence of people in the society who identify shared interests; work together to solve problems and create ways of living together that brings out the best in everyone. Pettit (2004) asserts that democracy should be deliberative at all times and it should promote deliberation among citizens and authorities as to what does best for the society as whole and should illicit decision making.

Some scholars argue that democracy is a suitable form of government that can help reduce poverty and conflicts if the notion of good governance is practiced. Sgueo (2020) argues that global instability, economic inequality, escalating poverty rates are some of the factors that cause democracy to decline. Furthermore, there are contemporary political threats that cause democracy to decline such as coup d'états, climate change, welfare and security that further erode democracies.

Dahl (1971) in Dalton et al. (2007) identified eight criteria in defining democracy; the right to vote, the right to be elected, freedom of expression, freedom of association, alternative sources of information and institutions that depend on votes and other expressions of preference. Also, Schumpeter (1943) in Dalton et al. (2007), propagate that democracy is equated with electoral processes. Furthermore, citizens perceive democracy as free and fair elections, responsive government, multi-party competition and majority rule as the elements of democracy. According to Diamond (1999), democracy has core values that include, participation and rights of citizens. Democracy can be defined in terms of individual rights protected by a democratic government such as freedom of speech and religion which are essential for democracy (Dalton et al., 2007).

For democracy to be effective, there has to be relevant policies, an effective bureaucracy, an effective opposition, an independent judiciary, effective parliament that allows the free participation of the citizens, free media that disseminates information to the public about the progress of the government. Equality and democracy are linked. It becomes easier for countries to achieve gender equality when their policies accommodate all people in the society. Oni & Agbude (2011) argue that sustainable democracy is only feasible if both men and women participate in the governmental affairs for the development of nations.

According to Fox (2007), a government that is dominated by men and does not represent the rights of women in the society does not qualify to be called democratic. Equality is when people have the same opportunities, social status and rights and the core principle of democracy is that people should not be treated differently on the basis of any identity with which they identify or which is ascribed to them including race, sex, gender, identity, class, language, religion birth status, National origin, in summary all individuals have the right to equal treatment and non-discrimination in all forums including social equality, political equality, economic equality and civil equality. (Krainc & White, 2021). Equality is

a central tenet of a democratic society (Krainc & White, 2021 ). The concept of equality means that people as human beings are entitled to the same rights and opportunities to develop their skills and talents and to pursue their ambitions and goals. The idea behind equality is that all human beings are equal regardless of their gender, colour, race or nationality and that human beings deserve respect because of their common humanity. (National Council of Educational Research and training, 2023).

### 2.2. Women, Politics and Media Representation

Socio-economically, women have always been excluded from the decision making processes and treated as inferior citizens. Women were perceived only as wives and mothers who only perform domestic work of taking care of families . Genderlinks (2017) reports reveals that women have always been treated as secondary citizens who are treated according to gender stereotypes. The report reveals that women voices are almost completely absent in the news stories on topics such as human rights, sports, crime, economic and others (Genderlinks, 2017).

Women in Lesotho are still faced with various challenges especially the prevalence of HIV/AIDS which places women at more risk. Women still do not have an autonomy over their bodies while girls are subject to early and unwanted marriages. Moreover, food insecurity and poverty have worsened becoming drivers of HIV/AIDS that significantly impacts women (Matlho, 2016). Gender links (2017) report highlight that most women in media are portrayed as victims of violence while men are portrayed as leaders. Therefore, women continually feel marginalised in political spheres. There are no positive stories about women rights in community news. According to AfroBarometer (2021), in Lesotho, radio is still the most preferred source of media. Most women still rely on radio for news due to factors such as lack of a reading culture and lack of interest in the political issues. Women feel listening to radio is far more easier as they are able to juggle activities such as domestic work while listening to radio, on the one hand men prefer interactive programmes that require feedback (GenderLinks, 2017).

Mass media plays a very pertinent role as the watchdog of the society by disseminating information to the public. Livingstone (1994) states that the mass media plays a very crucial role in the political processes and freedom of expression as it is seen as essential for protecting the rights of individuals. Media is vital for the dissemination of comprehensive communication to the public. Ineju (2022) supports that communication is an important component in every society and no society can exist without communication.

Women are still a vulnerable and marginalised group when it comes to democratic processes of majority of countries of the world. In some societies, women are marginalised due to gender stereotypes that undermine their leadership. Empowering women to be leaders is necessary for the development of any country. Genderlinks (2017) report reveal that there is gender bias in the portrayal of gender in the media and that most likely women are represented in media as beauty contestants, health workers, home caretakers, victims and sex workers while men are portrayed as officials such military officers, scientist, sports personalities and professionals. As a result, this undermines women political participation. Alexander and Hanson (2001) in Omari (2008) supports the report of Genderlinks (2017) as they mentioned that the media often portrays women's inadequacy by reinforcing gender stereotypes through advertising and news at the expense of other positive attributes. Furthermore, Geveorgyan (2016) highlights that the depiction of women in the media is distorted in television programmes where women are often seen on adverts as passive individuals who are dependent on men for emotional and financial support

Tremblay (2007) argues that equality is central to normative theories and that women are equal citizens and therefore should share equal decision-making with men. Furthermore, the underrepresentation of women in politics can produce policies that do not suit the needs of women. According to Trabetsi (2023), the media is a very powerful tool that can influence the way society views women, if women are discriminated, it can discourage women from participating in politics and further discourage political parties from voting for women.

Mass Media is a very important tool used to spread information and contributes to the consolidation of democracy. Oyesemi (2011) asserts that the professionalism of media during elections can be used to promote free and fair elections as the media plays an indispensable role in the proper functioning of democracy by educating voters on how to exercise their democratic rights, providing a platform



for the political parties to communicate their message to the electorate and by allowing parties to debate with each other. Media plays a role in shaping the perspective of people, therefore, it should strive to report positive content to avoid causing harm and rage in people. Journalists should endeavour to be socially responsible for delivering the truth because journalists have a an impact in communities and countries (Iqbal & Khan, 2022).

The important feature of democracy is equality and inclusive participation of all people in democracy. Different scholars argue that societies that robustly include women in decision making processes are more likely to prosper while those that discriminate against women are likely to face instabilities and little socio-economic progression. According to a report by ODIHR, (2014) political parties need to operate in a more democratic manner in order to create a more equal field for both men and women. This means the legislation of political parties can either promote gender equality or discriminate against women to be elected as party candidates and other political rights. The United Nations recognises the importance of women participation in electoral processes of countries and the need to protect these rights. Furthermore, the United Nations affirms that women have a right to enjoy these rights on the same basis as men as these will also help promote democracy. For elections to be truly free and fair, women and men must have the same opportunities to participate in all aspects of elections (United Nations, 2011).

Due to the observable underrepresentation of women in parliament and other decision-making sectors, The United Nations Resolution on Women and Political Participation (United Nations General Assembly, 2011) urges states through the political parties to stop all barriers that discriminate against women by developing policies that are formulated from the perspective of gender equality. Kandawasvika-Nhundu (2021) states that in barriers of legal and civil matters women were treated like minors, a married woman cannot sue without her husband consent (Molapo, 2005).

The way media portrays women can be negative or positive. As a result, this determines the way women will be treated in the society. Rapitse et al. (2023) argue that in order to bring balance in the society, the media needs to report both men and women news in the same light as it can lead to the development and successes of businesses by dismantling gender stereotypes that affect women in Lesotho. Rapitse et al. (2023) note that media is a toll that can be harnessed to report about women issues in order to promote them; that is when the media reports about both men and women it becomes easier to achieve gender equality through dismantling the stereotypes around women.

Using media can help amplify women voices by making them more visible (Rapitse et al., 2023). When utilised correctly, media is a tool used to promote gender equality by amplifying the voices of women and closing the gender gap disparities in the societies as women are in a better position to speak about their needs. Women in politics are still faced with discrimination in the media spaces as they remain in the disadvantaged side when it comes to media coverage. Traditional and social media often perpetuate disinformation about women as women are discredited, delegitimised and silenced. Sexist media contributes to the underrepresentation of women in politics (Trabetsi, 2023). Media may also represent a distorted version of the society. In general, both men and women are represented in stereotypical manner as men are portrayed as active, adventurous, powerful, sexually aggressive and uninvolved in human relationships while women are portrayed as sex objects, passive and dependent on men, incompetent and devoting their time to take care of homes as well as caregivers (Wood, 1994). One of the root causes of perpetual sexism of women is that journalists are consciously social products of a patriarchal society. Therefore, they do not find the need to challenge the status quo by continuing to portray men and women unequally (Ramakoele, 2021). Ara (2019) highlights that media portrayal of women in stereotypical role affects decision-making processes as women may be excluded from the decision-making processes while men continue to enjoy high positions. Furthermore, traditional media tends to write about women's physical appearance than their intellectual capabilities and are often seen as sexual objects and second class citizens (Ara, 2019).

Media coverage depends on the stereotypes in the society. Gender stereotypes determine men as possessing agetic qualities such as being aggressive, dominant, ambitious, independent, decisive and self confident while women on the one hand are emotional, friendly, warm and nurturant. In summary, women are associated with private life while men are associated with public life and political life is associated with masculinity (Van der Pas, 2020). He continues that women are associated with private life, physical beauty, nurturing and supporting roles that reflect on the personal background, physical appearance and marital status and children.

The media in Lesotho covers the news of both men and women. There has been an improvement in the news of women unlike in the past where the news of women was related to soft development such as sanitation and maternal health. Women rarely featured in news of politics and economy while men are key players in politics, sports and others (Afromedia Barometer, 2018). Notwithstanding, Ramakhula, (2019) states that in Lesotho, some of the foundational barriers to women's political participation include gender roles. This means that despite the high literacy rates of women in Lesotho, women are still perceived as belonging to the domestic spheres and household works such as cooking, cleaning the house and others which may hinder their effective participation in decision making processes and as a result these gender roles create obstacles for women to enter in parliament. The promotion of gender stereotypes on women continues to have a damaging impact for women as it is seen as a norm. The media continues to treat women in politics as objects and reporters do not cover the news which makes it difficult for women to pass their messages across compared to men (International IDEA , 2023).The oppression of women is evident in the exclusion of women and minority groups and in social structures such as patriarchy .

If women receive a more positive media coverage, they are likely to be accepted as political representatives in the society. Van der Pas (2020) explains that media disadvantageous reporting of women can rob women chances of being electoral candidates and threaten their longevity in politics. Furthermore, it can affect their prospects in politics and contribute to the underrepresentation of women in politics in the future.

### 3. THEORETICAL REVIEW

The agenda setting theory was used to understand and explain media representation of women in politics in Lesotho. It was first proposed in 1972 by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw who stated that the theory has two core assumptions. The theory states that the mainstream media sets the agenda of public discourse, it does so not so much by telling people what to think but rather what to think about.

The two core assumptions of the theory:

- Media controls reality – the mainstream media does not report reality but it only acts as a filter allowing some aspects of reality to reach their audience while blocking others.
- Media gives topics importance- the more the media reports on a certain issue, the more the public will perceive the topic that is being reported is important.

Oyesemi (2011) states that the agenda setting theory focuses on the cognitive, indirect effects of media and it is a theory that has led to mass communications researchers to study how media coverage affects an issue's salience. Additionally, Jones (2017) states that agenda setting refers to the ability of mass media sources to determine the most salient topics, therefore, they set the agendas for audiences and become influential in telling them what to think about them.

Mass media has the power to inform the public about certain issues that are considered important and the audience not only understands the news issues but also how important the issue is, as the mass media often reports on the issue. In summary, the mass media has the power to emphasize certain topics they consider important to the public (Agenda Setting). Based on the agenda setting theory, there are 3 agenda setting processes, namely media agenda, the public agenda and the policy agenda (Rudiman et al., 2020).

When the agenda setting theory is applied to the study of women political participation and media, it is observed that the media plays a vital role in agenda setting and how the public perceives women. If the media advances stereotypes across the society, it is most likely that the society will perceive women negatively; the media becomes the agenda setter. The amount of coverage devoted to an issue by the media ends up being an issue of importance on the public agenda (Kassed & Mustafa, 2017 ). This theory assumes the media is a powerful tool that helps shape the view of the society as it has a significant role in shaping and transforming gender roles in the society (Morna, 2022). The media has a big influence on the audience by stories they publish and their prominence in the public sphere. Therefore, the media is responsible for newstories published to the audience.

#### 4. MATERIAL AND METHODS

The qualitative research design was used to assess the role the broadcast media plays in the representation of women in politics in Lesotho. Primary data was collected from participants using semi-structured interviews. Tegan (2022) describes semi-structured interviews as a blend of structured and unstructured types of interviews that are open ended and allow flexibility as there is an option to ask additional questions. Face-to-face and telephone interviews were used to collect data from managing directors of civil society organisations, journalists, women in politics and audience of radio and television. All respondents were selected using the purposive sampling technique based on their knowledge and expertise in the field (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). Data was collected from October 2023 to November 2023 in Maseru. Data was recorded using field notes and recorder and analysed using manual thematic analysis which according to Braun and Clarke (2006) is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. This method allowed the researcher to appropriately scrutinise the participants' point of view (Creswell, 1994).

#### 5. RESULTS

##### 5.1. What is the Representation of Women in Politics in the Lesotho Broadcast Media?

Participants were asked about their views on the representation of women in politics in broadcast media. The interviewees were from the civil society, media, women politicians and audience. Three respondents from civil society P11, P15 and P16 mentioned that women feel intimidated by men in politics and that the media efforts in representing women are negative. Their view is that the media does not empower women and always writes negative stories about women. Most participants agree that the broadcast media in Lesotho which is both television and radio does empower women in the political participation of sustainable democracy. Eight participants who are journalist mentioned that women are positively represented in the media. Findings revealed that women were represented either in a balanced manner (both positive and negative based on their contributions in politics), negatively or positively.

##### 5.1.1. Balanced Representation

Findings revealed that the broadcast media representation of women in politics is a reflection of their contributions in the political sphere:

Participant 2, a journalist, mentioned that:

*“The media is engaged in government issues especially those pioneered by women. The media broadcasts all types of news, women who do well get positive remarks from the public but women who do not serve the interests of the public will get negative remarks. A good example is when the first Deputy Prime Minister of Lesotho as a woman was sworn in parliament. The broadcast media covered the news...” (Participant 2, 30 October, 2023)*

Also, participant 8, a journalist, shared that:

*“Our medium addresses current affairs not gender issues, our mandate is to cover all news of men and women equally without prejudice. We invite both men and women to our programmes to talk about issues that affect them.” (Participant 8, 24 October 2023).*

Participant 7 from Lesotho Television shared that:

*“We do cover news about women in politics on the television platform. However, we do not reach all women as sometimes we face challenges that constraint us to cover news about both men and women. One of the challenges is that inadequate transport especially in the rural areas may limit us from covering the news. Some of the network transmitters are sometimes vandalized therefore content coverage is limited” (participant 7, 26 November 2023).*

Participant 4 reported that:

*“We do not have strategies that bridge a gap between men and women. However, our programmes allow the participation of both men and women in the media. We give platforms to both men and women on issues of politics of sustainable democracy. Men and women participate equally as men” (Participant 4, 25 October 2023).*

### 5.1.2. Negative Representation

According to the findings, all participants interviewed from the civil society mentioned that the representation of women in the media is biased and negative and that women efforts are not well represented compare to men efforts. One of the interviewees from the civil society described this by saying:

*“The media in Lesotho is not promoting nor contributing to the women efforts in politics in Lesotho. Women are degraded, they feel belittled, they do not feel respected, it does not contribute to sustainable democracy at all, they only cover a woman in politics if there are negative scandal, gossips, and disagreements. We rarely notice media covering news about women in leadership doing positive contributions to the society. As a result, this contributes to women low confidence levels. Media highly popularizes men in media.” (Interview with participant 11, 30 October 2023).*

Another Participant from a different civil society stated:

*“Information about women empowerment in politics of sustainable democracy is imparted through radio and television as most women listen to radio. Radio accommodates people who are both literate and illiterate equally as it reaches many places within a short time. However, the media still portrays women negatively when reporting their news” (Interview with Participant 15, November 2023).*

Participant 1 further supported the views of participant 11 about the negative representation of women in the media:

*“Journalists are only concerned with selling stories to the public while damaging women image. Women only make headlines in news and current affairs when they are victims of violence, when there are negative stories; such news where women are accused of crime. Most of the times, where women are doing positive community works, their stories hardly make headlines.” (Participant 1, November 2023).*

All participants from the audience agreed that the media negatively broadcasts women in politics. Some of the participants mentioned that most times, media coverage about women focuses on issues about: crime, abuse, as victims of HIV/AIDS as well as climate change. They also mentioned that they rarely come across news where women are leaders who are doing positive developments especially on television or radio.

*“I usually come across the news of women as victims of gender based violence, HIV/AIDS and poverty. Yes, there are news about positive development on women but mostly men are leaders and few women make headlines as leaders in news” (Participant 24, November 2023).*

Three participants who are women in politics mentioned that the media only covers news about women when there are disagreements and squabbles as well as gender based violence while two of them agreed that the media covers positive content on women in media. Participant 20 mentioned:

*“I have observed that the media usually covers news of women in a negative light. If a woman in politics has committed something wrong in the past, the media always uses her previous past stories against her” (Participant 20, October, 2023).*

### 5.1.3. Positive Representation

All participants who are journalists from various media houses agreed that media have programmes that give women platforms to participate in politics of sustainable democracy. Participant 8 from Lesotho National Broadcasting Services stated:

*“There are television programmes where women are invited to participate on issues of development, democracy, human rights and empowerment” (Interview with Participant 8, November 2023).*

Participant 5 who is a journalist stated that:

*“Women listen to radio and are always willing to participate in current affairs without fear or favour. Women are invited for programmes to analyse current affairs and are always available for debates and news. Women do participate on issues of economy because mostly, they are affected by it. For example, women do participate on socio-economic issues such wages, unemployment, climate change, agriculture as all of these issues affect them” (Interview with Participant 5, October 2023).*



### 6. DISCUSSION

This paper seeks to understand the broadcast media representation of women in politics in Lesotho. Based on findings, a balanced, negative as well as positive representation of women in politics exist in Lesotho's broadcast media. Findings and especially from journalists reveal an equal coverage of men and women without prejudice in Lesotho broadcast media as well as a balanced representation of women in politics based on their positive as well as negative contributions in the political sphere. Also, findings reveal that both women and men are given equal platforms and opportunities to participate on programmes on democracy. Journalists agreed that men and women are invited as guests to television and radio programmes. This finding is supported by report by African media Barometer (2018) states that the media in Lesotho fairly represents the voices of men and women well. The African Media Barometer (2018) report also highlights that majority of women stories are often related to soft issues such as reproductive health as a result women rarely feature in politics and the economy. Women are portrayed as victims of gender based violence, poverty and others while men are portrayed as heroes and leaders as presented in the responses of civil society and audience. Findings of civil society organisations and audience had similar responses that women are represented through gender stereotypes in the media, as victims of crime, abuse, HIV/AIDS and reports of women in politics are degrading and often feature their past failures. Genderlinks (2017), Ramakoela (2019), Van der Pas (2020), Alexander and Hanson (2001) in Omari (2008), Geveorgyan,(2016), Ara (2019) also support the findings.

Based on findings, participants from civil society mentioned that the representation of women in broadcast media is negative. Journalists interviewed contradicted the responses from other participants, as journalists highlighted that women in politics are positively represented in the media as they are invited to programmes, they participate in broadcast programmes as well as they present their perspective on issues of development, democracy, human rights and empowerment. This finding is supported by the Afromedia Barometer (2018) report that reveals that there has been an improvement in news about women. Rapiitse et al. (2023) emphasize that using media can help amplify women voices by making them more visible. Trabetsi (2023) note that the media is a very powerful tool that can influence the way society views women, if women are discriminated, it can discourage women from participating in politics and further discourage political parties from voting for women.

### 7. CONCLUSION

The representation of women and especially women in politics in the media have direct implications on how they are perceived by the society. This study concludes that broadcast media in Lesotho plays a minimal role in promoting the political participation of women in Lesotho especially through their negative and stereotypical portrayal of women in the media as women are prime on headlines on social issues such as HIV/AIDS, gender based violence, poverty and rape. The media also provide reflections of negative past of women which may discourage and frustrate their efforts in engaging in politics.

Radio is supposed to be maximally participatory and should promote democracy through its programmes. Radio and television should allow the audience to express their views without fear and intimidation. However, based on findings, there are still persisting gender inequalities that continue to marginalise women in broadcast media in Lesotho. The study also acknowledges the views of participants, mostly the journalists that radio and television play a pivotal role in promoting women political participation in Lesotho as they are invited and participate in programmes where they provide their perspectives on issues on democracy.

Need exist for media organisations to strengthen journalists on gender sensitive reporting and ethics. The broadcast media should empower women through their programmes to serve as guest in order to represent their voice in democratic issues as well as showcase women efforts in developments by engaging and collaborating with other sectors like NGO's and other civil society organisations that work with women directly. Empowerment through programmes set agenda on the role of women in politics and increases visibility of women as well as encourages them to join in the process of enhancing democracy. Regular outreaches and awareness's about eliminating gender stereotypes through media programmes may set a positive agenda for women in the political sphere.

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