

Women Voices in Inter-Party Debates during the 2021 Ethiopian General Elections

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Abstract

In Ethiopia, multiparty elections are being organised every five years. For the 2021 general election, 47 parties were registered and more than 9,300 candidates ran for seats, of which, 1,982 were women candidates. This study explored women candidates' participation in election debates during the 2021 Ethiopian general elections. Using qualitative approach and content analysis technique, 35 television debates streamed in six stations were watched and analysed. Moreover, media legal documents and election reports are reviewed in gender lens. The findings revealed that the Ethiopia mainstream media cover men and women politicians differently during election campaign. The frequency of parties' appearance in television debates and their gender representation are found to vary depending on the issues discussed and the media style of coverage. Female politicians were primarily being featured under the theme of gender, health, and education debates. Moreover, women candidates' role in the election debates was limited in introducing and summarising their party policies while their men counterparts took the modest air time to present the details of the policy alternatives and to criticise the existing policies.

Keywords: women candidates, election debates, Ethiopia, In-equal representation, Media

Introduction

The 2021 Ethiopia election was held, between June and September 2021, under extremely difficult circumstances. Ethiopia was facing a multitude of challenges from within and outside, threatening its very existence. The Covid-19 pandemic forced to postpone the country's general election for a year. Inter-communal conflicts and armed clashes made it impossible to hold elections in various parts of the country. Relations between the federal government and the Tigray People Liberation Front (TPLF) deteriorated into a full-scale armed conflict after November 2020. The conflict caused a devastating humanitarian crisis in the country. Some opposition parties would boycott the elections claiming that there was not a level playing field on which to compete (Ayele, 2022).

Even under normal circumstances, elections in Ethiopia have historically faced numerous challenges due to a mix of political, social, logistical, and security-related factors. Ethiopia's federal system, based on ethnic lines, has led to heightened ethnic nationalism and rivalries, complicating political consensus. Armed conflicts in regions create unsafe conditions for voters and election officials. Ethiopia's challenging geography and underdeveloped infrastructure make it difficult to distribute election materials and ensure voting access in remote regions. Poor infrastructure, lack of resources, and security concerns has often caused postponements or cancellations in certain areas. There are concerns about the impartiality of the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) have been raised by opposition groups and civil society organisations.

Disputes over electoral frameworks and their implementation can lead to disagreements and lack of clarity in processes. The government has been accused of restricting access to information, including shutting down the internet, which hampers voters' ability to make informed decisions. Allegations of vote rigging, intimidation, and ballot tampering undermine public trust (the International Republican Institute and National Democratic Institute report (Kidanie and Hailu, 2024; NRI-NDI, 2021). Women and marginalised groups often face significant barriers to participating as voters and candidates. State and private media are often seen as biased towards specific parties, ethnic groups, or gender. Despite increased support of women's equal participation in development, women records poor participation in politics and decision making positions (Anifowose, 2004; Waylen, 2017).

Van der Pasand Aldering (2020) stated that gender bias regarding the quantity and kind of media attention politicians obtain is a significant issue, given that contemporary politics is heavily influenced by media and voters depend almost entirely on the media as their source of political knowledge. Negative reporting from the media can damage the electoral prospects of female candidates and jeopardise the political careers of incumbent women politicians. In addition to impacting the career opportunities for women in politics and thus directly contributing to their underrepresentation in this field. The portrayals of male and female politicians in the media are likely to reinforce the perception that politics. This, consequently, can diminish the political aspirations of young women and deter political elites from choosing women, resulting in ongoing underrepresentation of women in the future.

There is insufficient study on gender, media and elections focused on Ethiopia. Most of the researchers conducted so far are on the portrayal of women in Ethiopian print media, movies, advertising (Gebremichael, 2008; Jemaneh, 2014; Gebreselassie, 2006; Tiruneh and Ladsaria, 2019; Zeleke, 2004). When election periods are accompanied by a serious set of obstacles, as occurred during the 2021 Ethiopia election, it ignites an interest to examine how media platform entertained women candidates during the election campaign. The portrayal of women in Media in general and during election camping in particular is an important area to study because of the unequal representation that women receive.

Research questions that guided the study on which this paper is based were:

- What is the policy focus of the 2021 Ethiopia election debates?
- How many parties and women candidates are participated in the election debates?
- How is the gender proportion of the media debate participants and debate moderators?
- What are the contents covered during the election debates?
- What roles played by women candidates in the debate sessions?

A qualitative research approach and content analysis was chosen as a method of inquiry for this study. Thirty-Five debates that were streamed on television, from 19th April to 14th June 2021, were watched and analysed. Debates streamed in Televisions are chosen for analysis hence it is the dominant sources of information during election campaigns in Ethiopia. In countries with high illiteracy rates, radio and television still play important role in promoting women's political participation (Olivola and Todourov, 2010). The selected 35 debates were analysed based on different content categories such as: the policy focus of the debate; the number of parties participating in the debate; the gender proportion of the debate participants and debate facilitators; the content coverage of the debates and the role of the female candidates in the debate sessions.

This paper is organised into the following sections. First, historical context of women representation in Ethiopia politics is presented. Second, media portray of women politicians during election campaign is discussed followed by theoretical foundations of female political candidates and media coverage. Thirdly, Ethiopian election, Media laws, and gender representation are presented followed by the nature of political parties in the 2021 Ethiopian general election. Then, policy issues for the 2021 Ethiopian general election debates are explained followed by role of women representatives in the debates, and challenges of women related to media use for campaigning. Finally, conclusions and way forwards are discussed.

The Media Context in Ethiopia

According to the Ethiopian Media Authority (2022), in Ethiopia there are 20 public media, 38 commercial broadcasters, 56 community broadcasters and 3 subscription media that have started transmission and are ready to transmit. Therefore, there are a highly increasing number of channels as well as media advancements in Ethiopia. For the 2021 general election campaign, free air time distribution was made for 23 Television Stations, 21 Radio Broadcasting Corporations, and five Newspapers. For this study, a total of 35 television debates streamed in six televisions are reviewed (web links of the debates are included at the end of the paper). The debates are streamed by five privately owned Televisions: AHADU, ASHAM TV, Ethiopian Satellite Television and Radio (ESAT tv), Fana Broad Casting TV (FBC), and WALTA TV; and one state owned medium-Ethiopian Broad Casting (EBC) Television. In Ethiopia, media via Television and Radio stations has a history of being controlled by state rule. Since its establishment in 1962, Ethiopia Television's [ETV] operations and content has been regulated by government. In 2014, the channel changed its name from ETV to Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC). Fana Broad Casting TV[FBC] is a private shareholder television owned by the four coalitions of the former ruling party called the EPRDF, now Prosperity Party. Ethiopian Satellite [ESAT] television is founded and powered by collective opponents of the then EPRDF regime, mainly the Diaspora community. WALTA TV is an Ethiopian television network was launched on 2017 and is owned and operated by Walta Media and Communication Corporate S.C. Ethiopian Satellite Television and Radio (ESAT tv) was established in 2010 by a group of exiled journalists. ASHAM and AHADU are commercial televisions owned by investors with their own new style and formats with explicit content. These televisions were purposively selected as they had streamed at least five debates in election out of the eight policy agendas approved by the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE).

Historical Context of Women Representation in Ethiopia Politics

In Ethiopia, since the monarchical period, the political and decision-making role of women at the higher post has been impressive (Kebede, 2020). There were many queens and empresses during the monarchical feudal system. During the Italian occupation (1935-1941), women fought Italy with patriotism. Ethiopian women's role began to expand into public space, during and in the aftermaths of the Italian invasion, as some women formed an association in 1933 and started providing training on treating war victims (Eresso, 2021). Women's right to vote was granted in 1955 and the first woman joined the Ethiopian parliament in 1957.

In the 1960s and 70s, the legacy of women's active political participation has continued during the famous Students' Movement, in the Workers Party of Ethiopia, Women's Associations, and as a combatant in different liberation fronts. Ethiopia entered the era of party politics at the eve of the revolutionary upheaval of 1974. After 1991, prominent women politicians, in favour or against the government, have come to the political arena (Ethiopia Today, 2019). Elections have been restarted to be organised every five years since 1995, when nominal multiparty elections

were introduced. From 1991 to 2021 the share of women in parliament grew from two per cent to 38.8 per cent. The first woman speaker to the House of People Representative was elected in 1995 (Hailu, 2017; Richards, 2020). When Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took power in 2018, he appointed women to half the cabinet positions. Women have been appointed in top ministerial positions including as President of the country, Chief of Justice, Chair of the National Election board (Africa News.Com, 2018; Breuning and Okundaye, 2021). Despite the progress Ethiopia has achieved in increasing women political participation, women are still underrepresented in federal and regional parliaments and decision making positions (Hailu, 2017; Bekana, 2020).

Media Portray of Women Politicians during Election Campaign

One of the contributing factors for the low participation of Ethiopian women in politics could be the media representation of women politicians in general and women's candidate performance during the period of election campaign. The first-ever televised political debate was between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy in 1960, which forever changed the nature of political campaigns (Mehltretter Drury and Herbeck, 2016). Since then, the media have an essential role as a primary source of information for voters about politics and elections.

Elections are a period of intense media scrutiny and voters often will rely on the news to forge their opinion and vote (Llanos and Nina, 2011; Macharia, 2020). Campaigning always precedes elections and there is always a keen interest in politics and representatives of political movements during election times. Politicians with higher media coverage are more visible to voters. The amount and type of campaign coverage can influence voters' perceptions of politicians (Lühiste and Banducci, 2016).

According to Macharia (2020), women only make 24 per cent of the persons read, seen or viewed in the news until 2015. Bystrom (2004) studied nearly 600 articles, and found 6 per cent of newspaper articles mentioning female candidate appearance, sex, and marital status, while only one per cent mentioned that of male candidates. Conroy, Oliver, Breckenridge-Jackson, & Heldman (2015) found that of 67 openly sexist remarks they noted in newspaper articles, 94 per cent were directed at female candidates. Women candidates may also receive coverage focusing more on their personal qualities, their responsibilities as wives and mothers, or their opinions about "female issues" than on their political positions.

Unfair media coverage can hurt the electoral chances of women candidates and threaten the political longevity of sitting women politicians (Atkeson and Krebs, 2008). According to Van der Pas and Aaldering (2020, p. 115), media images of men and women politicians affect the career prospects of women in politics and contribute to underrepresentation of women in politics by strengthening the association between politics and the masculine realm. This, in turn, can depress political ambitions of young women and discourage political elites from selecting women, leading to continued underrepresentation of women in the future.

Gender bias in the amount and type of media coverage towards politicians is an important topic for debate since present-day politics strongly fall under media influence. Voters heavily rely on the media as their source of political information. In Ethiopia, we have only limited insight into the dynamics of media coverage during election campaign in general and how women politicians are treated in particular. This study thus explores how women politicians were participating in the media campaigns during the 2021 general election. This study therefore reviewed gender perspective of election debate; examined media legal documents and their gender sensitiveness during elections; analysed the policy focuses of the 2021 Ethiopian election debates; the number

of parties and their gender proportion of participation in the debates; the content coverage of the debates, and the role of the women candidates in the debates.

Theoretical Foundations of Female Political Candidates and Media Coverage

There are contradictory findings regarding gender and the visibility of politicians (Brooks, 2013; Wagner, Trimble, Sampert, & Gerrits, 2017). There are scholars who argue women politicians receive more attention to their appearance and personal life, more negative viability coverage, and, to some extent, stereotypical issue and trait coverage (Van der Pas and Aaldering, 2020). Others argue women were previously disadvantaged but are now appearing on an equal footing with men (Fernandez-Garcia, 2016; Ward, 2016). There are authors who argue that women politicians receive less media attention than their male counterparts (Humprecht and Esser, 2017; Laverly, 2013; Verge and Pastor, 2018).

Overall, there are roughly four views regarding differences between male and female politicians in campaign coverage: the volume of coverage or visibility, politicians' issues, politicians' traits, and politicians' viability (Atkeson & Krebs, 2008). To the 'glass ceiling' analogy, women's underrepresentation in political news coverage is characterised as 'paper ceiling' (Shor, Van De Rijt, Miltsov, Kulkarni, and Skiena, 2015, p. 964). Agenda-setting theory argues that the volume of media attention influences voters' perceptions of politicians. The lack of press attention is a 'potential roadblock for women candidates because citizens are unlikely to vote for candidates with whom they are unfamiliar' (Kahn, 1994, p. 171).

Arguments also lead to different views as to why media pay different amounts of attention to men and women politicians: the news value of rarity; networks; and social attitudes. First, news values are the criteria journalists use to determine what to cover. Second, established networks could be a mechanism that drives gender differences in Media's visibility (Hooghe, Jacobs, & Claes, 2015; Vos, 2013). Political journalism is a majority-male profession and journalists may prefer for same-gender contacts, resulting in men politicians being more visible in the Media (Aalberg and Strömbäck, 2011). Third, male politicians could receive more media attention as a result of societal stereotypes. In general, women are stereotypically associated with private life and men with public life (O'Neill, Savigny, & Cann, 2016). Media Bias Theory argues that the press "plays an integral role in the campaign by framing, shaping, ignoring or presenting the candidates to the public" (Falk, 2010, p.2). If the media frame stories on male and female candidates differently, the electorate may internalise the bias inherent in these messages (Lavery, 2013).

In general, studies so far have stressed how important appearing in the media is for political actors. The higher visibility and viability of a party and candidate leads to increases in vote intentions for that party/candidate (Van der Meer, et al., 2020). Unbalanced and unfair media coverage of gender during elections is expected to impact the public's understanding and influence gender balance in the result of electoral competitions. This study, therefore, considers the two aspects: the visibility of female politicians in campaign coverage and the issues in relation to which the media features them.

Ethiopian Election, Media Laws, and Gender Representation

In Ethiopia, accredited media representatives only are allowed to report the election events. The media are selected based on the Code of Conduct for the Mass Media and Journalists on the Manner of Reporting about Elections Regulation Number 6/2010. To receive accreditation, journalists are required to sign and abide by a code of conduct that binds them to the principle

of fair, balanced and unbiased reporting. Upon receiving a certificate of candidacy from NEBE, political parties and individual candidates are given the right to conduct election campaigns by sending written notification to their respective administrations or municipalities. However, campaigning is prohibited at any time before the start of the official campaign period and during the four days leading up to the election.

For the 2021 general election, pre-recorded debates were aired on various television stations and radio covering various issues, including the federal system, the Constitution, and economic and social matters. In the past, there was only a single television station, the government-owned Ethiopian Television, and the ruling party had enjoyed unrestricted access to it while opposition parties could only use time allocated to them by the Broadcasting Authority. Things have changed in this respect since there are now more than a dozen television stations, either privately owned or operated by state governments.

According to NRI-NDI (2021), for the 2021 election campaign and political debates, 1,414 hours of free airtime to the 46 parties and 143 individual candidates in 57 state-run and commercial media, in accordance with a formula established by law. According to the Media Proclamation No. 1238/2021, the allocation of free airtime takes four factors into consideration: the number of seats political parties have in the HoPR and regional councils; the number of candidates/political parties present for the election; the number of women and PWD candidates standing; and equal allotment of airtime for all participating political parties. To make a fair distribution, 25% of the total air time was distributed to all parties, five per cent consideration for parties which have seat on regional and national council, 40per cent of the air time was distributed based on the parties' number of candidates for the election, 20per cent of the air time was distributed based on the number of female representatives in the parties, and 10per cent of the air time was allocated based on the number of persons with disability representatives in the party (FBC, 2021; NEBE, 2021).

The measures taken by NEBE to regulate the air time distribution and fair utilisation for the sixth general election campaign could be taken as one of the development in the history of Ethiopian elections. However, evidence elsewhere shows that even when airtime is carefully regulated, women may face systematic and informal discrimination manifested in their inability to get on the air at all (Gilardi and Wüest, 2017). Though election laws and media laws create a framework for the role of the media in elections, in practice, media regulations may indirectly disadvantage women (O'Neill, Savigny, & Cann, 2016; Van der Pas and Aaldering, 2020). To tackle this challenge, some countries even provide extra airtime as an incentive for political parties to nominate and support women candidates (UNDP, 2018). However, while balancing the air time distribution and even allocating extra air time for women participants is an appreciative move, the quality of coverage is still more important (Braden, 2014). Below, we present an analysis to see how women were substantively represented in the Ethiopian election debates in using the 20per cent of the air time which as distributed to political parties based on the number of female representatives they have.

The Nature of Political Parties in the 2021 Ethiopian General Election

From 47 parties registered to run for seats in the national and regional councils, only 11 parties appeared in political debates that were streamed in six televisions stations: AHADU, ASHAM, EBC, ESAT, FBC, and WALTA televisions. Each of these television stations has streamed five to eight political debates. The frequency of parties' appearance in the debates varies widely between the national and regional parties and within the national parties as well. From the national parties, the ruling party, Prosperity Party [PP], claims to adopt combination ideology of Ethiopian

Table 1. Summary of Television Debates held for the 2021 Ethiopia General Election Source: Researcher analysis of debates streamed in six Televisions: AHADU, ASHAM TV, ESAT tv, FBC, WALTA TV; and EBC from 19th April to 14th June 2021 (Details available on p 14).

| Issues for Public Debate | Television Streams | Gender Proportion in the Debates | Parties participated in the Set of Debates | Female debate participants at Minister position |
|---|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|--|--|
| Rule of law and democratic institutions, | AHADU, EBC, ESAT, FBC, WALTA, ASHAM | 23 males, 3 Females | National Parties All Ethiopian Unity Party [AEUP], | Dr. Hirut Kassaw, Minister in Charge of Culture and Tourism from property Party |
| Constitution, Federalism, And Diversity Language, Culture and Tourism | EBC, ESAT, FBC, WALTA | 33 Males, 1 Female | Balderas Party, ENAT party, Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice Party [ECSJP], | Dr. Ergego Tesfaye, Minister in charge of Ethiopian Labour and Social Protection Affairs |
| External Relations and National Security | EBC, FBC, WALTA | 15 Males, 2 Females | Ethiopian National Unity Party [ENUP], | Dr. Liya Kebede, Minister in Charge of Health |
| Industry, development and investment | EBC, ESAT, WALTA | 13 Males, 1 Female | Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party[EPRP], Ethiopian Social Democratic Party [ESDP], | Dr. Fitsum Assefa, Minister in charge of Planning and Development Commission |
| Urbanization and infrastructure development | FBC, WALTA | 4 Males, 2 Females | Freedom and Equality Party [FEP], Hibir Ethiopia Democratic Party [HEDP], New Generation Party[NGP], and Prosperity Party [PP]. | |
| Agriculture, food security, and rural development | AHADU, EBC, ESAT, FBC, and WALTA | 22 Males, 3Female | Regional Parties | |
| Health, education, economic policies | AHADU, EBC,ESAT, FBC, WALTA, | 34 Males, 6 Females | Afar People Party [APP], National Movement of Amhara party [NMAP], | |
| Women and Youth policy | ASHAM, EBC, ESAT, FBC, WALTA | 11 Males, 13 Females | Benshanguel People Liberation Front [BPLF], Boro Democratic Party [BDP], | |
| Disability and inclusion in action, and human rights violations | ASHAM, AHADU, ESAT, and FBC | 7 Males, 1 Female | Kucha People Democratic Front [KPDPF], Oromo People Liberation Front [OPLF], Raya Rayuma Democratic Party [RRDP], and Wolayta People Democratic Front [WPDF] | |

nationalism, Liberalism, and Federalism, whereas the Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice Party [ECSJP], claims to adopt a mix of Ethiopian nationalism and Liberalism ideology.

Prosperity party has appeared in all the eight debates which were streamed in the three mainstream media: EBC, FBC, and WALTA television stations. Other parties such as All Ethiopian Unity Party [AEUP], Balderas Party, ENAT party, Ethiopian National Unity Party [ENUP], Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party [EPRP], Ethiopian Social Democratic Party [ESDP], Freedom and Equality Party [FEP], Hibir Ethiopia Democratic Party [HEDP], and New Generation Party [NGP] have been participating in the debates with different level of engagement. These parties predominantly align with the ideologies of social democracy and ethnic federalism.

Policy Issues for the 2021 Ethiopian General Election Debates

The political parties running for the 6th Ethiopian election have agreed to hold a debate in eight major policy areas. A debate on "Rule of law and democratic institutions in Ethiopia" was streamed in five television stations (AHADU, 2021; EBC, 2021; ESAT, 2021; FBC, 2021; WALTA, 2021). ASHAM (2021) streamed additional debates on "human rights protection and freedom of speech" in collaboration with the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission [EHRC] and the Centre for Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD). Seven national and one regional political party took part in these debates. Twenty six representatives of political parties took part in the debate, of which, only three were females from ECSJP and FEP Parties. In addition, most of the debate moderators were males, except the two streamed in EBC and ASHAM. Groetsch (2022) argues that the difference between male and female moderators in political party debates during election campaigns can impact the debate based on the gender difference in communication style, question framing, societal expectations, and public perceptions. For instance, male moderators might frequently emphasis on topics related to gender equality to female candidates but not for male candidates in equal tone. Whereas, male moderators give more time to challenge male candidates on topics like economics, military, or foreign policy, which often perceived as core political subjects. According to Trucotte and Paul (2015), women moderators can impact how often women's issues are discussed, as they are more likely to ask questions involving women's issues than men moderators.

The issue of "constitution, federalism, and diversity" was discussed in four television stations (EBC, 2021; ESAT, 2021; FBC, 2021; WALTA, 2021). Ten parties participated here. Thirty one party representatives participated - all, including the debate facilitators, were men. The issue of "federalism and constitution" is very sensitive and the central pivot of the country's current political ideology, but it appeared the debates totally neglected the inclusion of female politicians. In relation, "language, culture and tourism" was debated on FBC television. Two national and one regional parties (PP, NMA, and FEP) took part. Three candidates participated, one of which was female; Dr. Hirut Kassaw, the then Minister in Charge of Culture and Tourism. Though tourism is considered as one of the five developmental agendas of the government in its ten years strategic plan, it appeared in one debate only.

The issue of "external relations and national security" was another point on the debate agenda. Eight parties participated in the debate. The programmes were streamed in three media (EBC, 2021; FBC, 2021; WALTA, 2021). A total of 17 party representatives took part in the debate, only two of which were females from PP and ECSJP. All the debates were facilitated by male moderators.

A debate on "industry, development, and investment" was streamed by three television broadcasters (EBC, 2021; ESAT, 2021; WALTA, 2021). Six parties took part in this debate, with ten party candidates, all males. While the debate streamed in EBC facilitated by male, the debate in ESAT

was facilitated by a female journalist. In relation to this, ESAT televised an additional debate on “*social justice and industry*” in collaboration with the Ethiopian Workers Association Confederation and Ethiopian Labour Rights Watch (ELRW). In this debate, Dr. Ergego Tesfay, a woman, and the then Minister in charge of Ethiopian Labour and Social Protection Affairs participated.

The debate on “urbanisation and infrastructure development” was streamed by two television stations (FBC, 2021; WALTA, 2021). Five parties took part in the debate. Of the six candidates participating, two were females from Prosperity Party. All the facilitators were men moderators.

The debate on “agriculture, food security, and rural development” streamed in five television stations (AHADU, 2021; EBC, 2021; ESAT, 2021; FBC, 2021; WALTA, 2021). Nine parties and 25 candidates took part in the debate, three of which were females from PP, ECSJP, and ESDP. Debates on EBC, AHADU, and ESAT were facilitated by female moderators.

Socioeconomic policies under the theme of “health, education, economic issues” were discussed in four television stations (AHADU, 2021; EBC, 2021; ESAT, 2021; FBC, 2021; WALTA, 2021). Eleven parties and forty candidates took part in the debate, six of which were females who represented the PP and FEP parties. Women representatives, Dr. Liya Kebede, Minister in Charge of Health and Dr. Fitsum Assefa, Minister in charge of Planning and Development Commission took part in the debates of health and economy, respectively.

A debate on “Women and Youth” streamed in five television stations (ASHAM, 2021; EBC, 2021; ESAT, 2021; FBC, 2021; WALTA, 2021). FBC in collaboration with Ethiopian Women Rights Commission and Sweden Embassy streamed an additional debate on the issue of “gender equality.” Eight parties participated in the debate. In addition, ASHAM television in collaboration with CARD and Ethiopian Women Associations Coalition, televised a debate on “Women and Politics: Saying of Women Candidates.” In these programme four ethnic-based regional parties with ethnic nationalism ideology participated. A total of 24 party representatives took part in debates of “Women and Youth”, thirteen of which were females. Only two debates streamed by FBC and ASHAM televisions were moderated by females.

In addition, disability and inclusion in action, issues of internal displacement and human rights violations were also streamed (AHADU, 2021; ASHAM, 2021; ESAT, 2021; FBC, 2021). These debates were supported by the Ethiopian Human Right Organisation, Democracy and Human Rights Development Centre, and Ethiopian Centre of Disability Development. Four national parties and four regional ethnic-based parties took part here. All the party representatives were males except one female representative. Two debates were moderated by female journalists.

The Code of Conduct for the Mass Media and Journalists on the Manner of Reporting about Elections Regulation Number 6/2010, Article 14 states “Every media shall give voter education that includes programme in minority languages and programme targeted for groups that traditionally may have been excluded from the political process, such as women and people with disabilities.” However, only ESAT television was committed in using sign language translators to most of the debates.

In terms of number, health, education, economic, and gender issues have better engagement of women politicians as compared to the other policy areas. Media debate observant elsewhere also reported that certain political issues such as child and elderly care, unemployment, welfare, and education are coined as “female issues” while “male issues” focus on financial issues, foreign policy, defence force, economics and finance, agriculture and crime (Braden, 2014; Gilardi, Fabrizio; Wüest, and Bruno, 2017).

Role of Women Representatives in the Debates

The purpose of election debates is to help political parties present the policy alternatives so that the public can make an informed decision. The election debates have also an additional purpose of strengthening the culture of peaceful political dialogue, which has been a struggle for Ethiopia so far. Most of the debates for the 6th general election were held in three rounds. In round one, each party representative had proportional time to introduce their party and policy alternatives. In round two, debaters were given modest time to present the details of their policy alternatives and to criticise the weakness of the existing government policies and strategies. The third round was to summarise their debate and respond to questions raised from other party representatives and the participants.

In the entire set of debates, female party representatives took different roles. In the first round, which was allocated to introduce their party's policy views, only the Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice Party was represented by females at least once; the other parties were either represented by males only, or shared the given time with their female party representative in all the debates. The same pattern was observed in the second and third debate rounds. Those parties which were represented by females only had the chance to take the stage alone, whereas much of the air time was taken by male candidates for those parties which were represented by both male and female candidates.

Both male and female candidates were challenged to capture their party policy and present its relevance to address the policy gaps in Ethiopia. It was really difficult to detect role differentiation between female and male debaters since many of them relayed on reading a pre-prepared document. Most of the debates were held in the television stations, away from the public, due to COVID-19 restrictions, which was another constraint to challenge the political candidates regarding their policy alternatives.

Another thing observed from the debates was how politicians in government offices, whether they are men or women, received more media coverage during the daily news than other parties' members. However, even from those in power, female politicians who are not in the first row of ministers, or top candidates at the national level, have received little chance in the debates. For instance, Dr. Liya Kebede, Minister in Charge of Health, Dr. Fitsum Assefa, Minister in charge of Planning and Development Commission, Dr. Hirut Kassa Minister in Charge of Culture and Tourism, Dr. Ergoge Tesfay Minister in Charge of Labour and Social Affairs from Prosperity party took part in the debates of their respective policy issues. However, other women politicians in the government structure below the minister position virtually did not appear at all in the debates.

Elsewhere, reports showed that women politicians are more often discussed in terms of their gender, their family life, and their physical appearance, but not in terms of their political personality. In Ethiopia election campaign, the physical appearance and dressing style of female candidates weren't the subject of media coverage. However, this doesn't mean parties don't take into consideration the background of females when they chose candidates for election. Hence, Ethiopian politics is heavily dominated by group identity; systematic filtrations are made based on family, ethnic, religion and other backgrounds when candidates are chosen for election.

Challenges-Related to Media Use for Campaigning

Although significant improvements in access to freedoms of assembly and expression were noted during the 2021 election, the overall environment compromised widespread complaints about intimidation and an unlevel playing field, which disproportionately affected women and

individuals from other marginalised groups both as candidates and voters. Opposition parties reported repeated instances of detention of candidates, physical attacks on members, vandalised party offices, and destruction of campaign materials, and detention of candidates in contradiction to legal provisions that candidates be protected from arrest or detention during the campaign period. As the campaign season began, candidates of two opposition parties, the NAMA and EZEMA, were assassinated (Borkena, 2022). The NAMA candidate Berihun Asfaw was running for Benishangul-Gumuz state council, while Girma Moges was EZEMA's candidate for a parliamentary seat. Each political party alleged that the assassinations were politically motivated (Ayele, 2022).

Moreover the extremely volatile security situation due to the war between the federal and its regional allies' forces and the armed TPLF group in the northern Ethiopia could be one potential factor for the decline of women candidates' representation for the 2021 election. According to the International Republican Institute and National Democratic Institute (NRI-NDI) report (2021), the insecurity due to violence have specific and disproportionately negative effects on the participation of women and other marginalised populations and pose grave concerns about potential human and political rights violations in and outside the election context.

The other challenge for properly using the media for debate is the campaign financing issue. The Electoral Proclamation regulates the sources of political parties' income and assets and includes limited provisions to guarantee transparency and political party or campaign finance. Receiving funding from foreign institutions, but not individuals, is prohibited. Political parties are required to keep records of their annual financial audits for at least ten years. However, as representatives of major opposition parties, including EZEMA, NAMA, ENAT, and individual candidates highlighted, there is a skewed campaign playing field. The ruling party has more than the normal advantages of incumbency, in part due to the country's political history. They noted lopsided support of the business community, citing the example of a fundraising event organised by PP at the Millennium Hall on March 15, at which the Prime Minister and most cabinet members, and a wide range of business persons were in attendance whilst the party raised over ETB 1.5 billion (USD 34 million). Opposition parties also alleged that the business community could not support them openly, fearing retribution. Most parties complained about the ruling PP's misuse of state resources and abuse of office for campaigning purposes from the local to the federal level.

In relation, women's participation as candidates in election media debates, financial issue can be one influential factor. Female candidates often face challenges in fundraising due to biases or fewer established networks compared to their male counterparts. This can reduce their ability to compete equally in debates and campaigns. Limited funding may restrict female candidates' ability to secure media coverage, making it harder to build recognition and establish a platform leading up to debates. Participation in debates may often involve travel and accommodation expenses, which can strain campaign budgets for less-funded female candidates. Addressing these challenges involves advocating for equitable funding mechanisms, empowering women-led fundraising networks, and creating fairer debate and media participation rules.

Conclusion

This article provides insights into media coverage of female politicians in the 2021 Ethiopia general election debates. The findings of this study lead to the conclusion that the Ethiopia mainstream media cover men and women politicians differently during election campaign. The frequency of parties' appearance in television debates and their gender representation are found to vary depending on the issues discussed and the media style of coverage. Female politicians were primarily being featured in relation to policy issues under the theme of gender, health,

and education, issues. Moreover, women candidates' role in the election debates was limited in introducing and summarising their party policies while their men counterparts took the modest air time to present the details of the policy alternatives and to criticise the existing policies.

In sum, the effect of this gender bias in media coverage could be one of the detrimental factors for women politicians. A lot could be done to revisit the role of media during election campaign from a gender perspective. Advancing women's political participation requires determined efforts from a wide range of stakeholders throughout the electoral cycle. Some of the measures to be taken could be integrating a gender-sensitive approach, looking into barriers that hinder women's participation in the election campaign, and empowering women to be prepared for election debates ahead. Developing a media-monitoring strategy could help to identify bias against women in the media and assess the quality and plurality of the election coverage. Further research should also focus on qualifying and quantifying experiences of women candidates, media reporters', and the public on issue-related to debate coverage. It is also necessary to raise the question of how the media generally treats women in different professions, not only politicians.

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