

## FRAMING WOMEN IN MALAYSIAN POLITICS: AN ANALYSIS OF MALAYSIAKINI'S COVERAGE DURING THE 15<sup>TH</sup> GENERAL ELECTION

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### ABSTRACT

Women's political participation has increased globally, yet media representations of female politicians often remain shaped by gendered stereotypes and unequal framing. This study examines how Malaysiakini portrayed female politicians during Malaysia's 15th General Election (GE15), focusing on whether news coverage emphasized their political contributions or reinforced traditional gender norms. Using a qualitative content analysis of Malaysiakini's election coverage over the one-month GE15 campaign period, this study analyses dominant themes and narratives surrounding female political actors. The findings indicate that while Malaysiakini challenges tokenism by amplifying women's agency, its coverage simultaneously reinforces gendered expectations by evaluating female candidates through moral and humanitarian frameworks that are rarely applied to their male counterparts. Due to its focus on a limited campaign period, this study provides a contextual rather than longitudinal understanding of media representation. Nevertheless, the findings contribute to scholarship on gendered media coverage in Malaysian political journalism and offer insights into how news portrayals of female politicians may shape public perceptions during electoral contests.

**Keywords:** *Malaysiakini, female politician, GE 15, news reporting, gender*

### INTRODUCTION

Malaysia's 15th General Election (GE15) marked a critical juncture in the country's political development. While the election is often discussed in terms of political realignments, voter behaviour, and electoral outcomes, GE15 also provides an important context for examining broader democratic practices, including issues of representation, inclusivity, and equality. One notable feature of GE15 was the increasing visibility of women in political contests, both as candidates and as party leaders, alongside the growing influence of digital news media in shaping political narratives.

Over the past few decades, women's participation in Malaysian politics has undergone gradual but meaningful transformation. Earlier scholarship indicates that women were traditionally positioned as supporters, grassroots mobilisers, and vote gatherers rather than central political decision-makers. However, studies by Saidon et al. (2013) demonstrate that women's roles have expanded to include leadership positions within political parties and participation at higher levels of governance. These developments reflect broader global and regional trends toward increased recognition of women's political agency. Nevertheless, women in Malaysia continue to encounter structural, cultural, and institutional barriers that limit their access to political power and visibility (Lee & Kim, 2018).

In democratic theory, political equality is a foundational principle, asserting that all citizens should have equal opportunities to participate in political decision-making regardless of gender (Ballington & Karam, 2005). Yet the persistent underrepresentation of women in legislative and executive bodies suggests a gap between democratic ideals and political realities. This gap is not only numerical but also symbolic, as the ways in which women politicians are represented and perceived can influence their legitimacy, authority, and effectiveness. Media representation plays a crucial role in this process, as news coverage shapes public understanding of who is considered a credible political actor.

The media functions not merely as a neutral transmitter of information but as an active constructor of political meaning. Through framing, selection of sources, and narrative emphasis, media outlets influence how political actors and issues are interpreted by audiences (Sofian et al., 2025). During election periods, this role becomes particularly significant, as media coverage can affect voter perceptions, campaign dynamics, and electoral outcomes. Research consistently shows that female politicians are often portrayed differently from their male counterparts, with greater attention given to personal characteristics, emotional traits, or traditional gender roles rather than policy expertise and leadership capabilities (Sofian et al., 2026).

In Malaysia, the expansion of online and alternative media platforms has reshaped the political communication landscape. Independent digital news organisations such as Malaysiakini have emerged as influential sources of political information, particularly among urban and younger audiences (Sofian et al., 2023). Unlike mainstream media, which are often associated with political or institutional constraints, Malaysiakini positions itself as an alternative voice that emphasises accountability and critical reporting (Sofian & Qasem, 2020). Examining how such a platform portrays female politicians during GE15 offers valuable insights into whether alternative media challenge or reproduce gendered norms in political journalism.

Thus, this study examines the representation of female politicians by Malaysiakini during the GE15 campaign period. The study aims to elucidate: In what manner were female politicians discursively represented in Malaysiakini's election coverage? What prevailing themes and narratives influenced their portrayal? By explicitly scrutinising these analytical dimensions, the study transcends a mere descriptive account of coverage to a concentrated analysis of representational patterns and discursive framing.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Gender Stereotyping and Media Representation of Women Politicians in Malaysia**

Existing scholarship consistently demonstrates that Malaysian media continue to reproduce gendered and stereotypical representations of women in politics, particularly during electoral periods. Rajaratnam (2010) first highlighted how women politicians in Malaysia were marginalised in news coverage through limited visibility and stereotypical framing that emphasised traditional gender roles over political competence. This pattern suggests that media discourse plays a significant role in sustaining patriarchal norms by positioning women as peripheral political actors rather than authoritative leaders.

Subsequent research during Malaysia's 14th General Election further confirms the persistence of these patterns. Manan (2019) shows that women candidates were frequently denied agency in news discourse, with media narratives emphasising familial identities such as "wife," "mother," or "daughter," and emotional traits like compassion and empathy. Using systemic functional linguistics and social actor analysis, the study reveals that women were often portrayed as lacking power and autonomy, reinforcing classic femininity stereotypes that delegitimise women's leadership capabilities. Similarly, Rajaratnam et al. (2020) find that despite increased awareness of gender equality and political reform following GE14, women politicians remained underrepresented and were primarily framed through superficial or symbolic roles rather than professional expertise or leadership qualities.

While the studies by Manan (2019) and Rajaratnam (2010; 2020) focus on media texts, Arsad et al. (2023) extend this body of work by examining gender stereotyping from the perspective of journalists themselves through qualitative interviews. Their findings reveal that journalists are often aware of gender bias in political reporting, yet newsroom routines, political pressures, and entrenched norms continue to shape how women politicians are framed. They demonstrate that stereotyping is not merely a textual outcome but a product of structural and institutional practices within journalism, including assumptions about political viability, audience expectations, and male dominance in political culture.

Taken together, these studies suggest that gender stereotyping in Malaysian political journalism operates at both discursive and institutional levels. Women politicians are

systematically underrepresented, framed through gendered roles, and positioned as less authoritative political actors, despite increased political participation and reform narratives.

### **Malaysiakini as an Alternative Media Platform and Gender Discourse**

As a prominent and influential force in Malaysian media, Malaysiakini is widely regarded as a trailblazing independent news portal. It has redefined the country's information landscape by providing unfiltered, multilingual coverage in English, Malay, Chinese, and Tamil. By offering alternative perspectives to traditional, state-aligned outlets, it has become a primary source for a discerning audience seeking transparent and diverse reporting. Earlier findings from the Reuters Digital News Report 2018 also identified Malaysiakini as the most popular online news portal in Malaysia ("Malaysiakini is top news portal, Reuters study shows, 2018"). These rankings underscore Malaysiakini's significance and influence as a major source of political and social information for the Malaysian public, particularly in shaping political discourse and public opinion during election periods.

Scholars have characterised Malaysiakini as a pro-democracy and alternative news portal that differs markedly from mainstream Malaysian media in its reporting style and editorial stance. Pui (2014) argues that Malaysiakini consolidates a more secular and liberal orientation, particularly in its coverage of sensitive racial, religious, and political issues. This positioning enables the portal to address controversial topics with greater openness, frequently challenging dominant narratives, institutional authority, and state-aligned perspectives that are commonly reflected in mainstream media.

Due to its critical and liberal approach, Malaysiakini has often been perceived as more open and progressive in its reporting compared to mainstream media. Some audiences, particularly those accustomed to traditional media narratives, may view the portal as challenging established norms and conventions, including issues related to gender and political representation (Sofian & Qasem, 2020). Critics have argued that Malaysiakini highlights controversial topics and gives attention to marginalized voices, which can be perceived as confronting dominant social or political hierarchies. However, empirical research suggests a more nuanced reality. Sofian and Qasem (2020) found that while Malaysiakini often adopts a critical tone in its reporting, it also provides space for diverse perspectives, including women's voices and underrepresented groups, thereby engaging social and political issues through inquiry rather than outright sensationalism or bias.

Importantly, Malaysiakini's liberal and open editorial orientation has also positioned it as a prominent platform for discussions on gender equality, women's rights, and patriarchy. The portal has consistently provided visibility to issues that challenge patriarchal norms, including women's political participation, gender discrimination, and unequal power relations in both public and private spheres. By offering space for feminist perspectives and gender-sensitive discourse, Malaysiakini encourages critical

engagement with entrenched social hierarchies, particularly those related to gender and political leadership.

Empirical studies further demonstrate Malaysiakini's evolving approach to representing women in politics. Rajaratnam and Rycker's (2018) longitudinal qualitative content analysis of Malaysiakini's election coverage during the 2008 and 2013 general elections found a notable shift in the portrayal of female candidates. Earlier reporting relied more heavily on gendered and descriptive frames, whereas later coverage increasingly positioned women as competent professionals and legitimate political actors. This transformation was accompanied by a broader move from descriptive to interpretive journalism, situating women candidates' challenges within wider societal and international contexts.

Building on this, Rajaratnam et al. (2020) examined Malaysian media coverage of female candidates and leaders during the 2018 general election and found that Malaysiakini stood out among news outlets for providing greater depth and breadth in its reporting. While most media organisations relied overwhelmingly on straight news formats, Malaysiakini was the only outlet to consistently include opinion pieces and column articles on women leaders, signalling an editorial commitment to interpretive and contextual journalism. The study also found that Malaysiakini largely avoided trivialising frames related to marital status, physical appearance, or family orientation, instead emphasising professional background, experience, leadership qualities, and political agendas. Moreover, Malaysiakini employed predominantly positive or neutral frames in its reporting, suggesting an effort to enhance the legitimacy and credibility of women leaders without overt partisan bias.

Taken together, these studies indicate that Malaysiakini has progressively revised its gender representations over time, moving towards more professionalised, issue-based, and less stereotypical portrayals of women in politics. Nevertheless, the findings also suggest that such progress exists alongside structural limitations, including uneven visibility and broader systemic marginalisation of women in political news coverage.

Within this context, Malaysiakini represents a particularly relevant case for examining media portrayals of female politicians during Malaysia's 15th General Election (GE15). Its reputation as an independent, liberal, and alternative media platform, combined with evidence of evolving gender-sensitive practices, raises important questions about whether such outlets can consistently challenge gender stereotypes or whether they continue to reproduce more subtle forms of patriarchal framing in contemporary political reporting.

## **Framing theory**

Framing theory provides the central theoretical lens guiding this study. In media scholarship, framing refers to the process by which certain aspects of reality are selected and made more salient in news coverage (Entman, 1993). News does not merely reflect political reality; it actively constructs meaning by emphasising specific themes, perspectives, and evaluative cues while downplaying others.

Framing theory serves as the primary theoretical framework for this study. Framing in media studies is the process of choosing certain parts of reality and making them stand out more in news stories (Entman, 1993; Tankard, 2001). News doesn't just show what's going on in politics; it also shapes meaning by highlighting certain themes, points of view, and evaluative cues while downplaying others.

In political communication, framing is especially important during election campaigns because the stories told by the media shape how people see legitimacy, competence, and leadership. Research on gendered framing shows that female politicians are often framed in a different way than male politicians. As discussed before, women are often judged based on their personal traits, emotional traits, family roles, or moral positions rather than their policy knowledge or leadership skills.

This study adopts a framing perspective to examine how Malaysiakini constructed meanings around female politicians during GE15. Specifically, framing theory guides three interrelated analytical dimensions in this research:

Theme identification – identifying recurring narrative emphases that define how women's political participation is constructed (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Matthes & Kohring, 2008).

Tone (frame valence) – examining whether coverage positioned female politicians in legitimising, neutral, critical, or morally evaluative terms (de Vreese, 2005).

Source selection and discursive authority – analysing whose perspectives were prioritised, how authority figures shaped interpretation, and whether female politicians were granted narrative control or framed through external commentary (Tankard, 2001). By synthesising these dimensions, the study transcends mere descriptive content analysis to elucidate how media narratives shape political legitimacy.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis with a thematic approach to examine how Malaysiakini portrayed female politicians during Malaysia's 15th General Election (GE15). Qualitative content analysis is particularly suitable for this study as it enables an in-depth examination of meanings, narratives, and discursive patterns embedded in news texts, rather than merely quantifying media visibility. By focusing on thematic

patterns and lexical choices, this approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how gendered representations are constructed and negotiated within political journalism.

The study focuses on Malaysia's 15th General Election (GE15) campaign period, which took place between 17 October and 18 November 2022, with polling held on 19 November 2022. GE15 represents a critical political moment characterised by intense media coverage, heightened political contestation, and increased public attention to issues of representation, leadership, and governance. This period therefore offers a valuable opportunity to examine how female politicians were portrayed as they campaigned, responded to controversies, and engaged in political discourse.

Malaysiakini was selected as the case study for several reasons. As one of Malaysia's most prominent online news portals, Malaysiakini is widely recognised for its relatively independent editorial stance and extensive political reporting. Its large and diverse readership makes it an influential platform in shaping public discourse, particularly during election periods. Moreover, Malaysiakini frequently addresses gender-related and social justice issues, providing a rich dataset for analysing representations of women in politics.

Data collection was conducted systematically by identifying articles published on Malaysiakini between 17 October 2022 and 18 November 2022, corresponding to the official GE15 campaign period and concluding one day prior to polling. Articles were retrieved using keywords such as "female politicians," "women leaders," "GE15," and the names of prominent female candidates contesting in the election.

The inclusion criteria required that articles explicitly reference female politicians or focus on issues related to women's political participation, leadership, or candidacy. The dataset comprised a mix of news reports, feature articles, and opinion pieces to ensure a diversity of perspectives and journalistic genres. Both Malay and English language articles were included to capture variations in framing and lexical choices across languages.

Malaysiakini publishes in both Malay and English, so we included articles in both languages to make sure we covered the election reporting fully. The analysis was performed in the original language of publication to maintain lexical nuance and contextual significance. When Malay excerpts are included in the findings, the researcher translated them into English, focusing on semantic equivalence rather than literal substitution. It was important to keep culturally embedded meanings, metaphors, and evaluative terms. This method made sure that interpretive analysis was consistent across languages while also keeping the integrity of the discourse.

A total of 41 articles met the selection criteria and were included in the analysis. Articles published during the campaign period were screened using keyword searches and subsequently reviewed for analytical relevance. Only texts that substantively addressed

women's political participation, candidature, leadership, or gender-related controversies were retained. The final dataset was determined through purposive selection guided by analytical relevance rather than numerical representativeness.

The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis procedure. First, the articles were read and reread multiple times to achieve familiarity with the data. During this phase, preliminary observations were noted, particularly recurring narratives, emphases, and linguistic patterns.

Second, initial codes were generated inductively by identifying meaningful segments of text related to women's political agency, leadership, exclusion, moral regulation, resilience, and gendered expectations. Particular attention was paid to lexical choices, metaphors, evaluative terms, and attribution practices used in Malaysiakini's reporting, as these linguistic elements play a crucial role in shaping representation.

Third, the coded data were examined to identify broader themes by clustering related codes together. Fourth, these themes were reviewed and refined to ensure internal coherence and clear distinctions between themes. Fifth, each theme was defined and named to reflect its analytical focus accurately. Finally, the themes were interpreted in relation to existing literature on gender, media representation, and political communication.

To enhance analytical credibility, interpretive decisions were revisited through reflexive discussion and re-reading of the data to minimise premature closure or selective interpretation. Themes were retained only when supported by multiple instances across the dataset rather than isolated examples.

## **FINDINGS**

This study identifies several dominant themes that characterise Malaysiakini's portrayal of female politicians during Malaysia's 15th General Election (GE15). Overall, the findings suggest that while Malaysiakini demonstrates a conscious effort to foreground women's political participation and leadership, traces of gendered framing and structural inequality remain evident. The themes below are illustrated using examples drawn from headlines and article content published during the GE15 campaign period.

### **Visibility of Women as Political Actors Rather Than Symbolic Figures**

A prominent theme in Malaysiakini's coverage of the 15th General Election (GE15) is the deliberate positioning of female politicians as active political actors with agency and leadership capacity. Rather than portraying women as symbolic candidates, several headlines and news reports foreground their political ambitions, policy commitments, and critical reflections on party practices. In doing so, Malaysiakini challenges tokenistic

representations that have historically characterised women's participation in Malaysian electoral politics.

In particular, reports highlighting women candidates' rejection of quota-based politics emphasise that their electoral participation is not merely to fulfil numerical targets but to influence policy agendas and decision-making processes. Across these articles, women politicians are quoted articulating their political visions, campaign strategies, and frustrations with party hierarchies that continue to marginalise women within formal power structures. Such narratives frame women as conscious and strategic political agents rather than passive or symbolic representatives.

This framing is reinforced through Malaysiakini's consistent reporting on women leaders' critiques of tokenism, its attention to dissatisfaction over unmet 30 per cent gender representation targets, and its emphasis on women politicians' calls for substantive roles, winnable seats, and meaningful participation in governance. Analytically, the notion that women are "not contesting merely to fill numbers" emerges inductively from these recurring patterns rather than from a single article or headline.

By centring women's voices through direct attribution and contextual explanation, Malaysiakini departs from traditional media portrayals that often marginalise women's political subjectivity. However, this visibility remains uneven, as women's agency is frequently discussed alongside structural and institutional barriers. This suggests that while Malaysiakini acknowledges women's leadership capacity, recognition in media discourse does not automatically translate into political empowerment.

### **Structural Marginalisation and Male Dominance in Party Politics**

Another recurring theme in Malaysiakini's GE15 coverage is the systemic exclusion of women from winnable seats and leadership positions, framed as a structural rather than individual shortcoming. Malaysiakini repeatedly reports on political parties' failure to meet the 30 per cent women candidate target, with headlines and articles drawing attention to the continued dominance of male candidates during nomination processes.

In several reports, the electoral landscape is described using metaphors that suggest overcrowding and competition, such as male candidates "flooding" or "dominating" candidate lists, while women are portrayed as being sidelined or pushed to the margins of party decision-making. Other articles employ spatial and viability-based metaphors, noting that women are often placed in "difficult," "tough," or "unwinnable" constituencies, while male candidates are allocated "safe seats" and positions of strategic advantage.

Such coverage foregrounds women politicians' frustration and disappointment, with direct quotations highlighting how exclusion is justified through appeals to "electability," "experience," or the need for "tested candidates" terms that implicitly align political competence with masculinity. By juxtaposing parties' public commitments to gender equality with their actual electoral practices, Malaysiakini exposes the contradictions embedded within party structures.

Through this framing, the portal implicitly critiques political institutions by revealing how women's marginalisation is normalised and rationalised, not as overt discrimination, but as pragmatic electoral strategy. This reinforces the idea that gender inequality in political representation is sustained through institutional logics rather than individual failure.

### **Gendered Expectations and Moral Regulation of Women Politicians**

Despite its progressive stance, Malaysiakini's coverage of GE15 also reflects persistent gendered expectations, particularly when women's political participation intersects with cultural and religious norms. Articles addressing controversies surrounding women candidates' eligibility, specifically debates over religious rulings (*iddah*), illustrate how women's political roles are frequently evaluated through moral and religious frameworks rather than political competence.

Notably, two Malaysiakini articles reported differing religious interpretations by the Mufti of Perak, Wan Zahidi Wan Teh, and the Mufti of Perlis, Prof. Dr. Asri Zainal Abidin, regarding the observance of *iddah* for women candidates who had lost their husbands. These reports were contextualized around a Barisan Nasional candidate for the Padang Besar parliamentary seat, Zahida Zariq Khan, who was said to be within her *iddah* period following the death of her husband during the election campaign. In these articles, Zahida herself was quoted through a video statement circulated on social media, explaining that she deliberately limited her campaign activities in accordance with religious obligations during her *iddah* period.

While Malaysiakini presented contrasting religious viewpoints and allowed space for Zahida's own explanation, the focus of the coverage nonetheless centered on the moral permissibility of her political participation rather than her policy positions or electoral agenda. This form of scrutiny highlights how women politicians are subjected to moral regulation that male politicians rarely encounter, particularly when private life circumstances intersect with public political roles. The inclusion of competing religious authorities, alongside Zahida's own explanation, illustrates how source selection structures interpretive possibilities, shaping the moral framing of women's political participation.

Additionally, some articles reference women politicians' emotional resilience, patience, or moral strength, subtly reinforcing traditional expectations of femininity even when

the tone is supportive. For example, an article headlined "Kaki digilis tayar kereta ketika kempen" (Car runs over foot during campaign) exemplifies how women candidates are portrayed as needing to demonstrate extraordinary strength and perseverance. Rather than foregrounding leadership qualities, such coverage highlights physical injury and endurance, implicitly reinforcing the expectation that women must prove a specific "toughness" to be taken seriously.

This requirement for women to earn their legitimacy through extraordinary means is further evidenced in the coverage of Nik Faizah Nik Othman, the Pakatan Harapan candidate for Pengkalan Chepa. In the article headlined "Pencetus kempen 'bendera putih' jadi calon PH di Pengkalan Chepa" (Initiator of the 'white flag' campaign becomes PH candidate in Pengkalan Chepa), the media shifts from moral regulation to a framework of activism and public service. The vocabulary used emphasizes her role as a "pencetus" (initiator), framing her candidacy not as a pursuit of power, but as a natural extension of her humanitarian work. The grammar of the report utilizes strong, declarative sentences that enhance her credibility, presenting her past activism as a factual foundation for her political entry. This creates a cohesive narrative that builds on her prior social care to justify her presence in the political arena.

### **Contestation of Misogyny and Patriarchal Political Culture**

Malaysiakini also functions as a platform for challenging sexist discourse and misogynistic political behaviour. Several reports and opinion pieces directly criticise remarks by a male politician that demean or trivialise women leaders, using explicit language such as "sexist," "misogynistic," or "demeaning." For instance, articles responding to comments suggesting that women are unsuitable leaders or should play secondary roles highlight public backlash and condemnation from civil society groups and women politicians.

Malaysiakini's framing does not merely report such statements but contextualises them within broader discussions of patriarchal political culture. This approach positions the news portal as an active participant in gender discourse, amplifying counter-narratives that question male dominance in politics. However, these critiques are often reactive, emerging in response to controversies rather than being embedded consistently across routine political reporting.

A notable example involves reports responding to remarks made by the Kedah Menteri Besar, Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor, who, during a series of campaign speeches, was reported to have questioned the suitability of women to serve as Members of Parliament in Sik. These comments were widely interpreted as targeting Pakatan Harapan candidate Datuk Latifah Md Yatim, who was contesting the Sik parliamentary seat. Malaysiakini's coverage foregrounded the strong backlash from various quarters, including women politicians, civil society actors, and political commentators, who condemned the remarks as sexist and reflective of misogynistic attitudes in politics. By

highlighting these reactions, the portal framed the controversy as symptomatic of a broader resistance to women's political leadership rather than a mere campaign misstep.

In contextualising the incident, Malaysiakini also provided electoral background by noting that the Sik parliamentary contest involved a three-cornered fight between Perikatan Nasional candidate Ahmad Tarmizi Sulaiman, Pakatan Harapan candidate Datuk Latipah Md Yatim, and Barisan Nasional candidate Maizatulakmam Othman @ Ibrahim. This contextual detail reinforces the seriousness of the remarks, as they were made within a competitive electoral setting where gendered rhetoric could shape public perceptions of candidates' legitimacy.

Here, Malaysiakini adopts a counter-hegemonic frame, positioning sexist remarks not as isolated incidents but as manifestations of broader patriarchal political culture. The evaluative tone is openly critical, and the amplification of civil society responses expands the range of authoritative voices within the narrative. However, because such framing is often reactive to controversy, gender equality emerges as an issue mobilised in moments of dispute rather than consistently embedded across routine political reporting.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study set out to examine how Malaysiakini portrayed female politicians during Malaysia's 15th General Election (GE15), with particular attention to whether its coverage challenged or reproduced gendered stereotypes identified in earlier Malaysian media scholarship. Overall, the findings reveal a complex and ambivalent pattern. While Malaysiakini demonstrates clear efforts to foreground women's political agency and contest overt sexism, gendered expectations and structural inequalities continue to shape media representations in more subtle and conditional ways. These findings both align with and extend existing Malaysian literature, particularly studies by Rajaratnam (2010; 2020), Manan (2019), and Arsad et al. (2023).

From a framing perspective, media coverage operates through processes of selection and salience, highlighting certain aspects of reality while downplaying others (Entman, 1993). In this sense, Malaysiakini's portrayal of female politicians does not simply reflect political events but organises attention around particular dimensions of women's participation, thereby shaping how legitimacy and authority are interpreted.

One of the most significant findings is Malaysiakini's deliberate effort to position female politicians as active political actors rather than symbolic figures. This represents a notable departure from earlier studies that documented women's marginalisation and limited visibility in Malaysian media. Rajaratnam (2010) and Manan (2019), for instance, found that women politicians were frequently denied agency and framed through familial or emotional roles rather than political competence. In contrast, the

present study shows that Malaysiakini frequently foregrounds women's policy positions, leadership ambitions, and critiques of party structures, particularly in relation to quota politics and demands for meaningful participation. The inductive emergence of the theme that women are "not contesting merely to fill numbers" illustrates how Malaysiakini amplifies women's own voices to challenge tokenism, thereby enhancing women's political subjectivity. This finding supports Rajaratnam et al.'s (2020) argument that Malaysiakini has increasingly shifted towards more professionalised and issue-based portrayals of women leaders, reinforcing its reputation as a liberal and alternative media platform.

However, this increased visibility remains uneven and conditional. Women's agency is frequently articulated alongside discussions of structural barriers and exclusion, indicating that recognition in media discourse does not necessarily translate into empowerment. This extends earlier scholarship by demonstrating that contemporary gender representation in Malaysian media is not simply a matter of presence or absence, but of the terms under which visibility is granted.

The findings also strongly reinforce earlier arguments that gender inequality in Malaysian politics is sustained through institutional practices rather than individual shortcomings. Consistent with Rajaratnam (2010) and Rajaratnam et al. (2020), Malaysiakini's coverage during GE15 exposes how women's underrepresentation is normalised through party nomination processes. By repeatedly highlighting the failure of political parties to meet the 30 per cent women candidate target and employing metaphors that emphasise male dominance in candidate selection, the portal frames gender inequality as systemic. This aligns closely with Arsad et al.'s (2023) findings that journalists are often aware of gender bias, yet constrained by newsroom routines and political logics that prioritise "electability" and "experience," qualities implicitly associated with masculinity. Importantly, this study extends Arsad et al. (2023) by showing how these institutional logics materialise at the textual level, with patriarchal norms reproduced through seemingly neutral electoral strategies.

Despite Malaysiakini's progressive editorial orientation, the findings reveal that women politicians remain subject to moral regulation, particularly when political participation intersects with religious and cultural norms. This resonates strongly with Manan's (2019) observation that women candidates are framed through gendered expectations that undermine their authority, albeit in evolving forms. Coverage of *iddah*-related controversies involving Zahida Zarik Khan illustrates how women's political legitimacy is evaluated through moral and religious frameworks that male politicians rarely encounter. Although Malaysiakini presents divergent religious interpretations and includes Zahida's own explanation, the focus on moral permissibility rather than political competence underscores the conditional nature of women's political legitimacy, reflecting Rajaratnam's (2010) argument that patriarchal norms continue to regulate women's public roles through private and moral lenses.

Similarly, portrayals emphasising women's emotional resilience, physical endurance, and moral strength such as reports highlighting injury and perseverance during campaigning suggest that women are expected to demonstrate exceptional toughness to justify their political presence. Even positive portrayals, such as that of Nik Faizah Nik Othman, rely on narratives of activism and moral commitment to legitimise political entry. Collectively, these patterns indicate that women's legitimacy in political journalism remains contingent upon moral credibility rather than being presumed.

At the same time, Malaysiakini functions as a platform for contesting misogynistic discourse when sexism becomes explicit. Coverage of sexist remarks made by the Kedah Menteri Besar, Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor, demonstrates the portal's role in amplifying counter-narratives that challenge patriarchal political culture. By foregrounding public backlash and condemnation from women politicians and civil society actors, Malaysiakini frames such remarks as symptomatic of broader gender inequality rather than isolated campaign rhetoric. This supports Rajaratnam et al.'s (2020) observation that Malaysiakini engages in interpretive and contextual journalism when addressing gender-related controversies. Nevertheless, the reactive nature of this contestation aligns with Arsad et al.'s (2023) observation that challenges to gender bias often emerge in response to controversy rather than through consistently embedded newsroom practices.

## **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION**

Taken together, the findings confirm that Malaysiakini has made discernible progress in challenging traditional gender stereotypes compared to earlier Malaysian media practices documented by Rajaratnam (2010) and Manan (2019). At the same time, the persistence of structural marginalisation, moral regulation, and conditional legitimacy demonstrates that gender bias has not disappeared but has become more embedded within institutional and cultural norms. By focusing on GE15 and employing qualitative thematic analysis across bilingual content, this study contributes to the still limited body of Malaysian-focused research on women's political representation and responds to calls for more sustained, context-sensitive research on gender, journalism, and political communication in Malaysia.

The findings carry several important implications. For journalism practice, the study highlights the need for news organisations even those positioned as progressive and alternative to move beyond reactive critiques of sexism towards more consistently embedded gender-sensitive reporting. This includes normalising women's political authority without requiring moral justification, exceptional resilience, or activism-based legitimacy. Greater reflexivity in newsroom routines, sourcing practices, and framing strategies is necessary to prevent the subtle reproduction of gendered assumptions in everyday political reporting.

From a policy and political perspective, the findings underscore the role of media in exposing structural inequalities within party politics, particularly in relation to candidate selection and leadership access. Media coverage that critically interrogates nomination practices and quota implementation can contribute to broader public accountability and pressure political institutions to translate gender commitments into substantive action.

Although this study adds to the body of knowledge, but it has some limitations. First, the study only looks at Malaysiakini as a single case study. Even though this makes it easier to look at a big independent news site in depth, the results can't be applied to all Malaysian media. Comparing with mainstream media or other digital platforms may show different framing dynamics, which would support general claims about how the media represents Malaysia.

Second, the research is confined to the official GE15 campaign duration. This short time frame keeps the context the same, but the way the media shows female politicians may change before and after election campaigns. Later studies might use a longitudinal framework to investigate whether gendered framing patterns continue to exist outside of heightened electoral periods.

As a qualitative thematic analysis, the study focuses on interpretive depth rather than statistical generalisability. Even though iterative coding and thematic refinement were used to make sure the analysis was complete, there are still other ways to look at the data. Future research could improve qualitative methodologies by incorporating quantitative or mixed method designs to examine the prevalence of identified frames within larger datasets.

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