

Voicing Women's Underrepresentation in Speeches: A Framing Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Despite decades of gender equality advocacy, women still face significant barriers that limit their access to influential platforms and their impact once on these platforms. Analyzing how women's speeches are framed provides valuable insight into the dynamics of their underrepresentation, helping us uncover the structural and cultural constraints that shape societal perceptions of women leaders. This paper explores how women leaders and activists frame issues of gender inequality, human rights, and women's empowerment in the various spheres of political discourses. Using five speeches of influential women (i.e., Hillary Clinton, Kamala Harris, Angela Merkel, Malala Yousafzai, and Aung San Suu Kyi) as data, this study analyzes how framing constructs public perceptions of gender roles and influences the attitudes of society. Framing concepts coupled with rhetorical strategies by leaders can define problems, attribute the cause(s), construct moral imperatives, and put forth solutions to the systemic set of gender disparities. This analysis underlines framing as a tool that not only has symbolic and transformative power, but can also reshape the perception of women in leadership and stimulate political participation to enable societal change. Understanding these dynamics is of significance for greater inclusiveness in fostering the aspirational value of the global issue of gender inequalities.

Keywords: *Empowerment, framing analysis, gender inequality, political discourse, underrepresentation*

1. INTRODUCTION

The underrepresentation of women in public discourse, particularly in speeches by influential women, highlights systemic inequalities and deeply rooted gender biases. Despite decades of gender equality advocacy, women still face significant barriers that limit their access to influential platforms and their impact once on these platforms. Analyzing how women's speeches are framed provides valuable insight into the dynamics of their underrepresentation, helping us uncover the structural and cultural constraints that shape societal perceptions of women leaders.

This study aims to explore how women's speeches are framed through framing theory. It uses key examples from the speeches of prominent women figures, along with academic perspectives. Framing analysis is a widely used approach in communication and media

studies. It analyzes how media and journalists choose and highlight certain aspects of a story to favor particular problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and/or treatment recommendations (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013; Scheufele, 1999).

Researchers have applied framing analysis to study a variety of topics, including the representation of Iraq-Afghanistan veterans in newspapers (Wilbur, 2016), the framing of the Egyptian uprising in Arabic media (Hamdy & Gomaa, 2012). These studies have highlighted the usefulness of framing analysis in uncovering hidden logics and the various perspectives that shape media coverage (Franzosi & Vicari, 2018). By analyzing how issues are framed, researchers can better understand the subtle influences media exerts on public perceptions and societal discourse.

Framing analysis has also been used to examine social movements and policy debates, focusing on how

different stakeholders construct and contest the meaning of issues. This is evident in the works of Benford & Snow (2000), Woulfin et al. (2015), and Lane (2019). The research has shown that how a problem is framed can significantly influence the behavior and interactions of the actors involved, as well as the outcomes of the policy process (Lane, 2019).

In the present study, framing theory offers a lens to understand how women's voices are interpreted, perceived, and sometimes dismissed. It suggests that how information is framed—through language, visuals, and context—greatly influences how it is received by an audience. In leadership, this framing often reflects and reinforces societal gender norms. Research shows that women's speeches are more likely to be framed in terms of their personal lives or emotional expressions rather than their professional accomplishments or policy ideas (Wright & Holland, 2014). For instance, Julia Gillard's 2012 "misogyny speech" in the Australian Parliament was often portrayed by the media as an emotional outburst, rather than a strategic critique of systemic sexism (Wright & Holland, 2014). This framing not only trivializes women's contributions but also perpetuates stereotypes that hinder broader societal acceptance of women leaders.

Speeches by figures such as Hillary Clinton, Angela Merkel, Kamala Harris, and Malala Yousafzai highlight recurring themes of resilience, equity, and advocacy for marginalized voices. Clinton's 1995 speech at the Beijing women's conference framed women's issues as integral to global human rights, highlighting the universality of women's struggles and their potential to drive societal change. Similarly, Merkel's reflections on the centenary of women's suffrage in Germany focused on the steady progress toward gender parity, acknowledging the ongoing challenges women face in politics and beyond.

Kamala Harris's 2020 victory speech, marking her achievement as the first woman of color to serve as U.S. Vice President, framed her success not only as a personal milestone but also as a symbol of systemic change for future generations. Harris's emphasis on inclusion and intergenerational progress is a strong example of how framing can shift narratives from individual success to collective empowerment.

Malala Yousafzai's Nobel Peace Prize speech offers another powerful example. Her framing of education as a fundamental human right, intertwined with her

personal story of resilience against systemic violence, turned her narrative into a universal call for gender equity in education. The framing of women's underrepresentation extends beyond individual speeches to systemic patterns driven by cultural narratives and institutional norms. Women are often portrayed as exceptions when they break barriers, reinforcing the narrative that their success is an anomaly rather than a norm. This "exceptionalism" framing reinforces societal biases and makes it harder for subsequent women to gain similar recognition (Holman & Schneider, 2018). Moreover, structural biases within institutions further amplify these cultural narratives. For example, Angela Merkel has pointed out how gender pay gaps and underrepresentation persist even in progressive settings, illustrating how systemic inequality stifles women's voices at every level.

A crucial aspect of framing women's speeches is the "double bind," where women are criticized both for adhering to and deviating from traditional gender roles. They are expected to display empathy and warmth while also demonstrating authority and strength. This paradox is evident in media portrayals of leaders like Jacinda Ardern, whose empathetic leadership during crises has been praised yet criticized for lacking the "masculine" decisiveness traditionally associated with leadership (Convertino, 2020). Similarly, the speeches of Aung San Suu Kyi highlight how women leaders in patriarchal societies must balance their rhetoric to align with cultural expectations while pushing for systemic change.

Addressing women's underrepresentation in public discourse requires reframing how their contributions are perceived and valued. This involves dismantling stereotypes that confine women to specific roles and prioritizing the substance of their ideas over superficial traits. Research emphasizes that framing gender equity initiatives as beneficial for all can broaden their appeal and foster societal buy-in (Farrell et al., 2020). Efforts to amplify women's voices must also consider intersectionality, recognizing how race, class, and other identities intersect with gender to shape experiences of marginalization and empowerment.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

2.1. Research Design

The present research is a qualitative study based on the framing theory of Entman (1993). Framing theory describes how media and speakers can systematically develop people's perception of an issue by selectively presenting certain aspects of that issue while downplaying others. In this context, the research discusses speeches given by five influential female leaders: Hillary Clinton, Kamala Harris, Angela Merkel, Malala Yousafzai, and Aung San Suu Kyi. These leaders were chosen to represent very different backgrounds, positions, and highly influential roles within political, social, and humanitarian circles.

The core purpose is to explain how each of the leaders frames the key issues regarding gender equality, human rights, global politics, and leadership. The research makes a critical analysis of verbal and non-verbal aspects of their speeches to trace the emergence of certain themes and framing devices employed by the subjects under discussion.

2.2. Data Collection

The speeches of Hillary Clinton, Kamala Harris, Angela Merkel, Malala Yousafzai, and Aung San Suu Kyi were the primary data for this research. These are taken from public platforms such as official government websites, public addresses, international summits, and major political events. Selection focuses on those speeches that deal with important socio-economic issues like leadership, human rights, and gender equality.

These include speeches from different periods and contexts: presidential campaigns, speeches before international organizations, and speeches immediately after great crises. Extra attention is given to those speeches that have gained extraordinary media coverage. It is done to catch the broadest range of public reception and framing effects.

2.3 Data Analysis

The data analysis of the present study is thematic content analysis, based on the framing theory Entman (1993). Key steps in the analysis include the following: (a) Identifying the frames: The speeches are reviewed for identification of the frames used by each leader.

This involves a close reading of the text for how issues are presented and the underlying assumptions that shape their presentation. (b) Framing categorization: The identified frames are then categorized into themes of empowerment, resistance, solidarity, and leadership. Each frame is then analyzed for its purpose, target audience, and effect. (c) Contextual analysis: The research also considers the political, cultural, and social context in which the speeches were made, according to the framing theory. This provides the necessary contextual information in which to situate how such frames function in the name of aligning or disputing dominant societal narratives. It also makes a cross-comparison of the framing done by the five leaders, showing how they differ or converge in their approach to common themes. Special attention are given to gendered language and framing issues in terms of power dynamics.

3. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The study has revealed the ways how the world's women figures frame their ideas with regard to inequality and women underrepresentation. Figure 1 illustrates the summary of each of the speakers' problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and their recommendations to the raised issues.

Table 1. The framing of women leaders' speeches

Speech	Problem	Causal Interpretation	Moral Evaluation	Recommendation
Hillary Clinton (1995)	Systemic lack of respect for women's rights, violence, and lack of access to education and opportunities.	Cultural, economic, and political systems undervalue women and their contributions.	It is morally unacceptable to deny women their human rights; women's rights are human rights.	Empower women through education, healthcare, political participation, and human rights protection.

Kamala Harris (2020)	Systemic inequality, threats to democracy, and societal divisions.	Failure to include marginalized voices and respect democratic norms.	Unity, decency, and equality are essential for a just society.	Promote inclusivity, address systemic racism, and rebuild trust in democracy.
Angela Merkel (2018)	Gender inequality persists despite progress, e.g., wage gaps and political underrepresentation.	Societal and institutional barriers prevent full gender parity.	A just society requires equal opportunities for women and men.	Adopt quotas, improve childcare policies, and promote women's leadership.
Malala Yousafzai (2014)	Denial of education, particularly for girls, perpetuates poverty and injustice.	Cultural norms, extremism, and lack of investment in education systems.	Every child, regardless of gender, has a right to education and opportunity.	Invest in education, empower girls, and hold leaders accountable for action.
Aung San Suu Kyi (1995)	Lack of democracy, peace, and human rights disproportionately affects women.	Authoritarian regimes and intolerance suppress women's participation.	Freedom, tolerance, and equality are fundamental for societal progress.	Promote democracy, empower women politically, and advocate for tolerance.

1. Hillary Clinton

In terms of problem definition, Clinton, for instance, identifies that women all over the world are victims of systemic lack of respect, often denied even the most basic rights and subjected to violence. She describes how even women's work both inside the household and outside in the public sphere is not valued. She said, *"Women comprise more than half the world's population. Women are 70 percent of the world's poor, and two-thirds of those who are not taught to read and write."*

Further, as a causal interpretation of this issue, Clinton then proceeds to argue that deeply set cultural, economic, and political structures lower the status of women, leading to an inability to access education, healthcare, or even basic rights.

"Yet much of the work we do is not valued-not by economists, not by historians, not by popular culture, and not by government leaders."

Besides, Clinton makes a moral claim, that it is wrong as a matter of moral fact for women to be denied their human rights including education and to live their lives free of violence.

"Human rights are women's rights, and women's rights are human rights."

Finally, she then suggests some concrete measures that can be taken to empower women in education, healthcare, political participation, and protection of human rights.

"What we are learning around the world is that, if women are healthy and educated, their families will flourish."

2. Kamala Harris

In defining the problem, Harris talked about an issue related to systemic inequity, the undermining of democratic norms that endanger the future of her country, USA. She brought to light on how these few years have caused struggle and pain for so many Americans. She said, *"Times have been trying, especially the last several months. The grief, sorrow, and the pain. The worries and struggles."*

Further, Harris claims that the root causes of societal issues are excluding the voices of the marginalized and lack of democratic action. She reiterated, *"We can use the environment to blame nameless, faceless others, to feed the sense of insecurity, to retreat into greater levels of isolationism."*

Besides, she was determined and framed the moral obligation of people to choose hope, unity, and truth over division and cynicism.

"You chose hope, unity, decency, science, and, yes, truth."

As a solution to the framed issue, Harris calls for inclusivity, a call to name and fight systemic racism, and rebuilding democratic processes toward the creation of a just and fair society.

"We have elected a president who carries the best in us. A leader the world will respect and our children can look up to."

3. Angela Merkel

In the case of Merkel's speech, she points to the continuous inequality between women and men in Germany as a significant issue to address. This disparity is described to occur in the level of wages, underrepresentation in political life, and professional opportunities.

"Equal pay is one of the big questions on the agenda. there are still, particularly in sectors without statutory wage agreements, hidden inequalities in pay."

To these particular problems, Merkel points to societal and institutional barriers, such as outdated gender norms and lack of political will, as the main cause of this persistent inequality.

"It is unbelievable to consider that up until 1977, a woman had to ask her husband for permission if she wanted to work."

Furthermore, Merkel conceptualizes and represents gender equality as a moral necessity, which corresponds to the development of society. She considers that bringing justice to the society is unlikely to take place without granting equal rights in many aspects of day-to-day life for men and women.

"A society can only be just if it puts equality between women and men into everyday practice."

As a possible breakthrough, for example, Merkel proposes changes through quotas (for women to play some strategic roles), supportive policies that enable child-caring, and the development of female leadership in all levels of life.

"We need quotas, but the goal has to be parity—parity everywhere, be it in politics, business, the administration, academia, and indeed in the cultural sphere."

4. Malala Yousafzai

Malala framed and spoke about the denial of education to girls, especially in areas torn by extremism as a major issue for women underrepresentation. She also brought to light the portrayals of struggles for access to education of millions of children across the world.

"It is for the forgotten children who want to go to school. It is for the frightened children who want peace. It is for the voiceless children who want change."

Further, she underscores that there are causal links between cultural expectations, fundamentalism, and

government neglect in education to the general lack of education, particularly among girls in Pakistan.

"Education went from being a right to being a crime, girls stopped going to school."

Additionally, she realizes that the right to education is a fundamental right of every human being. Malala further emphasizes that education is something necessary for an individual, which will ensure progress of every person and the society too.

"Every child, boy or girl, has a right to education and opportunity."

Eventually, as a proposed solution, Malala invites and calls for worldwide action to ensure all children get quality education, especially the girls.

"Leaders should seize this opportunity to ensure a free, quality, primary, and secondary education for every child."

5. Aung San Suu Kyi

Speaking about the inequality challenges in her country, for instance, Suu Kyi has voiced the lack of democracy, violation of human rights, and peace in Burma, precisely apathy towards women's participation in politics and governance.

"Currently, no women participate in the higher echelons of politics, and none at all in the judiciary."

She believes that the causes of this stagnation are rooted in the political system in the form of authoritarian rule, patriarchy, and intolerance that has been practiced for years.

"The relationship between men and women should, and can be, characterized not by patronizing behavior or exploitation but by metta—that is to say loving kindness-partnership and trust."

Furthermore, Suu Kyi insists that an ideal society has to involve women fully in governance, given their potential for peace-making and development. *"In societies where men are truly confident of their own worth, women are not merely 'tolerated', they are valued."*

As a solution, she idealizes the active advocacy of full political participation of women, promotion of tolerance, and democracy to build a better future. *"Women, with their genius for compassion and self-sacrifice, their fearlessness and endurance, have accomplished much to dispel the darkness of*

intolerance and hate, suffering and despair."

The Women Voices

The portrayals of women within political discourse have been at the center of studies with regard to reflecting social perceptions that surround gender and its impact on power relations. Thus, the present study uses framing theory as a framework against which to analyze how women frame messages related to gender issues on equality, human rights, and empowerment. The findings above highlight the rhetorical and discursive strategies used by women figures to emphasize the roles and rights of women in society.

As a perspective, framing theory examines how speakers define problems, attribute causes to those problems, suggest moral imperatives to solve those problems, and recommend solutions. They weave in an attractive rhetorical framing that, therefore, constructs the understanding of the public about women and, subsequently, builds a mass opinion about the subject. Framing is a core part of political communication and is used to garner support jointly for policy or social positions and to create social cohesion against structural injustices. The speeches of Hillary Clinton from the 2016 campaign illustrate that when female leaders are confronted with the gendered expectations of their role, they jump into frames such as 'fight' and 'family,' as Kanwal and Garcia (2019) found women leaders do.

Women around the world have continued their struggle against established patriarchal structures through politics. While they attained serious strides toward political equality over recent decades, they still face issues regarding representation at local, national, and international levels; a huge majority of parliamentary seats worldwide are held by men at 75 percent as of 2020 (Hinojosa, 2021). This is a persistent indication of the inequality of gender and the re-definition of a woman in political discourse. The symbolic effects of the framing of women in power may alter social perception, leading to more gender equality with better political legitimacy (Verge et al., 2020).

The women leaders' speeches often serve to reframe the women's roles. For instance, Angela Merkel's speech to mark 100 years of women suffrage in Germany framed "the historical struggles for gender equality" as key moments along the path toward justice and democracy. The findings therefore align with Evans and Evans (2015), who argue that feminist campaigns and histories are essential to repositioning women's political representation within gendered power structures.

In the case of framing, narratives are strong mechanisms or tools through which leaders can express experiences both at the individual and collective levels. During her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Malala Yousafzai framed her struggles as part of a greater global cause concerning education and the rights of women. Through this framing, issues become more real in their abstractness and further point out a great need for systemic change. As supported, narrative frames in political communication have the broader scope to develop emotional involvement in the public, especially to change attitudes and behaviors related to gender equality (Hapsari, 2019).

Evidently, Kamala Harris has signaled, through inclusive discourses and personal stories in her victory speech back in 2020, that women in general and Black and Asian women in particular are parties that have made democratic values move forward. This idea is in line with Celis and Childs's (2018) who asserted that framing intersectionality and inclusively is what will lead to 'substantive representation. By emphasizing these contributions, Harris highlights the transformative potential of diverse leadership in fostering equity and progress in democratic systems.

While speeches provide a venue to model women empowerment, the media often goes on to stereotype them. Studies indicate that media typically portrays women leaders not by their policies but by their looks, emotions, and family obligations (Insenga, 2014; Sazali & Basit, 2020). For example, Australian media interpreted Julia Gillard's speech against "sexism and misogyny" in 2012 as an emotional outburst rather than as a powerful criticism against gender bias in politics

(Wright & Holland, 2014).

These framings cut both ways, as women leaders must negotiate a trade-off between traditional masculine attributes of leadership and typical feminine traits like softness and tenderness. This fact emphasizes the need for the extra effort on the part of women feeders to actively shape the framing of their speeches through the countering of sexist media stories by displaying competency and vision. By countering sexist media narratives and showcasing both competence and vision, they can challenge biases and redefine perceptions of leadership.

Speeches are also strategically utilized in calls for policy change. For example, Jacinda Ardern's speech to the United Nations regarding climate change and multilateralism framed New Zealand's environmental policy as a moral imperative based on global citizenship. Indeed, Hessami and Fonseca (2020) indicate evidence of improvements within policy outcomes with increased female political representation in education, health, and environmental sustainability.

Aung San Suu Kyi's 1995 speech at the NGO Forum on women brought into focus the relationship between peace and security and engendered equal participation of women to become primary agents of change. Her stress on tolerance and mutual respect thus comes into line with Celis and Erzeel's (2013) work on framing gender issues within wider narratives of societal well-being. By integrating these themes, Suu Kyi underscored the transformative potential of inclusivity in fostering sustainable progress.

This representation of women in such speeches carries great implications for public perception and policy making. By framing gender equity both as a basic human right and as an enabler of shared broader goals, leaders effectively challenge deep-seated biases to incite collective action. Indeed, Campbell (2016) draws on evidence to argue that strategic framing by political parties and their leaders about the centrality of women in democratic processes shapes and influences voter perceptions and affects electoral outcomes.

Furthermore, such framing of women as leaders and champions of justice serves to break the lingering underrepresentation in politics. Gilardi (2015) emphasizes that "positive role models and constructive framing raise the likelihood that women will have political ambitions by a remarkably large margin." This is a pointer to the symbolic power of framing, through which attitudes in society are shaped and people's aspirations toward political participation are influenced.

4. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATION

This paper contends that framing theory provides a sound framework within which women leaders can meaningfully address equality and the transformation of society. The examples provided below illustrate the strength of framing in problem identification, proffering solutions, and mobilizing action. This research will evidently illustrate, through critical analysis, how conscious framing changes public perceptions, increases women's representation, and fosters systems of change. In this regard, while global conversations of equality between men and women are gaining momentum, understanding the role of framing in political communication becomes an urgent necessity every day to create an inclusive and equal society for all.

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