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# The effect of media sexism on women's political ambition: evidence from a worldwide study

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents results from one of the first global studies on the relationship between media sexism and the share of candidates for the lower chamber of national parliaments who are women. Data on media sexism come from the Global Media Monitoring Project, the most reliable worldwide source for media coverage from a gender perspective. The data on share of female political candidates come from the Inter-Parliamentary Union. The results show that there is, even when controlling for the number of women in parliament, electoral system, gender quotas, level of human development, level of women's rights, freedom from corruption, and media access, a significant relationship between media sexism—measured as (i) the share of all news subjects that are women and (ii) the share of all news subjects portrayed in the function of experts who are women—and the share of women candidates for parliament: the higher the level of media sexism, the lower the share of women candidates. The theory discussed zooms in on a bystander effect: We hypothesize that sexist portrayals of women in the media stifle ambition among women who, in a less sexist media environment, would be willing to stand as political candidates.

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## Introduction

Despite global progress in women's position vis-à-vis men, two areas in which development is slow are the representation of women in media and that in politics. Data from the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP), the most reliable worldwide source for media coverage from a gender perspective, show that women currently make up 24% of news subjects globally (GMMP 2015a). At the same time, women make up 23% of the world's national parliaments ([www.ipu.org](http://www.ipu.org), January 2017). A burgeoning field of research has emerged in cross-country comparative studies, using a large number of control variables, to test the above-indicated relationship. A prominent example is the publication *Invisible Women? Comparing Candidates' News Coverage in Europe* by Maarja Lühiste and Susan Banducci (2016), using the 2009 European Election Study's Media Content Data, which includes candidate-level data on media coverage in 25 countries. Their study shows that women candidates

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appear less frequently in the media than their male counterparts. The main finding is, however, that the political parties play a significant role regarding the gender differentiation in media coverage: the triggering factor seems to be that political parties tend to not put women candidates forward in viable positions.

The study by Lühiste and Banducci (2016) focused on media coverage three weeks prior to the election of the European Parliament. Thus, they captured the most intense period of the election campaign. We argue that to fully understand the dynamics at work one needs to take a broad picture into account. Our theoretical focus is on women's willingness to become candidates, and it is likely that individuals' ambitions are formed over long periods of time. This leads us to focus on everyday reports in the media rather than reports during election campaigns. More specifically, we hypothesize that sexist portrayals of women in the media have a bystander effect on women citizens, stifling ambition among those who, in a less sexist media environment, would be willing to stand as political candidates. In addition to this shift in focus, from election campaigns to everyday media reports, we present results from one of the first global analyses, covering 56 countries, on the effects of media sexism.<sup>1</sup>

The data included are cross-sectional from one time point: The data on the share of women candidates, the dependent variable, reflect the situation for the most recent election in each country (2012–2015). The data on media sexism, the main independent variable, reflect the situation in 2009. The results show that there is, even when controlling for the number of women in parliament, electoral system, gender quotas, level of human development, level of women's rights, freedom from corruption, and media access, a significant relationship between media sexism—both when measured as the share of all news subjects that are women and as the share of all news subjects portrayed in the function of experts who are women—and the share of women candidates for parliament: the higher the level of media sexism, the lower the share of women candidates. Thus, we find support for the notion that media sexism may play an important role for women's political participation.

The rest of the paper will proceed as follows: First, we review the literature on media sexism and argue for the choice of terminology. Second, we move to the literature on women's political ambition and justify the decision to focus on the share of female political candidates rather than the share of female elected representatives. In this section, we develop the theoretical reasoning on the bystander effect. In the section on data and methodology we present the GMMP data and also discuss what additional data collection was necessary. The results are mainly presented in regression analyses (ordinary least squares [OLS] models). The final section concludes and points out avenues for future research. In the concluding section we also discuss the fact that only two out of nine potential indicators from the GMMP dataset remained significant.

## Media sexism

Often, terms such as gendered media, media bias, and the underrepresentation of women as the “problem of media” are used instead of the concept of media sexism in literature, making it difficult to find a commonly used definition. We define media sexism as the (re) production of societal sexism through under- and misrepresentation of women in media, leading to a false portrayal of society through a gendered lens. Media sexism both reflects sexism in society (media reproducing sexism) and portrays a more gender-segregated picture

than reality (media producing sexism), such that media is a good measure of societal sexism but also makes society more sexist than it would be otherwise. The concept of sexism is contested (Rosalind Gill 2011; Sara Mills 2003; Janet K. Swim, Kathryn J. Aikin, Wayne S. Hall, and Barbara A. Hunter 1995). However, we depart from a definition proposed by UNESCO (2012, 54): "Supposition, belief or assertion that one sex is superior to the other, often expressed in the context of traditional stereotyping of social roles on the basis of sex, with resultant discrimination practiced against members of the supposedly inferior sex." We would further emphasize the subtle and implicit nature of modern sexism, but believe this definition highlights how sexism may negatively affect women's ability to overcome stereotypes undermining their status and the upward mobility of women in society; in this case, the willingness of women to step forward as political candidates. Previous research on women in the media provides reasons for assuming that, overall, what is produced and reproduced in media is a false or twisted portrayal of women (Cynthia Carter and Linda Steiner 2004; Monika Djerf-Pierre 2011).

The literature in the area of media sexism tends to focus on "counting heads;" that is, underrepresentation in sheer numbers (Maria Edström and Josefine Jacobsson 2015; GMMP 1995, 2010, 2015a; Kim Fridkin Kahn and Edie N. Goldenberg 1991; Justin L. Mathews 2007; Rättvisaren 2015; Debby Vos 2013). It is not always obvious what the reference point should be, but sometimes the results are indeed stark: For example, in the 2002 election in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) noted the low success rate of women candidates. In their report the OSCE moved on to highlight that only 3% of the airtime on television and 1% of print media space was allocated to women candidates, suggesting that media downplayed the role of women as political actors (OSCE 2003, 18).

Many studies focus on the misrepresentation of women—a more qualitative aspect. In an analysis of media reports on political leaders in New Zealand, Karen Ross and Margie Comrie (2012) found tacit reference to the sex and other personal attributes of the female candidates but not of their male counterparts. Kim Fridkin Kahn (1994) found that the media agenda follows male candidates' political agendas more than female candidates and is more likely to question the chances women have of winning. Media frames, including trivialization framing, and type of media attention—tabloid outlets for women and broadsheets for men—contributed to the media bias against female candidates in Viorela Dan and Aurora Iorgoveanu's (2013) study of Romania's 2009 European Parliament election. In the forthcoming empirical analyses we incorporate indicators on the underrepresentation, as well as the misrepresentation, of women.

In our review of the literature we find several noteworthy comparative case studies: Diana D. Carlin and Kelly L. Winfrey (2009) compared the media portrayals of Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton and found that, despite variations in how media sexism appeared, both cases suggested that media sexism strengthens the glass ceiling for female politicians. Erika Falk (2008) compared the presidential campaigns of a number of selected female candidates in the United States, from the period 1872 to 2004, against comparable male candidates and found that media sexism had not varied over time. These studies found that media sexism does have a negative impact on women political candidates and elected politicians, but there are studies, based on similar methodologies and samples, showing that men and women are basically treated the same (Lesley Lavery 2013; K. Smith 1997) or that differential media treatments have no impact on candidates (Danny Hayes and Jennifer L. Lawless 2015). This

record of mixed findings was also emphasized by Lühiste and Banducci (2016, 225) in their review of research in the field.

When scholars discuss in greater detail the mechanisms at work, they typically emphasize that media sexism *directly* impacts female candidates' chances of success. Philo C. Wasburn and Mara H. Wasburn (2011) studied the case of Sarah Palin's vice presidential campaign via the "patterns of gendered reporting that have . . . dissuaded women from entering politics" (1027). They identified five patterns: female candidates receive proportionally less coverage than male candidates; stories on female candidates focus more on aspects such as appearance and family; women are more likely to be trivialized and scrutinized in terms of their competence; women's policy positions on women's issues will be in focus, whether or not this is a policy area on which they stand; and their potential influence if they were to win is questioned. Others have identified similar patterns (Jemima Asabea Anderson, Grace Diabah, and Patience Afrakoma Mensa 2011; Tobias Bromander 2012; Carlin and Winfrey 2009; Dan and Iorgoveanu 2013; Richard L. Fox and Jennifer L. Lawless 2014; Caroline Heldman, Susan J. Carroll, and Stephanie Olson 2006; Kahn 1994; Jennifer L. Lawless 2009; Rachel Larris and Rosalie Maggio 2012; Katharine A. M. Wright and Jack Holland 2014).

Our study concerns not how media sexism impacts demand for women politicians, but how it impacts women's willingness to enter politics. Jill C. Bradley-Geist, Ivy Rivera, and Susan D. Geringer (2015, 29) conducted an experiment with the findings that observing sexism (that is, experiencing ambient sexism) decreases the self-esteem—which reduces the sense of self-efficacy and thereby the career aspirations—of the bystander through reinforcing traditional gender roles, and that women are more affected by the bystander effect than men. Ambient sexism describes an *indirect* experience, and the argument is that individuals within a certain environment can be negatively affected, despite not being targeted directly (cf. David E. Campbell and Christina Wolbrecht 2006; Jesse Fox, Carlos Cruz, and Ji Young Lee 2015). There is strong reason to think that the indirect exposure to sexism through media would have a bystander effect on women's political ambition, as we theorize: Stefanie Simon and Crystal L. Hoyt's (2012) experimental study finds that women exposed to gender-stereotypical media advertisement images report less leadership aspiration than those exposed to counter-stereotypical images. This line of reasoning is substantiated by Wasburn and Wasburn (2011), who show how women can be discouraged from becoming political candidates being exploited, for example by being exposed disproportionately often in photographs. The bystander effect suggests that women who otherwise might have considered political candidacy, and who observe sexism targeting women in media, may be less likely to aspire to a political career. To the best of our knowledge, we are the first to test the effect of media-sexism, conceptualized as a bystander effect, in a Large-N study.

### **Why focus on women as political candidates?**

The share of women as elected representatives is the main focus of most international organizations that study gender equality (African Development Bank Group 2015; European Institute for Gender Equality 2015; Social Watch 2008; UNDP.org 2015). Being a candidate is, however, a first step in the recruitment process, and even though some of the dynamics that explain women's final success are also relevant for the earlier phases, there are factors at work in society that risk being overlooked if one ignores early steps.

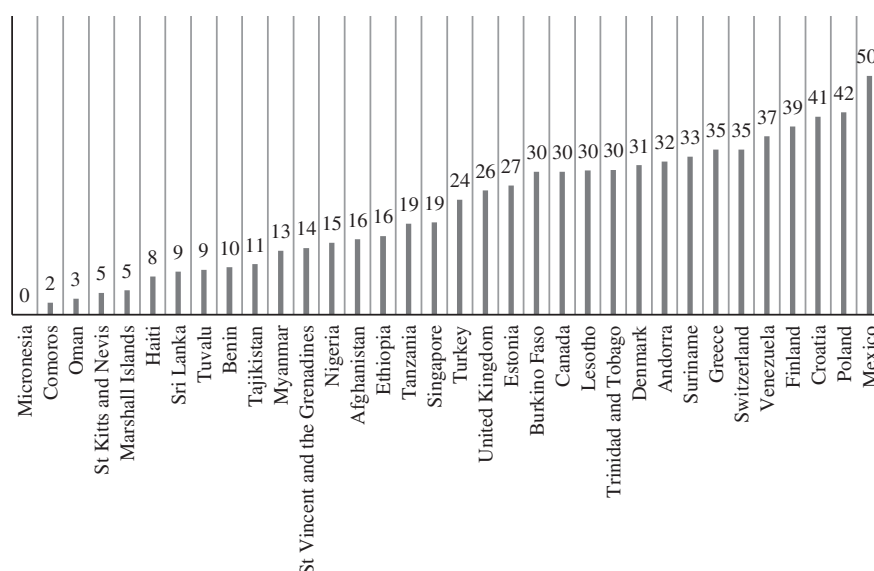
Women's political underrepresentation is often problematized as an issue of supply and demand, where supply refers to how willing women are to enter a political career (Leonardo R. Arriola and Martha C. Johnson 2013; Jeanette Ashe and Kennedy Stewart 2012; Joni Lovenduski and Pippa Norris 1993). Among other factors, Drude Dahlerup, Zeina Hilal, Nana Kalandadze, and Rumbidzai Kandawasvika-Nhundu (2013) pointed to the role of the electoral system, which interacts with electoral gender quotas. Overall, the authors argued that

systems with large district magnitudes (those using multi-member districts) give parties the ability to present a more balanced list of candidates, in which women and men need not compete for a single post in the nomination process within a party. (Dahlerup et al. 2013, 22; see also Amanda Clayton 2015)

In this kind of research, political gatekeepers are often seen as a central part of the problem (Christine Cheng and Margit Tavits 2011; Fox and Lawless 2014; Hayes and Lawless 2015), one that electoral gender quotas can help women overcome (Dahlerup et al. 2013). Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris (2003) discussed how the structural, institutional, and cultural barriers to women entering politics could together explain women's stagnation in political representation. Moreover, sociocultural institutions such as nationalism (Ann Towns, Erika Karlsson, and Joshua Eyre 2014) and ethnic patronage (Arriola and Johnson 2013) can reinforce traditional gender roles that counteract any formal gender equality legislation.

For our study, and supply side explanations in general, the way these country-level determinants interact with women's perceived political opportunity structure and internal efficacy is key. When explaining the low supply of women, the literature on candidate emergence typically suggests a number of factors, such as the incumbency advantage of men and the absence of women in certain occupations and/or other social positions that make them "suitable" for a political career, but women's lack of confidence in their eligibility despite their qualifications is quickly becoming an obvious determinant (cf. Richard L. Fox and Jennifer L. Lawless 2004). Some argue that the male-centered political atmosphere and political socialization dampen women's ambitions (Chinwe R. Ezeifeka and Nneka N. Osakwe 2013; Fox and Lawless 2014), suggesting that the male norm of politics needs to change before women will be fully able to join. Aksel Sundström and Lena Wängnerud (2016) presented evidence from the subnational level in 18 European countries, showing that where levels of corruption are high, the proportion of women elected is low. They suggested that corruption can be perceived as the opposite of impartiality and equal treatment of all citizens: When government authorities are permeated by corruption, citizens receive the signal of a parallel regime that they are expected to adjust to. This can make women, who are generally less privileged in society than men, less willing to step forward as political candidates. This argument is in line with the bystander effect suggested by Bradley-Geist, Rivera, and Geringer (2015).

The experimental study by Bradley-Geist, Rivera, and Geringer (2015) finds that the career ambitions and well-being of bystanders to ambient sexism (i.e., sexism that is targeted at someone else) are negatively impacted by this sexist treatment, despite the fact that they were not personally targeted. They argue that "sexist behaviors observed by bystanders act to reinforce gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles" (30) as expected by "role congruity theory" (when gender roles are reinforced, the incongruity between leadership positions and female social roles are strengthened), "similarity-attraction theory" (women identify more with female targets of sexism, which leads to internalizing the same suffering) and "stereotype threat theory" (trying to avoid confirming negative stereotypes can actually



**Figure 1.** Percentage of female candidates in 2015 elections.

make it more likely that such confirmation occurs). We theorize that media is a conveyor of ambient sexism, as consumers of media are bystanders to the treatment of those represented in media. Therefore, we hypothesize that the bystander effect will impact the career ambitions of women who are bystanders to media sexism.

To conclude, representative democracies depend on the willingness of citizens to step forward as political candidates. Much effort has been devoted to understanding the variation across the globe in the number of women in elected positions such as in national parliaments, but there is no linear relationship between the share of women in elected positions and the share of women among political candidates (see endnote 6). A focus on women as political candidates rather than as elected representatives provides the opportunity for discussions on nascent political ambitions and how institutions such as media may impact women more negatively than they do men.

### **Media sexism as a factor impacting nascent political ambition**

We hypothesize that media sexism is a factor contributing to women's lack of nascent political ambition. Potential women candidates may be put off political careers not only because of the obstacles to success produced by electoral systems, biased gatekeepers, and so forth, but also because of the bystander effect of media sexism discussed above. Demand may, however, also be reduced by media sexism: gatekeepers affected by negative portrayals of women candidates may be less likely to seek women out and nominate them to positions. The forthcoming empirical analysis tests whether media sexism adds to the understanding of variation across countries in the share of women as political candidates. Thus, our focus is on the supply of women as candidates. Figure 1 is an illustration of the current situation regarding the percentages of female candidates in elections in 2015 to the lower chamber of national parliaments around the world; it is a testament to the fact that even countries



with no legal political barriers for women are still impacted by the demand and supply determinants discussed, where media sexism may be one such determinant.

## Methodology

The sample consists of all countries that did not have missing values for any of the variables in the model. The countries included in this study are (in alphabetical order): Australia, Austria, Belarus, Belgium, Benin, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Botswana, Brazil, Bulgaria, Burkina Faso, Canada, Chile, Congo, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Ecuador, Estonia, Ethiopia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Haiti, Hungary, Iceland, India, Jordan, Kenya, Lesotho, Malaysia, Mauritius, Namibia, Nepal, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Paraguay, Poland, Republic of Korea, Romania, Suriname, Sweden, Switzerland, Tanzania, Togo, Trinidad and Tobago, Tunisia, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States of America, and Zimbabwe. The list indicates great variation in terms of media access and gender equality in society at large. Pakistan<sup>2</sup> was an outlier in all models and was therefore excluded from the final models (meaning the final number of observations is 56). We have included a fairly large number of controls in order to reach valid conclusions (see forthcoming sections on the variables included). Table 1 gives the descriptive statistics for all variables.

### *Independent variable: media sexism*

A core feature that distinguishes this study from, for example, that by Lühiste and Banducci (2016) is that we wanted to capture effects of everyday reports in the media. We assume that individuals' political ambitions are formed over longer periods of time, and therefore we have looked for indicators of media sexism outside the intense periods of election campaigns. From that point of view, the only body of relevant, global media sexism data produced in the world is that of the GMMP. The GMMP recruits nationally located coders, trained in the coding guidelines (GMMP 2015b), to code one day of traditional (television, radio, print) news in their country: the 2010 report shows results for news on 10 November 2009, a day chosen because any world event that might skew countries' results could be taken into account (GMMP 2010).<sup>3</sup>

The following indicators from the 2010 GMMP report were chosen because they best represent the patterns of media sexism identified in the case study literature on women candidates:<sup>4</sup> the share of all news subjects who are women; the share of all news subjects

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics.

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Error	Std. Deviation
Share of women candidates	118	50	0	50	22.72	1.191	12.942
Expert	108	63	0	63	19.63	1.274	13.24
Women news subjects	108	83	0	83	22.18	1.131	11.753
Women in lower house	181	56.3	0	56.3	17.73	0.824	11.084
Electoral system	159	1	0	1	0.5	0.04	0.502
Gender quotas	154	4	0	4	0.7	0.109	1.353
Ln HDI	178	1.08	-1.14	-0.06	-0.42	0.019	0.257
Women's rights	171	9	0	9	4.73	0.156	2.04
Ln Freedom from corruption	173	2.93	1.61	98.8	3.57	0.038	0.498
Media access	158	97.3	1.5	98.8	64.87	1.781	22.382
Valid N (listwise)	56						



in the topic area of politics and government who are women; the share of all news subjects in the occupational group of politician who are women; the share of all news subjects portrayed in the function of expert who are women; the difference between the share of all news subjects mentioned by family status who are women minus those who are men; a dummy variable for whether women are more likely to be shown in newspaper photographs and men are not more likely to be shown in photographs; the difference between the share of all stories that reinforce gender stereotypes minus those that challenge them (for example, reinforcing would be a story that ridicules a man in a typically female profession, while challenging would be to celebrate that he is breaking this gender norm); the share of all stories that highlight gender (in)equality; the share of all reporters in the topic area of politics and government who are women.

There is little guidance in previous literature on how to select between these indicators; therefore, all of them were tested in order to provide insight for future research (we only report the significant results). There are two main reasons for not combining the media sexism indicators into one index, both of which would undermine construct validity: first, the possibility of the different indicators having different relationships with the dependent variable; and second, a desire to not dilute results by allowing high media sexism of one indicator to be masked by medium or low media sexism of the other indicators. An abstract concept requires construct validity in order to be meaningfully measured (Robert Adcock and David Collier 2001; Edward G. Carmines and Richard A. Zeller 1979; Marina Popescu 2011; M. A. Thomas 2010). If indicators included in an index relate in different ways to relevant variables, such as the dependent variable and control variables selected, then the index created will not have construct validity (Carmines and Zeller 1979). A lack of construct validity is a valid concern, used to critique established indices such as the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators (Thomas 2010).

### ***Dependent variable: share of women candidates***

The share of candidates for the lower chamber of parliament was used as a proxy for political ambition, for three reasons. First, the share of seats in the lower chamber is the standard measure in the related field of women's descriptive and substantive representation (L. Wängnerud 2009). If women's political representation and electoral success are best measured by how many seats women have in the lower house, the share of candidates for this chamber is an appropriate gauge of political ambition among women in a given context. Second, this measure is comparable across national settings. Third, other elected positions will have far fewer candidates than parliaments do overall. The data for the variable were collected primarily from the Inter-Parliamentary Union's PARLINE dataset ([www.ipu.org](http://www.ipu.org)). A country's most recent election between 2012 and 2015 was included if the lower chamber is elected via direct elections. Missing values were found on national government websites, national electoral commission websites, or through reports by organizations monitoring or observing the election.

### ***Control variables<sup>5</sup>***

Share of women in the lower house<sup>6</sup> (IPU 2010) was selected as a control because the literature suggests that seeing women already represented impacts political ambition. The rest

of the controls were chosen because of their impact on women's electoral success: electoral system (Thorsten Beck, George Clarke, Alberto Groff, Philip Keefer, and Patrick Walsh 2001); gender quotas, an interval variable measuring the gender threshold for the lower or unicameral chamber (Michael Coppedge, John Gerring, Staffan Lindberg, Svend-Erik Skaaning, Jan Teorell, David Altman, M. Michael Bernhard, et al. 2015); women's rights, an additive index of three variables reflecting social, political, and economic rights (David L. Cingranelli and David L. Richards 2010); human development index (HDI), logged (Khalid Malik 2013); freedom from corruption, logged (Heritage Foundation 2014); and media access (Coppedge et al. 2015).<sup>7</sup>

## Results<sup>8</sup>

Two of the media sexism indicators reveal a negative relationship with the share of women candidates that holds up under all relevant controls and supports the hypothesis of media sexism being negatively related to the share of women candidates. Table 2 shows the OLS models of the media sexism indicator for the share of all news subjects who are female, "women news subjects." Table 3 shows the OLS models of the media sexism indicator for the share of news subjects portrayed in the role of expert who are female, "expert." The fact that other indicators did not retain significance throughout the models<sup>9</sup> could be because women in news are often shown in a more negative light than men, as seen in the literature. The media sexism indicators report only the share of women in media in different roles and do not pick up on subtle differences in portrayal (see discussion in summary of results).

The first model in Table 2 is the bivariate analysis including only the independent variable women news subjects and the dependent variable of the share of women candidates. On its own, women news subjects explains 6.8% of the variation in the share of women candidates in this model. A 1% increase in women news subjects correlates with a 0.3% increase in the share of candidates who are women. Women news subjects and all controls together explain 62% of the variation in the share of women candidates, and a 1% increase in women news subjects correlates with a 0.2% increase in share of candidates who are women with all controls included. Table 3 shows that the independent variable expert explains 15.3% of the variation in the share of women candidates on its own, and all independent variables together explain 63% of the variation; a 1% increase in expert leads to a 0.4% increase in the share of women candidates in the bivariate, which decreases to 0.25% when all controls are included.

Interestingly, not all of the controls were shown to be significant. This could be because the controls were based on what is seen in the literature to impact the success of women candidates—that is, the number of women finally elected—not women's political ambition. The only control selected based on the literature expecting it to impact women's willingness to step forward as candidates is the share of women with seats in parliament. The share of women in the lower house has a significant correlation with the share of women candidates in both Table 2 and Table 3, and the correlation is positive. The results in these models act according to the expectation that seeing women in power will increase political ambition.

Electoral system is highly significant throughout all models. As electoral system is a dummy variable, where a proportional representation (PR) system receives a value of 0, the models corroborate the literature on women's representation in politics by suggesting that women are better served in PR than plurality systems. The variable for gender quotas is significant in all models of Table 2 and some models in Table 3, showing that higher gender

**Table 2.** Share of female news subjects.

	Bivariate	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Women news subjects	0.296* (0.149)	0.267* (0.119)	0.209* (0.109)	0.260* (0.105)	0.224* (0.109)	0.246* (0.115)	0.239* (0.115)	0.235* (0.115)
Women in lower house		0.637*** (0.113)	0.539*** (0.106)	0.465*** (0.105)	0.408** (0.114)	0.477** (0.161)	0.491** (0.162)	0.485** (0.161)
Electoral system			−8.619** (2.391)	−9.333*** (2.292)	−9.088*** (2.291)	−8.905*** (2.325)	−8.974*** (2.330)	−8.115** (2.427)
Gender quota threshold				3.090* (1.218)	3.315** (1.226)	3.016* (1.327)	2.758* (1.359)	2.675* (1.355)
Ln HDI					6.021 (4.975)	9.307 (7.338)	12.301 (8.050)	9.186 (8.423)
Women's rights						−0.679 (1.109)	−0.31 (1.182)	−0.537 (1.192)
Ln Freedom from corruption							−3.85 (4.217)	−5.564 (4.434)
Media access								0.138 (0.115)
Constant	20.109*** (3.763)	7.414* (3.750)	15.107*** (4.003)	14.871*** (3.810)	18.773*** (4.977)	21.657** (6.876)	35.335* (16.49)	31.352* (16.748)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.068	0.418	0.534	0.586	0.598	0.601	0.608	0.62

\* $p < .1$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; Standard errors in brackets.  $N = 56$ .

Note: OLS models for the basic, linear relationship between media sexism (women news subjects) and share of women candidates to parliament. One outlier, Pakistan, is excluded. Countries included: Australia, Austria, Belarus, Belgium, Benin, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Botswana, Brazil, Bulgaria, Burkino Faso, Canada, Chile, Congo, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Ecuador, Estonia, Ethiopia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Haiti, Hungary, Iceland, India, Jordan, Kenya, Lesotho, Malaysia, Mauritius, Namibia, Nepal, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria, Norway, Papua New Guinea, Paraguay, Poland, Republic of Korea, Romania, Suriname, Sweden, Switzerland, Tanzania, Togo, Trinidad and Tobago, Tunisia, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States of America, Zimbabwe.

thresholds correlate with a higher share of women candidates. Freedom from corruption is significant in one model only, while HDI, women's rights, and media access are not significant in any of the models. The standard errors of these variables are noticeably high. This is a problem common in models with low observations. Possibly, had there been more observations, the standard errors would have been reduced and control variables would have had greater significance. Although the other controls were not significant, with the exception of corruption the coefficients prescribe the expected relationships.

The lack of significance for many control variables suggests that the factors explaining women's political ambition may differ from the factors explaining their political success; that is, that demand and supply of women candidates have different determinants. This alone is an interesting finding that deserves further exploration. Women's willingness to run is a somewhat different animal from women's success when they do run. First, there can be no assumption of perfect information: Women outside of the political system are unlikely to know what their chances of success in politics are. This can explain why female candidacy remains low, even in countries where women candidates' success rates are high (Lawless 2009). Therefore, even if the political arena is in fact positively inclined to elect women, this will not necessarily translate into women deciding to pursue political careers. Informal institutional factors, such as media sexism and socialization, could have a greater impact on personal decision-making than on evaluations of others—indeed, this has been suggested

**Table 3.** Share of female news subjects portrayed as experts.

	Bivariate	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Expert	0.426** (0.136)	0.318** (0.113)	0.285** (0.101)	0.253* (0.102)	0.222* (0.104)	0.230* (0.107)	0.257* (0.107)	0.253* (0.107)
Women in lower house		0.592*** (0.112)	0.495*** (0.103)	0.454*** (0.105)	0.395** (0.114)	0.351* (0.157)	0.373* (0.155)	0.369* (0.155)
Electoral system			−8.753*** (2.289)	−9.357*** (2.290)	−9.077*** (2.284)	−9.154*** (2.311)	−9.192*** (2.285)	−8.343** (2.383)
Gender quota threshold				1.911 (1.221)	2.308* (1.250)	2.501* (1.345)	2.032 (1.367)	1.962 (1.362)
Ln HDI					6.426 (4.904)	4.043 (7.624)	8.346 (8.086)	5.343 (8.432)
Women's rights						0.441 (1.073)	1.048 (1.139)	0.803 (1.152)
Ln Freedom from corruption							−6.18 (4.212)	−7.831* (4.415)
Media access								0.136 (0.113)
Constant	17.550*** (3.349)	7.519* (3.330)	14.636*** (3.505)	15.889*** (3.548)	19.780*** (4.608)	17.297* (7.625)	38.141* (16.083)	34.181* (16.349)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.153	0.445	0.567	0.587	0.6	0.602	0.619	0.63

\* $p < .1$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; Standard errors in brackets.  $N = 56$ .

Note: OLS models for the basic, linear relationship between media sexism (expert) and share of women candidates to parliament. One outlier, Pakistan, is excluded. Countries included: Australia, Austria, Belarus, Belgium, Benin, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Botswana, Brazil, Bulgaria, Burkino Faso, Canada, Chile, Congo, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Ecuador, Estonia, Ethiopia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Haiti, Hungary, Iceland, India, Jordan, Kenya, Lesotho, Malaysia, Mauritius, Namibia, Nepal, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria, Norway, Papua New Guinea, Paraguay, Poland, Republic of Korea, Romania, Suriname, Sweden, Switzerland, Tanzania, Togo, Trinidad and Tobago, Tunisia, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States of America, Zimbabwe.

(Richard L. Fox and Jennifer L. Lawless 2005). However, there is not scope in this study to solidify these claims.

### **Theoretical support within the results**

Overall, the models tentatively support the hypothesis because they suggest a negative relationship between media sexism and the share of women candidates. Our results appear to align with our theory that nascent political ambition is less likely to develop among women where media sexism is high, and those women who are politically ambitious will be less likely to express this ambition by becoming a candidate than they would have been in an environment free from media sexism.

Although only two media sexism indicators were significant when including all control variables, this does not necessarily mean that the other indicators are unimportant.<sup>10</sup> It could mean that the other media sexism indicators are only significant over time, or that this study has not identified the most important aspects of media sexism. The significance of the first media sexism indicator, share of women news subjects, suggests that being excluded from news media reinforces the idea that the public space is male. It makes sense, however, that being an expert also retained significance even after a tough test: as women are shown more in the prominent role of expert in the media, rather than, for example, being depicted in terms of their personal experience or as an eyewitness, they are portrayed as authoritative

rather than passive. This variable measures both the production and reproduction aspects of media sexism within our theory, depending on the country. In countries where women are established in the workforce, with upward mobility, a low share of women experts as news subjects reflects the media producing sexism: showing society in a more gender-segregated way than the reality. In countries where women are instead not fully present in paying jobs, a low share of women experts as news subjects reflects media reproducing sexism: reinforcing the gendered makeup of the society. In both cases, the bystander effect helps to explain why women seeing media representations that include authoritative, expert female voices could translate that experience into a feeling of belonging in powerful roles in society, such as in politics.

## Summary of results and discussion

The empirical analysis yielded results in support of the expected pattern: the OLS regressions showed a significant relationship between media sexism and the share of women candidates in two of the selected indicators. The null hypothesis—no effect of media sexism—could, therefore, be rejected. Although only two of the tested indicators were significant in all models, it is unlikely that these are the only aspects of media sexism that will impact women's political ambition in reality. Upon reflection, expert is, however, likely to best indicate the idea of media sexism as this study defines it: under- or misrepresentation of women, leading to a false portrayal of society through a gendered lens. Expert voices (including political experts), as opposed to other news subjects—that is, an eyewitness or someone sharing a personal experience—are trusted and respected. When women are missing as experts (or, as in the other significant indicator, missing entirely) in the news, this means there is a lack of authoritative female voices in the public sphere. Lonna Rae Atkeson (2003) found that it is only when women candidates are viable and have a chance of actually beating their male competitors that they raise political engagement among “ordinary” women. This could mean that the share of female experts in the news is even more effective for raising political ambition than the share of women politicians.

This study theorizes that media both produces and reproduces sexism. One explanation for the lack of women experts in the news could be that women are less willing to adapt to media logics, making it more difficult to form meaningful relationships with journalists (Toril Aalberg and Jesper Strömbäck 2011). Our focus, however, has been on the effects of media sexism and not on explanations for why this phenomenon occurs in the first place. The mechanism we suggest is a bystander effect (Bradley-Geist, Rivera and Geringer 2015) that ensures that women consuming media in societies across the globe are exposed indirectly to the sexism targeted at those represented in media; thereby, traditional gender roles are reinforced, which dissuades women from seeing themselves as equally suited to politics. Portraying women politicians and candidates, and indeed women in general, in the news in a way that gives them less agency, less credibility, or simply less space signals that women considering a political career must overcome powerful informal norms, even in contexts where official laws and regulations already have been altered to include them.

The most important recommendation for future research is to continue efforts to understand what aspects of media sexism influence women's political ambition. Reproducing this study using panel data could help establish causality, which our study is only able to theorize. However, there are also more insights to be gained from further cross-sectional investigation

by incorporating control variables not possible in this study; for example, the World Values Survey variable on whether men make better political leaders than women. Moreover, different levels and stages of democracy (Dahlerup et al. 2013; Elza Ibroscheva and Maria Raicheva-Stover 2009), gender empowerment indices (Chris G. Sibley, Nickola C. Overall, and John Duckitt 2007), and length of time that women have been legally able to stand for elections could be influential. How parties vary on the left–right scale according to female participation and gender quotas (Dahlerup et al. 2013), and how party identification influences gender group voting (Kelly L. Winfrey, Benjamin R. Warner, and Mary C. Banwart 2014), are interesting subnational considerations. Qualitative research focusing on understanding the mechanisms behind the relationship would add to the theory, as would survey data that aims to understand how everyday women—those who have not developed or expressed political ambition—themselves explain the impact media sexism has on them<sup>11</sup>.

All in all, the evidence presented in this study is encouraging—we know more about the potential impact of media sexism on women’s willingness to step forward as political candidates than we did prior to these analyses. The research area on relationships between media coverage and women’s participation in political life is challenging indeed, not least if one starts to think of social media as well, and there is a need for more studies to reach conclusive results.

## Notes

1. In this study all references to media should be understood as references to traditional, rather than social, media.
2. There is no obvious reason why Pakistan is an outlier. As per Pakistan’s 2015 national GMMP report ([http://cdn.agilitycms.com/who-makes-the-news/Imported/reports\\_2015/national/Pakistan.pdf](http://cdn.agilitycms.com/who-makes-the-news/Imported/reports_2015/national/Pakistan.pdf)), Pakistani media was privatized in 2002, creating certain “glass ceilings’ and ‘sticky floors’” and the English and Urdu language media differ in terms of women’s representation. It could be because the 2010 report was the first Pakistan participated in (though it was not alone in this for the sample). Models run with the outlier included are less statistically powerful for the indicator of share of women news subjects in total (it does not retain significance with all controls included), but equally compelling for the indicator of share of women experts (where significance is upheld with all controls included, and the coefficient for the expert variable is 0.4 in the bivariate model and 0.3 with all controls included). These models are available from the authors upon request.
3. The GMMP explains that big news events, whether on a global, regional, or national scale, can have an impact on media at any given time. Choosing one day for coding across all countries therefore limits the likelihood of these events impacting certain observations differently than others, as far as this can be controlled.
4. Indicators 5–8 are computed from the original indicators provided in GMMP 2010, 66–107.
5. Several other interesting control variables (such as GDP/capita, women’s education, and religion) were excluded from the models because of their high correlation with the human development index (HDI) or because they reduced the sample size greatly.
6. The share of women in parliament is not correlated highly enough with the share of women candidates to be considered a proxy: the Pearson correlation between the two variables is 0.683.
7. A complete list of sources (including those used to fill in missing values in the dependent variable) is available from the authors upon request.
8. Using ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions in a cross-sectional dataset requires satisfying conditions of validity and reliability (linearity of data, no outliers, no multicollinearity, normality of the distribution of errors, homoskedasticity); these conditions are all met, although certain outliers are seen, and therefore models were run both with and without these.

9. Several indicators were significant in bivariate models or when including some, but not all, controls.
10. In an earlier version of this study, interaction models were tested alongside models of the basic OLS relationship. When the media sexism indicators were interacted with a dummy version of the women's rights variable (where a value of 1 is given to countries with a score higher than 4.5 and 0 to those below), all models with the media sexism indicator for share of experts were significant, as were all models with the media sexism indicator for whether women are more likely to be photographed than men. When the media sexism indicators were interacted with the HDI, all models with the media sexism indicator of whether women are more likely to be photographed than men were again significant.
11. We thank our anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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