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## Portrayal of Society through Sexist Lenses: Misrepresentation of Women in Business in Print Media in Lesotho

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### ABSTRACT

Reputation can build a person's business profile to propel them to greater heights or ruin them and their business enterprise. The media can prop up a business or destroy it as perception carries value with customers. This study therefore sought to establish how the media in Lesotho gives coverage on female businesspeople in the country. The study interviewed women in business to solicit their opinions on how they benefit from how the local print media portray them.

### INTRODUCTION

The media can propel business to greater heights or destroy it through negative reporting. Providing no coverage at all to business entities can also cause harm because not all businesses can afford to pay for advertisement on radio, television or in newspaper and magazine outlets. Business and the media oil each other, with the business buying advertising space in media outlets and the media providing publicity to the businesses. Therefore, there must be an interdependent relationship of building each other and propping each other up. A relationship based on mutual respect between the media and female-owned business enterprises. This study therefore sought to establish the existence and strength of the relationship between the media and female owned businesses in Lesotho.

### Background

In Africa, women are challenged to access requisite resources for establishing and sustaining a business. This is because of gender barriers that militate against women. For Basotho women, establishing a successful entrepreneurial enterprise is also a big challenge which renders women to remain on the periphery of the economy (Langwenya, Mabuza and Tshabalala, 2011). For example, before 2008, a woman who wanted to establish a business enterprise was prohibited from becoming the company director unless she received permission from her husband in Lesotho. The country changed this policy with the adoption of the Companies Act No 7 of 2008 International (Labour Organization, 2014). Although the law allows women to start their own businesses and be registered as directors of the business entities, society still has perceptions of women as secondary citizens to men. The media, however, has the power to change these societal perceptions.

### Theoretical Framework

#### Agenda Setting Theory; Framing and Priming.

This study is framed by the agenda setting theory. This is because, if the media in Lesotho sets the agenda to promote gender balance in business reporting in order to drive the economic development of the country, women owned enterprises will be propelled to greater heights. That can create more employment to absorb more of the population of the workforce as compared to those currently employed. This is mainly so considering women's tenacity when they start businesses. The media can help achieve those goals by setting the agenda of deliberately giving balanced reporting for the genders. Considering that women in business have been disadvantaged due to traditional culture, the media can tap into the aspects of agenda setting whereby women in business activities can be prioritized; that is priming and framing their issues.

The agenda-setting theory was propounded by Walter Lippman in 1922 when he established the important role that the media can play in presenting issues that can make audiences focus their attention on. Scheufele and Tewksbury (2006) explain that agenda setting refers to the idea that there is a strong correlation between the emphasis that the mass media place on certain issues and the importance attributed to these issues by the audience. They say that this is based on relative placement or amount of coverage of issues.

Agenda setting is therefore making some issues look more important than others. Priming is when the media shape people's considerations when making judgements about issues (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2006). Framing assumes that how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by an audience (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2006).

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

Expanding freedom of expression and providing equal coverage to the genders is a human rights issue (Djerf-Pierre & Edstrom, 2020). That way, sustainable societies can be established. Equal coverage of the genders in all aspects of socio-economic activities in societies is therefore most ideal.

The way women are presented in the media can influence how women perceive entrepreneurship, whether it is desirable with attainable goals (Eikhof, Summers and Carter, 2013). This therefore impacts how they invest and focus on developing their business efforts. Eikhof *et al* go on to say that media portrayal of female entrepreneurs also impacts how stakeholders such as bankers and clients perceive and interact with female business owners. This has repercussions on female-owned businesses and their business relations and opportunities (Eikhof *et al*, 2013). The Cherie Blair Foundation for Women carried out a survey in 2021 and established that:

- 75% of women respondents to the survey questions responded that gender stereotypes were most conveyed in their childhood by family members.
- 68% responded that gender stereotyping was conveyed in the media.
- 48% responded that gender stereotyping was disseminated in education.
- 72% of women responded that a more supportive entrepreneurial ecosystem would have encouraged them to start their own business.
- 68% of respondents said that seeing more successful women entrepreneurs represented in advertisements, television, or social media could have encouraged them to start their own businesses.

Women's presence in business is growing. However, the media under and misrepresents them in business media with negative effects on their entrepreneurial and other work aspirations (Power, Rak and Kim, 2020). The media can be detrimental through disseminating gender stereotypes (Montiel, 2015). The consequences are the reinforcement of gender inequality. The media should therefore try to provide equal coverage to both men and women in business and issues related to the businesses. More gender balanced reporting will encourage more women to establish their own businesses and help with the growth of the national economy.

### Statement of Problem

The traditional culture of male dominance over everyday activities has a negative impact on perceptions on women in business. The media whether willingly or unwillingly can perpetuate that practice of giving prominence to male businessmen at the expense of their female counterparts. That practice can be detrimental to the development and success of businesses owned by women. The media therefore must balance on the genders when reporting business news.

## METHODOLOGY

In order to capture the perceptions of female entrepreneurs

on how the media in Lesotho covers female-owned businesses, the study will gather, present and analyze data qualitatively. Qualitative research is planned, ordered and public search for meaning basing on participants' interpretation of events based on their experience (Ospina, 2004). Interviews were carried out with women in business in order to solicit for their perceptions based on their experiences with media coverage of women in business in Lesotho. The individual interview has the value of getting insight into participants' perceptions, understandings and experiences (Frances, Coughlan and Cronin, 2009). For this study, it gave in-depth collection of female entrepreneurs' experiences with media coverage of their businesses and portrayal of female entrepreneurs at individual level. The interviewees were 12 in total. These came from the female business community categorized as small scale, medium scale and large-scale female industrialists. The sampling method for the selection of interviewees was purposive. Purposive sampling is when a researcher uses their expertise to select a sample that is most useful to the purpose of the research (McCombes, 2019). It is employed where the scholar seeks to establish detailed knowledge about a specific phenomenon rather than make statistical inferences. This choice of purposive sampling was informed by the fact that the interviewers settled on active businesswomen who have experience with Lesotho media coverage of female owned businesses. The voice of their experience is what the study values.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Findings

One female respondent said that women expect the media to break the stereotype that "males do better in business than females" by at least making research and finding out about a lot of female entrepreneurs who are making it big out there in business and try to cover as many stories as they can about those females with the aim to inspire the upcoming generation of females.

Another respondent said that presenting stories about female entrepreneurs in the media will bring the topic of business foundation closer to the public and leverage intentions to engage in female entrepreneurial activities.

Another respondent said "I think the media industry has had its own challenges to overcome in the drive towards gender equality. Even looking at the newsrooms themselves, they have been traditionally male dominated, but nowadays, female journalists outnumber male journalists all over the world.

"So, what I have seen happening over the years is that male entrepreneurs receive significantly more media coverage than female entrepreneurs because we as people in general, we still have that old mentality that if someone is a male, they can do better at anything than when they're a female, therefore, almost majority of things done by females, they are not taken seriously than when males do them".

Another female respondent said that there is a lot of underrepresentation of women in business by the print media compared to how they represent men.

"Women are depicted in weak roles or positions, portrayed

as housewives and used as sex objects and newspapers try to silence them. Men are the only ones portrayed as heroes in businesses by the print media”, another respondent said. “On Tv men are categorized on occupational role casts while women are given wifely duty responsibility roles and are always cast in marital roles, depicted as weak and unintelligent”, yet another respondent said.

## DISCUSSION

Mainstream media such as newspapers, radio and television can be drivers for the establishment and development of female owned businesses. However, due to factors such as gender bias, women in business and their enterprises may suffer from gender discrimination. Therefore, the media in Lesotho should be deliberate in setting the agenda to include women entrepreneurs in their reporting. The media institutions can even do better by ensuring equal effort is invested in reporting on women owned businesses equally as is done for male owned enterprises. However, if the mainstream media organizations have other reasons for not reporting on women owned businesses as they do for male owned enterprises, women entrepreneurs will have to explore other alternatives. Other media outlets must be harnessed as alternatives to mainstream media due to the opportunities offered by the Internet, for example. Cesaroni, Emartini and Paolini carried out a study on the use of social media by women in business in developing economies. They came up with several observations from which women in business from Lesotho can benefit. They say that women entrepreneurs’ ability to take advantage of social media could result from their greater propensity to adopt a community-based approach and maintain social relationships, and from a greater predisposition to interact with customers and perceive their needs. Women are better able to perceive and establish potentialities of social media and to take advantage of them. They also can sell their products online even if they live in remote locations. Social media provides the support for the creation of online communities and social networks. It has made it possible for women from low-income Indonesian communities to start businesses with low investments and operating costs. Cesaroni *et al* also observed that women in India were able to establish businesses at low start-up and running costs; to sell handmade products or services online.

## CONCLUSION

This study sought to establish women in business in Lesotho’s opinions on how the mainstream media portray female entrepreneurs and their enterprises. Female interviewees responded that the media in Lesotho is biased towards male owned businesses and male businessmen at the expense of female entrepreneurs and their businesses. For the economy to grow in an all-inclusive manner, there should be balance when reporting male and female owned businesses. Women are also encouraged to harness Internet platforms to market their businesses in the face of bias in mainstream media reporting of male and female-owned businesses and businesspeople.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The media has the capacity to bring about a balance in entrepreneurship by dismantling gender stereotypes that affect women entrepreneurs’ businesses in Lesotho. With a show of commitment, the media can help establish an enabling gender-balanced business ecosystem in the country. This is possible with close collaboration between media organizations and female entrepreneurs. Women in business are also encouraged to harness communication platforms enabled by the Internet to increase the visibility of their businesses and circumvent the limitations imposed upon their enterprises by male bias in mainstream media coverage of business reporting.

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