

## Mediated Scandals and Blame Game: Hina Rabbani Khar, the First Pakistani Woman Foreign Minister's Gendered Media Construction

**Abstract:** *Using media framing as the guiding lens and drawing on the insights from qualitative content analysis, this study explores Hina Rabbani Khar, Pakistan's first female foreign minister's mediated scandal, gendered portrayals, and their potential impact on the audience. The data comprises 59 news stories, articles, and broadcasts from different channels collected during the first 16 months of her tenure. Results show that the media seldom focused on political agenda; instead jeopardized Khar's position, profiled her to be in illicit relationships with Bilawal Bhutto Zardari that eclipsed her political achievements. For the international media has been way ahead of the national media, their preferences of sustaining gender polarities, therefore, transcend geographical boundaries. Change in the media's approach of the women politicians' coverage (especially those elevated to higher political positions) is, thus, desirable for confirming equitable media portrayals and accepting their position as equal to men in politics.*

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**Key Words:** Gendered Blaming, Media Framing, Women Politicians, Media Portrayals, Political Agenda

### Introduction

Women in power are subjected to a range of bizarre treatment such as sexuality, adherence to gender norms (or in some cases, its lack thereof), appearance, and private lives (Allern, Kantola, Pollack & Blach-Orsten, 2012; Baxter, 2018; Osawa, 2015). There is no denying the fact that being an essential and the most attended part of today's political arena, female politicians' mediated scandals (Allern & von Sikorski, 2018; Pollack, et al., 2018; von Sikorski, 2018) have the potential to jeopardize their political standing contrary to their male counterparts (Brooks,

2014; Entman, 2012; Entman & Stonbely, 2018; Kumlin & Esaiasson, 2012; Zemojtel-Piotrowska, Marganski, Baran & Piotrowski, 2017). This study, therefore, endeavors to review the interrelatedness of mediated gender politics (Williams, 2020, 2021) and blaming (if so) of Hina Rabbani Khar, the first women foreign minister, their effects on her position and positioning, and potential impact on the audience.

A few studies (e.g., Ahmad, Hafeez & Shahbaz, 2020; Bano, 2009) show that women in Pakistan face a diverse range of challenges, such as represented being body shamed and immoral,

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on the social margins having disadvantaged positions as appropriated territory (e.g., [Shaheed, 2010](#)), fashion icons (e.g., [Malik & Kiani, 2012](#)), and victims of dynastic elitism (e.g., [Akhtar & Mushtaq, 2014](#)). Other related studies highlight that during selection for key positions, women are victims of gender polarities and undemocratic norms (e.g., [Bari, 2010](#); [Matloob, Shabbir & Saher, 2020](#)) for they do not have an equal say in political parties' decision-making (e.g., [Bano, 2009](#); [Repila, 2013](#)) and hence, are subordinated in the power structure (e.g., [Ahmad & Anwar, 2018](#)). Nonetheless, Benazir Bhutto's election as the first woman Prime Minister of Pakistan made it the trendsetter Islamic country in empowering women in the arena of politics ([Bano, 2009](#)). Even though women have a good representation in Pakistani politics, the diverse socio-cultural dynamics such as household responsibilities, male politicians' intrusion, the underlying patriarchal structure, etc. are greatly instrumental in challenging the women politicians' careers and hindering their way of empowerment ([Zakar, Zakar & Hamid, 2018](#)).

To our knowledge, this is the first study that systematically examines Khar's alleged love affair through the lens of mediated framing ([Coleman, 2010](#); [Entman, 1993, 2007, 2012](#)). Consequently, this exploratory study has a substantial niche and makes multiple contributions to the literature relevant to women politicians' mediated and gendered portrayals. Taking into account the cultural differences and male-dominated politics, and the possible cross-national ideological and socio-political variations, this exploratory study investigates whether women politicians' acceptability is only confined to sociopolitical settings of Pakistan, or is a global phenomenon. For this purpose, the study endeavors to answer the following question: Whether Khar's media portrayals are framed? If yes, how do the national and international media differ in reporting scandals compared to political agenda and policy issues? This exploration of Khar's mediated scandal thus aims to broaden readers' intellectual horizons related to the construction of gender polarities that the media upholds through portraying women politicians in a different way than their male counterparts.

### **Gender and Blame Game: The Media's Power**

The burgeoning body of research on the media's framing (e.g., [D'Angelo, 2017](#); [D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2010](#)) shows that the impact of the newsroom discourse is still entrenched in the cultural, political, and social conventions related to women in power. The concept of shifting standards and women's acceptability ([Biernat, 2012](#)) allows for more precise predictions about how a scandal—undesirable conduct can result in a more or less hasty judgment depending on the offender's specific characteristics rather than generalizations connected to gender roles, expectations, and societal gender stereotypes ([Bengoechea, 2011](#); [Brescoll, 2016](#)) interpreting social reality ([D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2010](#)). Politicians' inconsistency with societal norms and scandals can weaken moral underpinnings and can be particularly destructive to a politician's image resulting in decreased support for the allegedly accused individuals ([Courtemanche & Connor Green, 2020](#); [Maier, 2011](#); [von Sikorski, 2018](#)). The most severe cases of political scandal are those in which individual(s) in a public position break either the sociocultural or the institutional/constitutional order, that is, the standards governing the exercise of power ([Bauer, 2020](#); [Neckel, 2005](#)). Furthermore, scandals can hurt a politician's likeability and electoral prospects ([Vivyan, Wagner & Tarlov, 2012](#)) because the audience's image-making profoundly influences their acceptability ([Cwalina & Falkowski, 2016](#)).

Women's engagement in many professional arenas in Pakistan shows signs of development but media filters continue to have an enormous impact on gender issues, and capital gains (easily attainable through framed news) continue to play a significant role in the perpetuation of gender stereotypes ([Malik & Kiani, 2012](#)). Additionally, research on women politicians' media portrayals, particularly those elevated to the key positions is still in its infancy, and the scope of eliciting the relevant framing effects regarding political scandals ([Dan, 2018](#); [von Sikorski, 2018](#); [von Sikorski & Ludwig, 2018](#)) from a different socio-cultural perspective such as that of Pakistan cannot be denied. Being 35 years old and the daughter of a well-known politician, she was

appointed Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs on July 19, 2011, making her the world's youngest female foreign minister at the time. We, therefore, examine Hina Rabbani Khar's (Pakistan's first-ever Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs) media framing and evaluate how she has been blamed and scandalized.

Putting it all together, previous research on women politicians (e.g., [Powell, Boomgaarden, De Swert, & de Vreese, 2015, 2018](#); [von Sikorski & Knoll, 2018](#);) highlights that gender preconceptions impact the careers of female politicians and gender stereotypes have a strong effect on a woman's acceptability and electability. Despite the absence of overt prejudice against women in politics, which has lately been documented, the matter of whether the media portray women and men in politics the same still necessitates attention.

### **Data and Methodology**

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Using media framing ([Entman, 1993, 2007](#); [Lecheler & De Vreese, 2019](#)), this study explores and explains the impact of the media's blaming on a female politician(s) mediated construction as gender stereotypes have strong gendered implications ([Brook, 2014](#)). This study is based on the qualitative content analysis ([Fairclough & Wodak, 2007](#); [Goffman, 1974](#)) of 59 news reports, articles, editorial opinions, photographs with captions, and news broadcasts (see Appendix A containing web addresses of the data cited via the numbers in [] for avoiding confusion between the in-text citation and data web addresses) from different national and international media sources. In addition to widely read newspapers (published both online and print) from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Malaysia, the United States, and Australia; public and private television networks from Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh are included.

As of July 19, 2011, when Khar assumed her office as foreign minister, the corpus covers the time through November 15, 2012. Following Khar's appointment as Pakistan's first female foreign minister, her first trip to India, and alleged love affair with Bilawal Bhutto Zardari dominated the media. To get a complete picture of Khar's media portrayals, almost all the accessible sources were explored. Qualitative

content analysis ([Creswell, 2013](#)) functioned as a powerful tool for uncovering the deeply embedded themes in the media discourses and delineations entrenched in cultural conventions, which offer the grounds for the construction of gender systems and sustain gender ideologies in society.

### **Mediated Political Scandals: Gender and Blame Game**

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There no denying the fact that gender stereotypes still exist in today's globalized world, even in the age that claims gender equality. The way the mainstream media report the news reflects social prejudices in the conception of social reality—mediated in nature though. Politics being primarily understood as the man's world ([Harp & Bachmann, 2018](#)), the mediated discourses ([Byerly & Ross 2008](#); [Ross & Ross, 2010](#); [Scollon, 2014](#)) are instrumental in shaping public opinion, which allows the audience to understand the political reality.

Initially, the media portrayed Khar as “the distinct youngest politician's” [10] ascension to the key political position as a step towards sending Pakistan's “soft image” [1,3,5] and declared her “a source of hope” [13,17,18]. However, the media's trend turned hastily towards portraying her as “inexperienced” [24, 25, 27, 28] and hence unsuitable for the said position. Having a “flirting and shrewd smile” [40], a few labeled her as “a definite fashionista” [35] whereas a few others declared her “a rare combination of beauty and brains” [36], who has been celebrated for her “Birkin bag” [37] [15]. Labeled as a “Glamorous woman in politics” [50] [52], and scoring “full marks on the style meter” [38] in a “monotone blue suit” [38] [39] [43] [52], but still “unfit and untrained” [8,41] to be ascended to such an important political position, Khar has been the source of news headlines for the mainstream media.

Keeping in mind the media's role in the gender blame game, maintained through the coercive strategy ([Thompson, 2013](#)), the word “Rumors” [31] proved to be extremely useful in portraying the news of Khar's alleged love affair with Bilawal Bhutto as credible while spreading in “hushed tones” [12, 54, 55, 56]. Even though Khar's love affair was referred to as a rumor in

the majority of cases [54, 55, 56], the media considered it worth reporting. The authenticity of the media's claims has been confined to the most common verbiage such as 'according to media sources' which propagate:

Khar received a "special gift" in the form of a floral bouquet as well as a handwritten greeting card that read, "No wonder we waited long enough, not [sic] it's time to put an end to our waiting. "Happy Eid Mubarak!" She was falsely identified as Bilawal's (Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, the head of the Pakistan People's Party) girlfriend without any evidence [31].

While going a step farther, the Indian newspaper, Khaama Press, stated:

It was Asif Ali Zardari who first learned of Bilawal Bhutto's extramarital encounters with Hina Rabbani Khar after the couple was discovered in a compromised scenario inside the President's official mansion, where Bilawal Bhutto's son also resides...When Hina Rabbani Khar gave Bilawal a birthday greeting card on his birthday...with a handwritten inscription declaring—"The foundation of our connections is eternal, and soon we shall be just ourselves," Asif Ali Zardari became well aware of the situation [31].

### **Mediated Scandals: Transcending Geographical Boundaries**

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For, the news is not made up of what is 'happening' rather it is made up of what is believed to be 'newsworthy'—events that must be reviewed, packaged, and reported to be broadcast. It is, hence, worth noting that the media uses bombastic language to make their stories appear genuine and that is also true in the case of Khar's love affair scandal. For example, Blitz Weekly, a Bangladeshi tabloid, claimed to have discovered "a bombshell" [34] regarding Khar and Bilawal's secret love affair. Such carefully chosen words not only increase the number of people who read the news stories but also have a powerful impact on their minds, causing prejudice, undermining the leadership potential of female politicians when compared to male politicians, and making females less desirable in powerful positions in society ([Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009](#); [Williams, 2017](#)).

By pushing specific aspects of a story while picking, stressing, and elaborating the discourse that has a significant impact on the audience ([Entman, 1993, 2007, 2012](#)), the media is also capable of deciding the significance of a scandalous portrayal and how much time and space should be devoted to its coverage. The same is true in the instance of Khar's alleged love affair, which gained widespread attention through gendered discourses of defamation and allegations on the Internet, television, and print media causing challenges for her [4]. To heighten the dramatic impact of the story, the media speculated that Pakistan's President, Asif Ali Zardari (who had previously declared her to be an asset of the nation [3]), might enlist the assistance of Islamic clerics to sanction a fatwa (a religious decree) expelling her from the country because her alleged love affair might bring disrepute to the country [42]. Even though the scandal was proven to be fabricated when the Bangladeshi government arrested Salahuddin Shoaib Chaudhry, the editor of Weekly Blitz, on the charges of irresponsible or yellow journalism [44, 45, 46], nonetheless, we cannot jump to conclusions that such actions would push the media to refrain from gender stereotypes in women's portrayals.

The news of Khar's purported love affair served as a springboard for media stereotyping, which glorified the alleged affair by comparing it to the legendary story of Layla and Majnun and proclaiming, "Bilawal is bachcha Majnu [child Romeo] to Hina's experienced Laila [Juliet]" [39]. The media also compared Khar's alleged relationships with Bilawal to the well-known love story of one of the Mughal princes, named Prince Salim, and one of the court dancers, named Anarkali and dubbed Khar and Bilawal's position as "Pakistan's Mughal-e-Azam" [53]. Consequently, the media was able to create salience ([Thompson, 2013](#)) by portraying Khar's love affair (alleged though) as something of the greatest importance for the viewers.

Although the Bangladeshi tabloid "Blitz weekly" reports on Hina and Bilawal's love affair scandal proved to be fabricated and a part of a defamation campaign but it has served as a spark to hold the audience's attention for a longer time. The Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Pakistan

showed strong resistance to defaming the country's female foreign minister and in response to the report published in *The Telegraph*, a leading newspaper, issued a warning stating:

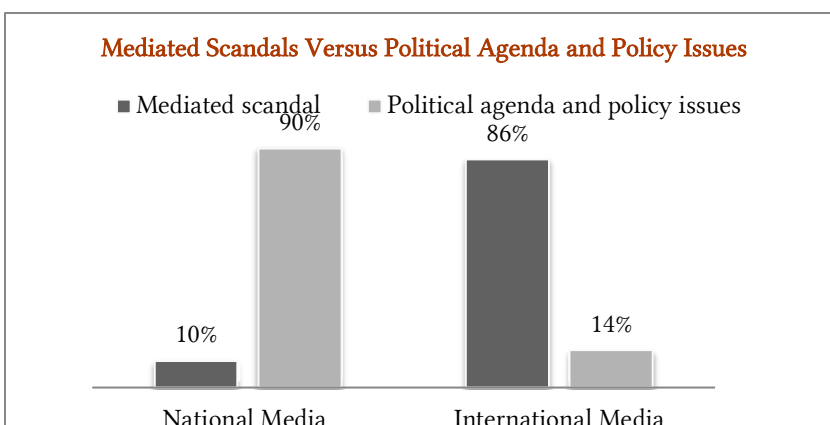
The *Telegraph*... must act with greater responsibility and verify the reliability of material received from various sources before publishing such harmful pieces... According to the military, it has the authority to "take legal action on such anonymous reports without identifying any individuals or sources" [27].

As marital infidelity (Chang, 1999; Mandell, 2015) has the potential for substantial ramifications to the integrity of persons in high positions, the instance of Khar's alleged love affair, holds a due place because it caused a significant dent both to the country's image and her popularity at a time when she was holding a prominent political position in Pakistan. In the context of how public opinion is formed, Khar's media representations focusing on her gender and private life were not only meant for weakening her political credibility as a woman politician but also put Pakistan in a challenging situation. The media deemed Hina Rabbani Khar as unacceptable due to her lack of expertise, which was exploited through a "double-bind" and "well-honed media campaign" (Mandell, 2015), and above all due to her femininity.

Besides, the media predicted that President Asif Ali Zardari would remove her from the cabinet on the grounds of earning a bad name for Pakistan, which probably might not have been so

in the case of a male politician. As said earlier, the media showed undue interest in the matter and they expected that the President of Pakistan would ask the prominent religious leaders to issue a Fatwa (an Islamic ruling for doing something wrong that results in a heavy punishment) against her and remove her from the cabinet. The National Assembly of Pakistan was dissolved on March 16, 2013, and general elections were held in May 2013, the media did not succeed in their coercive and scandal-mongering policy (Allern & von Sikorski, 2018) and as a result, she stepped down from her position. Nonetheless, the media obstructed her progress because she was "not only turning heads but also working to shatter prejudices about female leaders?" [51]. The damage done to her reputation as a foreign minister by the media could not be used to challenge traditional media (gendered) portrayals such as "Majnun and Laila [39], "Main hun Khshrang Hina" [60] translates as "I am pretty Hina", Khar's first name, Hina, being manipulated and compared with "Henna"—a shrub used for dying hands and hair.

Taken as a whole (see Figure 1), the national media preferred focusing the policy issues and political agenda whereas the international media's preferences were slanted towards covering the alleged scandal, which proved to be a rumor but none of them published any apologies for demoting a woman politician on the allegations that were unfounded.



**Figure 1:** Distribution of topics in national and international media

Seen through the lens of the media frames ([Entman, 2012](#)), Hina Rabbani Khar's media portrayals (particularly in the international news) were unfounded ([Kumlin & Esaiasson, 2012](#)). The findings of this study thus show that the media still supports the norms that risk women politicians' identities and their acceptability and competence to compete in mainstream politics. Conforming to the previous research on the media's role (e.g., [Allern & von Sikorski, 2018](#); [D'Angelo, 2017](#); [Pollack, et al., 2018](#); [von Sikorski, 2018](#); [Zakar, et al., 2018](#)), this study shows that the media discourse operates at multiple levels of subjectivity that promote gender traditions and lacks the broader perspective essential for acknowledging women politicians in key political positions. That is why women politicians have yet to travel a long way towards gender equality, which is still male-dominated and gender conventions ridden.

Compared to their male counterparts, the media's harsh treatment of women politicians is also dependent on the media type, the context, and country of origin ([Bhatti, Hansen & Olsen, 2013](#)). Contrary to this fact, Hina Rabbani Khar's ascension to a higher position was an enormous leap in the acknowledgment of gender equality in Pakistan. Nonetheless, the media, particularly international news focused on her alleged scandal in addition to her physical exquisiteness, fashion, and gender that resulted in eclipsing her political acumen to important political issues. Because of the long-standing stereotypes, the mainstream media deliberately acted as the gatekeeper of gender conventions and delineated the arena of politics as "an essentially male pursuit" ([Trimble, 2014](#); [Williams, 2017, 2020, 2021](#)). This type of reinforcement of the mediated scandals not only regulates prevalent mindsets that trivialize women politicians but also configures politics in the customary stereotypical modus operandi. Under the pretext of presenting the 'real world', the mainstream media, thus, replicate dominant gender values, patterns, and ideals bolstering male supremacy and female subservience ([Ross, 2010](#), William, 2020). These discrepancies in the mediated portrayals—as is contended—show

specific framing ([Entman, 2012](#); [Reese, 2001, 2007](#); [von Sikorski, 2018](#)) of the alleged scandals and shape the audience's attitudes/views. Despite the initiatives taken for gender equalities such as gender quotas, the mediated scandals of women politicians serve as one of the major hindrances in the way of their equitable position to their male counterparts.

### **Summative Remarks: The Way Forward**

In summation, the results of this study demonstrate that a politician's scandals, either alleged or factual, result in adverse evaluations ([von Sikorski, 2018](#)). The media's active involvement unfolds scandals (either political or personal) on different levels and generates a 'shock-like' scenario that evokes various forms of public scrutiny. This intentional narrative is essential on the media's part for making a potential scandal something beyond merely an incident—a moral and ethical transgression bearing public interest and relevance ([Zulli, 2021](#)). That being set forth, it is evident that the transgressions the media frame for constructing the scandalized self of women politicians have the traces of being made newsworthy through deeply personalized and deliberate narrative development. Such narratives of moral transgressions are framed for collective and immediate emotional reactions of the public and are instrumental in further intensifying the readily anticipated outcomes. These outcomes are primarily aimed at undermining the women politicians' gender, their misappropriation for the position, and putting them in a vulnerable standing ([Eagly & Karau, 2002](#); [Zulli, 2021](#)).

Therefrom, the fact cannot be denied that mediated scandals (politically crafted though) promote its international visibility and renegotiate women politicians' position in political culture that not only results in transnational mediated construction but also anchors on masculine dominance and patriarchal hegemony. Women politicians' framing ([Entman, 2012](#)) as innately mothering, mothering, and voiceless is thus their taming in

the political arena and making them the losers in the strive for political endurance. So, instead of merely increasing women politicians' number on the key political positions, the preference for a gender-inclusive political culture, rigorous and all-inclusive approaches, and deeper changes in society and politics are highly desirable.

Still and all, it could be concluded that the media are the primary driving force behind making any scandal (either alleged or real) worth prioritizing and hence worth publishing. Hina Rabbani Khar's mediated construction portrays bias against women politicians and makes the way for raising questions about their gender and the non-judicious expectations from them. This suggests that the women politicians' portrayals through mediated scandals still perpetuate gender stereotypes. Being tagged as a female, with a horrible voice and a flamboyant style, the media treated Khar way differently compared to her male counterparts and focused on the alleged love affair that proved to be false but she has never been compensated for that later.

The findings of this study underscore that the interplay of scandals and media framing ([Entman, 2012](#)) deteriorate women politicians'

*self* (*emphasis added*) loaded with severe implications ([Dan, 2018](#); [Nyhan, 2014](#); [Powell, et al., 2015, 2018](#)) for them on the audience's/news consumers' part ([von Sikorski, 2018](#); [von Sikorski & Ludwig, 2018](#)). Nonetheless, there is limited scope to this study because it focuses just on the media portrayals of a Pakistani woman politician on the key position, and hence, the findings of the present study entail thoughtful interpretation. Delimited only delving into Khar's mediated construction, the most important recommendation for further studies is to record the public perceptions of women politicians' scandals (both alleged and factual). For further strengthening the broad-spectrum grasp of scandals and their potential effects on the audience thinking, Khar's response to media representations as well as her accomplishments as Pakistan's foreign minister would be of significant importance. Yet, another aspect of research is to point out the connections of scandals with cultural aspects of the selected countries/regions ([Esser & Hartung, 2004](#)) as the patterns of norm transgressions and scandals might resonate differently in different regions of the world.

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## Appendix A

### Web Addresses of the Dataset

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