

VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN POLITICIANS IN TELUGU NEWSPAPERS: A STUDY OF PHOTOGRAPHIC COVERAGE DURING THE 2024 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN ANNAMAYYA DISTRICT.

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the visual representation of women politicians in Telugu newspapers during the 2024 General Elections in Annamayya district, Andhra Pradesh. The research explores how photographic coverage contributes to the construction of gendered political narratives, influencing public perception and reinforcing or challenging existing gender stereotypes. Using qualitative content analysis, the study analyses photographs published in leading Telugu dailies such as *Eenadu*, *Andhra Jyothi*, and *Sakshi* during the election campaign period. The analysis focuses on parameters such as photo size, placement, frequency, visual context, and body language cues to interpret the implicit messages

conveyed through imagery. The findings suggest that although there was increased visibility of women candidates compared to previous elections, representation remained constrained within patriarchal frames emphasizing traditional gender roles and symbolic participation rather than leadership and authority. The study highlights how media visual discourse continues to mediate women's political legitimacy through selective framing, necessitating more gender-sensitive visual journalism practices in regional media.

Keywords: Women politicians, Telugu newspapers, gendered framing, photographic coverage, Annamayya district, 2024 General Elections, media discourse

1. Introduction

Media is one of the most powerful institutions in constructing political meaning and shaping public perceptions of leadership. In contemporary democracies, the press functions not merely as a channel for political information but as an active participant in defining legitimacy, credibility, and authority of political actors (Adcock, 2010; Jhunjhunwala & Verma, 2024). Within this ecosystem, visual storytelling particularly through photographs serves as a key instrument of persuasion. Photographs do not only document events but also frame how audiences perceive gender, power, and political engagement (Bligh et al., 2012). For women politicians, whose leadership often challenges entrenched gender hierarchies, visual media representation becomes a crucial site of negotiation between visibility and legitimacy (Braden, 2014; Sreberny-Mohammadi & Ross, 1996).

The 2024 General Elections in Andhra Pradesh presented a notable shift in political participation, with a record number of women contesting from both national and regional parties (Reddy, 2024; Kannabiran, 2024). Annamayya district, a newly formed administrative region, became a key electoral battleground that witnessed active campaigning by several women candidates across party lines. However, the degree and nature of their representation in regional Telugu newspapers remained uncertain. Telugu-language media dominated by *Eenadu*, *Andhra Jyothi*, and *Sakshi* has historically influenced electoral discourse and public opinion in Andhra Pradesh (Gundimeda, 2017; Karan, 1997; Satyanarayana, 1982). Given the regional press's deep cultural and linguistic penetration, it is essential to examine whether it offers equitable visual representation to women in politics or continues to reinforce gender stereotypes (Kasturi, 2014; Sivanna, 2025).

Despite visible progress in women's political participation in India, their representation in mainstream and regional media continues to reflect patriarchal norms (Dhasmana & Raj,

2024; Dehalwar& Sharma, 2024). Studies have shown that women politicians are often framed through their appearance, domesticity, or emotionality rather than competence and leadership (Hayes et al., 2014; Wasburn&Wasburn, 2011). In Andhra Pradesh, where political culture intertwines with caste, kinship, and regional identity (Mooij, 2007; Inukonda, 2019), media depictions of women candidates may reproduce these socio-cultural hierarchies. The visual portrayal of women politicians thus remains under-researched, especially in the Telugu-language print media, which plays a pivotal role in shaping rural and semi-urban voters' perceptions. This study addresses this gap by examining how Telugu newspapers visually represented women politicians during the 2024 General Elections in Annamayya district. The study is guided by following research questions. *RQ1: How are women politicians visually represented in Telugu newspapers during elections? RQ2: What types of images and contexts dominate their visual portrayal? RQ3: How do these visuals reinforce or challenge gender stereotypes?*

This study contributes to feminist media scholarship by investigating how regional vernacular newspapers in South India shape the visual discourse of women's political participation. It extends prior research that highlights the persistence of gender bias in media portrayal of women politicians (Huddy & Capelos, 2002; Winfrey & Schnoebelen, 2019) and contextualizes it within the socio-political fabric of Andhra Pradesh. By focusing on photographic coverage rather than textual narratives, the study underscores the role of visual media in constructing symbolic meanings around gender and power. Findings from this research aim to inform media practitioners, policymakers, and scholars about the need for gender-sensitive editorial practices and equitable visual representation of women in politics (Paxton et al., 2020; Bahuguna, 2025; Saxena, 2025).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Media and Gender Representation

Media representation of women in politics has long been critiqued for its reinforcement of gender stereotypes and unequal visibility compared to male politicians. Globally, studies indicate that women leaders often receive coverage focusing on appearance, emotionality, and personal life rather than policy competence or leadership skills (Ross, 2017; Winfrey & Schnoebelen, 2019). Bligh et al. (2012) found that gender stereotypes significantly affect voters' perceptions, making women appear less authoritative even when they demonstrate similar political capability. Adcock (2010) emphasized that newspapers historically

constructed the image of women as supportive political actors rather than as autonomous agents of change.

In the Indian context, this imbalance remains pronounced. Media portrayals of women politicians are often shaped by patriarchal values, with coverage that trivializes their political authority or associates them with domestic and emotional imagery (Dhasmana & Raj, 2024; Fathima, 2023). Studies such as Sharma (2020) and Reddy (2024) highlight that Indian women in politics are frequently positioned as symbols of empowerment but rarely depicted as independent decision-makers. Moreover, the introduction of the Women's Reservation Bill has not necessarily translated into fairer media representation, as news framing often reinforces tokenistic narratives (Dehalwar & Sharma, 2024; Jolly & Srivastava, 2024).

Western research echoes similar trends: Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross (1996) argued that media representations of women MPs in the UK revolved around their bodies and appearances, undermining their legislative competence. Mavin et al. (2010) critiqued the British press for using gendered labels like "Blair's babes" and "Cameron's cuties," revealing how journalistic practices trivialize female leadership. These patterns underscore the global persistence of gender bias in political imagery, a concern also reflected in Indian print and visual media (Wasburn & Wasburn, 2011; Huddy & Capelos, 2002).

2.2 Visual Framing in Political Communication

Visual framing theory explains how photographs and visual symbols shape public understanding of political authority, trustworthiness, and leadership. Goffman's (1974) notion of frame analysis laid the groundwork for understanding how visual cues guide audience interpretation. In the context of gender, visual framing operates through composition, body language, gaze, and spatial positioning to communicate subtle hierarchies of power (Hayes, Lawless, & Baitinger, 2014).

International studies, such as Sazali and Basit (2020), demonstrate that women politicians are often framed through passive poses or supportive roles, reinforcing femininity and emotional sensitivity. Bligh et al. (2012) observed that even when women project competence, the media tend to emphasize physical appearance and attire, undermining their authority. In India, Rao (1999) explained that visual portrayals of women as symbolic representations of virtue and nationalism have deep historical roots tied to identity politics.

Visual framing is also influenced by contextual factors such as media ownership, political affiliations, and regional ideology. Hayes and Lawless (2015) argued that even in developed democracies, media coverage rarely treats women candidates as equal political actors. In the South Asian media landscape, Thomas and Kaunain (2025) noted that visual imagery often positions women within patriarchal hierarchies, subtly communicating subordination. Visual studies from Malaysia (Sazali& Basit, 2020) and the U.S. (Wasburn&Wasburn, 2011) affirm that photo framing can both reflect and perpetuate gendered social norms, affecting women's political legitimacy.

2.3 Regional Media Studies: Telugu Press and Gender Portrayal

Telugu-language newspapers hold immense influence in shaping political opinion across Andhra Pradesh, with *Eenadu*, *Andhra Jyothi*, and *Sakshi* being the dominant players. The Telugu press has historically mirrored the state's socio-political and caste dynamics (Gundimeda, 2017; Mooij, 2007). Satyanarayana (1982) and Suri (2002) documented how the press evolved into a vehicle for political mobilization during electoral cycles.

However, gendered perspectives within Telugu journalism remain underexplored. Thunga (2020, 2023, 2024) and Anita & Thunga (2020, 2021) provided significant empirical insights into how Telugu newspapers frame election imagery, showing that female politicians are underrepresented both in frequency and prominence of photographs. Their studies revealed a trend where images of women are more likely to appear in lifestyle or community sections rather than on front pages or political columns.

Gundimeda (2017) linked this to the structural dominance of caste and patriarchal hierarchies within Andhra media ownership and editorial practices. Kasturi (2014) argued that the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh in 2014 further fragmented media spaces, leading to localized editorial biases in political reporting. Sivanna (2025) added that rapid digitalization of regional media has not eliminated these biases; rather, visual narratives continue to reflect traditional social hierarchies.

While some coverage aims to highlight women's empowerment, it often reinforces tokenism by portraying women as "emblems of progress" rather than as legitimate political contenders (Kumar, 2015; Chandrashekhar, 2016). Paxton, Hughes, and Barnes (2020) pointed out that women's symbolic representation often masks deeper structural exclusions in political visibility. In Andhra Pradesh, where women's political participation is increasing post-2023

reservation reforms (Kannabiran, 2024; Kaur, 2023), this visual inequality remains a critical concern.

Despite growing scholarship on gender and media, limited research has addressed the visual dimension of women's political representation in vernacular newspapers, particularly at the district level. Most existing studies (e.g., Dhasmana & Raj, 2024; Bahuguna, 2025; Sharma, 2020) focus on textual analysis of national English media, neglecting regional photojournalistic practices that significantly influence public perception in rural India. Furthermore, Telugu media's photographic framing during elections where images often determine voters' visual recall remains understudied (Anita & Thunga, 2020; Thunga, 2023). Few empirical works explore how visual strategies such as placement, prominence, body posture, or spatial context encode gender hierarchies in Telugu newspapers. The lack of focused district-level studies, especially in politically evolving regions such as Annamayya district, leaves an analytical gap in understanding how gendered political representation manifests in localized visual media. Hence, this study fills that gap by examining photographic coverage of women politicians in Telugu newspapers during the 2024 General Elections, providing a nuanced understanding of how regional visual media contribute to gendered political discourse in contemporary Andhra Pradesh.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by three complementary theoretical perspectives that together explain how photographic coverage constructs, maintains, or challenges gendered meanings in political life: feminist media theory, framing theory, and symbolic representation theory. Each theory informs the analytical categories and interpretive moves used in the visual content analysis.

3.1 Feminist Media Theory

Feminist media theory treats the media as an active site where gendered power relations are produced, reproduced, and occasionally contested (Adcock, 2010; Braden, 2014). From this perspective, images are not neutral records; they are discursive practices that position women as subjects with particular social meanings. Feminist scholarship highlights recurring patterns such as personalization, focus on appearance, and domestic or relational framing that reduce women's political agency and authority (Sreberny-Mohammadi & Ross, 1996; Bligh et al., 2012). Application in this study: feminist media theory justifies treating photographs as ideological texts. It directs attention to visual choices that encode gender norms, for example

whether a woman politician is shown alone or surrounded by family, shown in public action or private/domestic settings, and whether captions emphasize relational roles rather than policy or leadership.

3.2 Framing Theory (Goffman, 1974)

Framing theory explains how media organize perception by selecting and emphasizing certain aspects of reality while downplaying others (Goffman, 1974). In visual framing, compositional elements such as shot size, camera angle, gaze, posture, proximity to other figures, and placement on the page function as framing devices that cue viewers about authority, competence, and emotional stance (Hayes et al., 2014; Sazali& Basit, 2020). Photographs can frame a candidate as authoritative through wide shots, podium imagery, and assertive postures, or they can frame a candidate as peripheral through small crops, secondary placement, and passive gestures. Application in this study: framing theory provides the operational vocabulary for coding photographic features. Specific visual frame dimensions used in analysis include placement (front page, inside page), prominence (photo size and crop), shot-type (close-up, medium, long), gaze and facial expression, body posture, presence of symbolic objects (microphone, flag, religious symbols), and contextual actors (family, party leaders).

3.3 Symbolic Representation Theory

Symbolic representation theory distinguishes between descriptive presence and substantive influence. It highlights how mere visibility of women can be symbolic rather than indicative of real power or leadership (Paxton, Hughes, & Barnes, 2020). Media often provide symbolic inclusion by presenting token images that signal diversity while avoiding coverage that conveys decision-making authority. This symbolic visibility can create a veneer of inclusion while maintaining substantive exclusion. Application in this study: symbolic representation theory guides interpretation of whether visual inclusion of women politicians translates into portrayals that suggest authority and agency. The coding scheme therefore assesses not only whether women appear but how they are presented: are images ritual or performative, or do they visually communicate leadership, policy engagement, and electoral competitiveness?

Combining these three perspectives allows for a layered analysis that moves from descriptive coding to interpretive explanation. The study operationalizes theory in the following way: Descriptive coding captures measurable photo attributes: publication name, date, page and section, photo size (measured in column centimeters), shot type, number of people in

frame, and presence of symbolic objects. Framing coding records compositional and semiotic cues: camera angle, gaze direction, body posture, clothing emphasis, caption tone, and proximity to male figures. Interpretive coding draws on feminist and symbolic lenses to classify images into thematic categories such as leadership framing, relational/domestic framing, emotional framing, tokenistic inclusion, and marginalized visibility. Triangulation pairs visual findings with accompanying captions and article placement to assess whether photographic frames align with or contradict textual frames. This combined theoretical framework enables the study to move beyond counting images to explaining how photographic practices reproduce gendered political orders. Feminist media theory supplies the critique of patriarchal meanings, framing theory provides precise tools for visual analysis, and symbolic representation theory anchors the normative concern about whether visibility equals empowerment. Together these theories shape both the coding manual and the interpretive claims about how Telugu newspapers constructed women politicians during the 2024 General Elections in Annamayya district.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design grounded in visual content analysis, a method appropriate for exploring meanings embedded in media images (Krippendorff, 2018). The goal is not merely to quantify the occurrence of photographs but to interpret how visual cues construct gendered meanings and political identities. Qualitative visual content analysis enables the researcher to examine both the manifest content (observable features such as size, placement, and framing) and latent content (underlying ideological or cultural messages). This approach is particularly suited to feminist media research that seeks to uncover subtle reproductions of patriarchy within everyday visual communication (Adcock, 2010; Sreberny-Mohammadi & Ross, 1996).

4.2 Sampling

4.2.1 Newspaper Selection: The study focuses on three major Telugu-language newspapers:

- Eenadu – widely recognized for its extensive rural circulation and influence in political discourse (Gundimeda, 2017).
- Andhra Jyothi – known for its political commentary and readership among the middle class.

- Sakshi – affiliated with regional political movements and popular among younger readers and urban audiences (Kasturi, 2014).

These dailies were chosen for their dominant presence in Andhra Pradesh's print media ecosystem, their role in shaping political narratives, and their contrasting ownership and editorial orientations that ensure a balanced representation of visual framing tendencies.

4.2.2 Temporal Frame: The data covers the 2024 General Election campaign period, from March 1 to May 31, 2024 the months leading up to polling and the immediate post-poll period when media attention on candidates' peaks. This time frame captures both campaign imagery and post-election representations, allowing for comparative analysis of pre- and post-victory visual patterns.

4.2.3 Sample Size and Unit of Analysis: The unit of analysis is each individual photograph depicting a woman politician, irrespective of article length or textual content. The dataset includes all photographs featuring women politicians published across 45 print and e-paper editions of the three newspapers. Photographs were collected systematically to ensure comprehensive coverage of both front and inside pages. Duplicate images across print and online editions were excluded to avoid redundancy.

4.3 Data Collection

Photographic data were gathered from a combination of archival and digital sources. Print editions were accessed through district-level public library archives and university repositories, while e-paper editions were retrieved directly from newspaper websites. Each photograph was catalogued with metadata including publication name, edition date, page number, section, and headline context. Captions accompanying images were transcribed verbatim to facilitate textual-visual linkage during analysis. A photo logbook was maintained, coding each entry with a unique identifier (e.g., E-2024-05-15-03 for *Eenadu*, May 15, 2024, Image 3). This ensured replicability and traceability of data sources. All data were stored digitally with backups on secure institutional drives to maintain integrity and accessibility.

4.4 Data Analysis: The analytical process followed a three-stage interpretive model, combining descriptive, interpretive, and thematic analysis consistent with visual sociology and feminist media methodologies (Rose, 2016).

4.4.1 Coding Categories: Visual data were coded along the following analytic dimensions:

- Photo prominence – size (in column centimeters), location (front page, inner pages), and headline adjacency.
- Subject activity – active (speaking, campaigning, addressing a rally) vs. passive (listening, smiling, standing).
- Attire and appearance – traditional vs. professional clothing, use of symbols such as party scarves or religious marks.
- Body language – gestures, posture, gaze direction, and expressions signaling confidence, deference, or submission.
- Contextual framing – presence of other actors (male politicians, family members, supporters), crowd background, or domestic settings.
- Captions and text cues – interpretive or descriptive tone of accompanying captions and their alignment with visual framing.

These variables were derived from previous visual framing studies (Hayes et al., 2014; Sazali & Basit, 2020; Anita & Thunga, 2021) and refined during pilot coding on a small subset of 30 photographs to ensure clarity and consistency.

After initial coding, patterns of representation were identified through thematic clustering. Visual themes such as “symbolic inclusion,” “domestic framing,” “active leadership,” and “**4.4.2 Interpretive Analysis:** collective participation” emerged from repeated imagery. Photographs were then interpreted through the lens of feminist media theory, framing theory, and symbolic representation theory, to decode the ideological implications of these frames. For example, recurring depictions of women standing beside male leaders or engaging in religious rituals were coded as *symbolic participation*, whereas independent campaign images were coded as *leadership assertion*. The frequency and distribution of these thematic frames across the three newspapers were compared to identify editorial tendencies and gendered visual hierarchies.

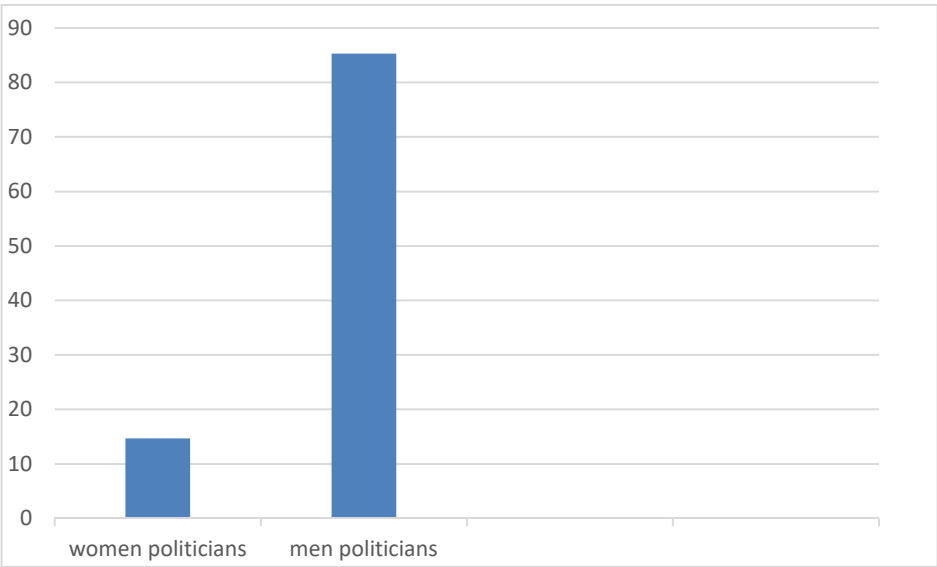
4.4.3 Validation and Reliability: To enhance credibility, two trained coders independently analyzed 15 percent of the dataset. Inter-coder agreement was assessed using Cohen’s Kappa ($\kappa = 0.82$), indicating high consistency. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. Moreover, triangulation was achieved by comparing photographic data with textual coverage, ensuring that visual analysis aligned with or diverged from accompanying written narratives.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Visibility Patterns

The qualitative visual content analysis of *Eenadu*, *Andhra Jyothi*, and *Sakshi* editions published between March and May 2024 revealed a marked imbalance in the visibility of women politicians. Out of the total election-related photographs examined, only 14.7 percent featured women politicians, while 85.3 percent depicted male counterparts. This disparity underscores a persistent gender gap in visual political representation, even as women’s participation in Andhra Pradesh’s 2024 elections reached its highest level to date (Reddy, 2024; Bahuguna, 2025). Across the three newspapers, front-page visibility remained low, with only a handful of women’s photographs receiving prominent placement above the fold. Women were more often relegated to inner pages or supplementary sections, frequently grouped in collective images rather than highlighted as individual leaders. *Sakshi* showed marginally better inclusivity, featuring women candidates in 18 percent of total political visuals compared to *Eenadu* (12 percent) and *Andhra Jyothi* (14 percent). However, even these images lacked thematic emphasis on leadership or authority. These visibility patterns align with global and Indian media trends, where women politicians are underrepresented and frequently marginalized within visual hierarchies (Ross, 2017; Winfrey & Schnoebelen, 2019). The findings reinforce that mere inclusion in coverage does not ensure equitable representation; prominence and framing determine political salience.

Figure 1: Visibility Patterns



5.2 Framing Dimensions

Dimensions

5.2.1 Supportive and Relational Roles: The analysis found that the majority of photographs presented women politicians in supportive or symbolic roles rather than assertive, decision-making positions. Many images showed women standing beside male party leaders, participating in group events, or attending family-oriented community gatherings. Few visuals captured them addressing crowds, leading rallies, or engaging directly with the electorate. This framing resonates with findings by Adcock (2010) and Bligh et al. (2012), who argued that media often relegate women to relational identities—wives, daughters, or party supporters—rather than autonomous political actors. In several photographs, women were visually framed as “accessible” and “modest,” emphasizing traditional femininity over authority.

5.2.2 Visual Aesthetics and Posture: A recurring aesthetic choice involved close-up or medium-close shots focusing on facial expressions rather than on public action or political context. These images projected emotional warmth and empathy but rarely suggested assertive leadership. Moreover, body language tended to be passive—folded hands, smiling postures, or downward gazes—contrasting sharply with the dominant, action-oriented poses afforded to male politicians. Such compositional patterns exemplify visual gender coding, where women’s political identity is aestheticized and softened (Sazali & Basit, 2020). The reliance on close-up shots also implies symbolic containment, limiting women’s visual presence to the personal sphere rather than the political.

5.2.3 Symbolic Inclusion: While all three newspapers included images of women candidates, their coverage often served symbolic inclusion rather than substantive visibility. Photographs of women lighting lamps, offering prayers, or participating in ceremonial events reinforced traditional femininity and cultural compliance. These images functioned as visual affirmations of women’s presence but not their power. Drawing on symbolic representation theory (Paxton et al., 2020), this framing represents women as signs of inclusivity without disrupting patriarchal power structures. In several cases, headlines or captions that accompanied these photographs highlighted personal attributes—“dedicated mother,” “young dynamic face,” “simple leader”—rather than political performance or policy articulation.

5.3 Narrative Construction

Visual narratives across the three Telugu dailies reinforced gendered hierarchies of political legitimacy. Men were consistently framed within contexts of authority—campaign rallies, podium speeches, or strategic meetings while women were depicted in relational or supportive spaces. This pattern visually naturalized the association between masculinity and leadership, aligning with the findings of Hayes et al. (2014) and Wasburn & Wasburn (2011). The repeated emphasis on men in commanding postures and women in deferential stances established a visual hierarchy where women's presence served to complement, rather than challenge, male dominance. Even in cases where women held significant political positions, the visual grammar diminished their leadership through smaller photo sizes, peripheral placement, or contextual framing that associated them with domestic or ceremonial imagery. Through feminist media theory, these images can be read as visual manifestations of patriarchal ideology where women's political legitimacy is mediated through cultural respectability rather than competence (Sreberny-Mohammadi & Ross, 1996; Braden, 2014). This framing reproduces symbolic inequalities even in the context of rising female participation.

5.4 Comparative Analysis of Telugu Newspapers

A comparative evaluation of the three dailies revealed minimal variation in the overall visual framing of women politicians.

- *Sakshi* offered slightly more balanced coverage, particularly highlighting younger women candidates and featuring them in campaign-related visuals.
- *Eenadu* tended to focus on women associated with national parties, often framing them within traditional social roles.
- *Andhra Jyothi* maintained a moderate tone but showed a preference for event-based imagery over leadership-based photographs.

Despite these differences, the underlying editorial tendencies remained consistent. Women's visibility did not equate to political centrality. This reflects the findings of Gundimeda (2017) and Thunga (2023), who noted that Telugu newspaper visuals are shaped by political affiliations and patriarchal editorial cultures that prioritize symbolic over substantive representation. Moreover, none of the three newspapers provided sustained visual narratives following women's electoral success, suggesting that post-election media attention declines

sharply once symbolic representation goals are met. This temporal imbalance also indicates that women's media visibility remains event-driven rather than leadership-driven.

The findings collectively indicate that the visual portrayal of women politicians in Telugu newspapers during the 2024 General Elections is marked by persistent gendered framing. While the quantitative visibility of women has improved compared to previous elections (Anita & Thunga, 2021; Reddy, 2024), qualitative analysis shows slow progress toward equitable representation. Women continue to be represented through soft-focus imagery—symbolic presence, aesthetic appeal, and cultural conformity rather than assertive leadership. The persistence of such framing patterns reflects the media's role in maintaining gendered political hierarchies, where visual authority remains a masculine domain. These results affirm feminist media critiques that visibility without transformation in framing perpetuates inequality (Adcock, 2010; Ross, 2017). As Goffman's (1974) framing theory suggests, media visuals do not merely reflect political reality; they construct it through selection, composition, and repetition. Therefore, Telugu newspapers, while expanding women's presence, continue to mediate their legitimacy through patriarchal visual codes that privilege symbolic participation over substantive power.

6. Conclusion

The study examined the visual representation of women politicians in Telugu newspapers during the 2024 General Elections in Annamayya District, with a focus on how photographic coverage contributes to the construction of gendered political identities. Drawing on feminist media theory, framing theory, and symbolic representation theory, the research reveals that while women have gained greater visibility in political life, their portrayal in regional media remains deeply embedded in patriarchal visual codes.

Findings indicate that women politicians featured far less frequently than their male counterparts, and even when represented, the imagery often emphasized supportive, decorative, or relational roles rather than assertive leadership. Photographs frequently depicted women in ceremonial or social settings, relying on close-up and passive postures that highlighted femininity, modesty, or moral virtue instead of political authority. Such depictions functioned as symbolic inclusion acknowledging women's presence but denying them substantive prominence within political narratives.

The comparative analysis across *Eenadu*, *Andhra Jyothi*, and *Sakshi* demonstrated that editorial tendencies toward gendered framing were consistent, despite minor differences in

coverage frequency. *Sakshi* offered marginally higher representation, but across all newspapers, visual authority remained gendered and hierarchical, associating leadership and power with masculinity. These findings align with previous scholarship that highlights how regional and vernacular media reinforce gender biases through visual framing (Gundimeda, 2017; Sreberny-Mohammadi & Ross, 1996; Anita & Thunga, 2021).

By treating images as ideological texts, this study underscores that visibility alone is not equivalent to empowerment. The persistence of symbolic rather than substantive representation reveals how media visuals sustain patriarchal norms even within progressive discourses of women's political participation. In this context, the vernacular press, which serves as the primary information source for rural and semi-urban populations in Andhra Pradesh, becomes a crucial site for renegotiating gendered meanings of power.

Theoretically, the study reinforces the need to integrate visual analysis into feminist media research, emphasizing that gender bias is not only textual but also structural and aesthetic. Practically, it calls for gender-sensitive editorial practices—including equitable photo selection, balanced visual framing, and awareness training for photojournalists and editors—to ensure that media coverage reflects women as decision-makers and leaders rather than as symbolic participants.

Hence, the research affirms that the road toward equitable political representation in media remains gradual and contested. While increased participation of women in politics marks social progress, representational justice in media imagery still lags behind. Transforming visual narratives in Telugu newspapers requires a shift from tokenism to authenticity—one that recognizes women politicians as full political subjects shaping the democratic discourse of contemporary Andhra Pradesh.

7. Implications of the Study

7.1 Theoretical Implications: This study offers several significant contributions to the theoretical understanding of gender, media, and political communication in the Indian and South Asian contexts. First, it extends feminist media theory by empirically demonstrating how patriarchal ideology is visually encoded within regional print journalism. While most feminist media analyses have focused on textual framing, this research foregrounds the visual dimension revealing how imagery itself becomes a discursive site where gender hierarchies are reproduced and normalized. By decoding visual signs such as posture, camera angle, and composition, the study affirms that gender bias is not only linguistic but also aesthetic and

spatial. Second, the study contributes to the advancement of framing theory by applying Goffman's (1974) principles of frame analysis to the visual coverage of women politicians. It situates the concept of "visual framing" within vernacular media, highlighting how editorial choices such as image size, prominence, and positioning operate as subtle cues of legitimacy or marginality. In doing so, it expands the scope of framing theory from Western broadcast media to regional print cultures in India, thereby contextualizing how local socio-cultural dynamics influence global theoretical constructs. Third, the research strengthens symbolic representation theory by differentiating between women's *presence* in political images and their *power* within those representations. It shows that visual inclusion often serves a symbolic function projecting inclusivity without substantive authority. This insight refines existing theoretical distinctions between descriptive and substantive representation (Paxton et al., 2020), reinforcing that visibility alone does not equate to empowerment. Collectively, these contributions position the study as an important addition to visual feminist scholarship, encouraging future researchers to integrate semiotic and framing analyses in understanding gendered media practices, especially in regional and vernacular communication systems.

7.2 Practical Implications

The practical implications of the study are directly relevant to media practitioners, journalism educators, policymakers, and gender advocacy organizations seeking to promote equitable media representation. The findings call for the development of gender-sensitive editorial guidelines within Telugu media organizations. Editors and photojournalists should be trained to identify and avoid gendered framing that reinforces stereotypes. Regular content audits can help monitor visual balance and ensure women politicians are depicted in leadership, decision-making, and campaign contexts rather than ceremonial or supportive roles. Journalism schools and media training institutes in Andhra Pradesh should integrate modules on gender and visual ethics, equipping future journalists with the tools to recognize symbolic inclusion and promote authentic representation. Collaboration with feminist media scholars can strengthen newsroom understanding of intersectional perspectives. Policymakers, press councils, and media watchdogs should establish representation benchmarks for equitable visual coverage during elections. These could include proportionate visual visibility, balanced portrayal of leadership roles, and adherence to diversity standards in election reporting. Institutional guidelines from the Press Council of India could be adapted to include visual framing criteria as part of media accountability measures. As Telugu newspapers expand into digital platforms, there is an opportunity to redefine visual

storytelling. Online editions can adopt participatory photography and multimedia storytelling that foreground women's voices and leadership, moving away from static, tokenistic imagery. Civil society groups and academic institutions should collaborate on media literacy campaigns to sensitize audiences about how gender bias operates through imagery. Encouraging readers to question and critique visual portrayals can help build public demand for gender-equitable media practices.

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