

Patriarchal Rhetoric: Deconstructing Gender Misrepresentations in Politics by Malaysian Media

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ABSTRACT

Malaysian political discourse has a crucial role in constructing gender misrepresentations by framing nonchalantly at times sexist political rhetoric and sensationalizing women's vulnerabilities via dejected speech with patriarchal flavour. This paper looks at gender misrepresentations in public discourse through patriarchal lenses, evident in parliamentary interactions and the reactions to it in the forms of media framing, which are yet to be given the focus it deserves. Applying an integrated analytical framework consisted of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), pragmatic implicatures, and Interactional Sociolinguistics to dissect these patterns by examining real-world examples, this qualitative study analyses news media articles in reaction to political discourse with gender misrepresentations. This contextual public discourse in Malaysia is being seen as reinforcing patriarchal ideologies via sexist language and framing, marginalizing women in politics while being bloated by the media. Findings reveal strategies like objectification and myths around gender inequality. Pragmatic implicatures and political rhetoric misrepresent women as emotional, often ridiculed objects unfit for power, embedding patriarchy via indirect insults and stereotyping. The findings also suggest emphasis on footing shifts and intonation signalling sexism as banter cue, and gender differences in interruptions, while illustrating how rhetoric sustains hegemony and power. These reinforcements on gender misrepresentations are constructed through sexist political rhetoric, reinforcing patriarchal norms, and thus, call for a long overdue media liberation and discourse reform in Malaysia.

Keywords: (Political and Media Discourse, Critical Discourse Analysis, Gender Misrepresentation, power and hegemony)

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a unique example of how having a mainly patriarchal society can fit into the modern age and way of living while offering quite a balanced approach to roles that different genders get to play in a society. However, is such approach also the kind of public discourse published out there in the open? What is offered by the media in terms of public discourse shapes social meanings of how gender and power exist in an interplay mainly assumed to be harmlessly condoned but leads to a realm that is less understood by the society. Malaysian society operates in a mostly harmonious existence where public life interweaves political, cultural, and religious sensibilities. However, unlike other Asian countries within the continent, Malaysia seems to have its own distinct nuances in its public discourse, still patriarchal in flavour but widely camouflaged by cultural and religious beliefs and expectations. This is where media and political rhetoric can come into the picture since they play crucial roles in constructing, reproducing or contesting gendered hierarchies. Malaysian politics remains male-dominated, with parties and institutions shaped by patriarchal norms and gender-biased practices. Malaysia operates under electoral authoritarianism with 85% of MPs being male, adopting patriarchal value systems and where women who hold only 15% of the political positions have peripheral representatives and minority status.

Thus, this study examines how political rhetoric adopted in specific political contexts and subsequent media framing offered as direct responses contribute to gender misrepresentations that normalize patriarchy, marginalize women in politics, and maintain hegemonic power voices and relations. Integrating Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), pragmatic implicature analysis, and Interactional Sociolinguistics, the paper offers a multifaceted analysis of media reactions to parliamentary interactions across a decade to highlight linguistic and interactional strategies that fit the negative categories or not, the kinds that relegate women to objectified, emotional, or incompetent roles.

This study aims to address these research questions:

- 1: What are the linguistic strategies adopted in political rhetoric of media coverage that construct gender (mis)representations?
- 2: How do these media reactions reinforce or challenge these (mis)representations?
- 3: What are the implications of these discursive practices for women's participation and representation in Malaysian politics?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Power, gender and media framing

Language has always been regarded as crucial in the production of gendered power interplay and relations. Baxter (2003) reiterates that what discourse does is not merely to describe gender but to actively position speakers, as the source of interactions, within hierarchies of authority and status. Bourdieu (1991) similarly argues that symbolic power operates through language in ways that make hegemonic outcomes appear natural, expected and condoned, gaining authority standing in return. In this sense, sexist discourse is not only offensive; it is ideological, because it organizes social perception and legitimacy. Coates (2013) also demonstrates that gendered language practices are shaped by recurring social expectations on how women and men should speak. Women are often expected to be polite, restrained, emotionally controlled, and seen as submissive, while men's assertiveness is more easily but unfairly accepted as leadership. These expectations become especially powerful in politics, where authority is closely linked to speech style, repertoire and interactional control. When women violate these expectations, they are often judged more harshly than men.

Media framing also has its classic role in influencing how the public interprets political events and social practice. Entman (1993) argues that framing selects certain aspects of reality and makes them more prominent, thereby guiding interpretation. Iyengar (1991) likewise shows that television news can shape public judgments by emphasizing responsibility, conflict, or personality rather than structural issues. In gendered contexts, this becomes important because media can frame women politicians through emotionality, appearance, or vulnerability instead of competence. Carlin and Winfrey (2009) demonstrate that women candidates are often subjected to sexist coverage, which then leads to reproducing double standards in gendered discourse. Ross and Carter (2011) further show that news coverage of women frequently reinforces traditional assumptions rather than challenging them. van Zoonen (2005) argues that popular media and politics increasingly overlap, which means that entertainment logics can dominate political interpretation, which can be dangerous when it seeps slowly into the fabric of the society. This overlap can encourage sensationalism, especially when gendered conflict becomes a newsworthy spectacle. Studies on media frames suggest that it has a big role in shaping the perception of gender in the society (Entman 1993; Van Dijk 1998).

Critical Discourse Analysis, power and gender

CDA provides a useful framework for examining how discourse reproduces inequality. Fairclough (1995) understands discourse as a social practice tied to ideology and power, and later emphasizing that language is part of broader social and institutional change (Fairclough 2013). Wodak (2001) and Wodak and Meyer (2009) similarly argue that discourse must be studied in relation to historical and political contexts in which they operate for realness of representations. From this perspective, gender misrepresentation is not accidental; it is

socially organized. Lazar (2007) proposes feminist CDA as a way to expose how gendered domination is sustained through routine textual and interactional practices, in which have been manipulatively orchestrated for misleading perceptions. van Leeuwen (2008) adds that discourse analysis should focus on how social actors are represented, excluded, positioned or backgrounded. These approaches are relevant here because sexist political rhetoric and media framing often work through omission, presupposition, and subtle evaluation rather than explicit abuse. CDA therefore helps reveal the ideological work of apparently ordinary language. CDA conceptualizes discourse as social practice that reproduces power relations (Fairclough 1995; Wodak 2001). CDA applied to gender highlights how lexical choices, intertextuality, and generic framing naturalize inequality.

Pragmatic features in political and media discourse

Pragmatics is essential for studying indirect sexism. Grice (1975) shows that meaning can be generated through conversational implicature when speakers do not say exactly what they mean. Levinson (1983) extends this insight by showing how context and inference shape interpretation. In political discourse, indirectness allows speakers to attack or belittle others while maintaining plausible deniability.

Dynel (2009) and Billig (2005) show that humour can function as a vehicle for ridicule, exclusion, and social control. Ford and Ferguson (2004) similarly argue that disparagement humour can legitimize prejudice by making discrimination seem harmless. In this study, that insight is important because sexist remarks may be reclassified as jokes or banter after the fact, which might occur due to ingrained false perception and exacerbated by the expected sense of machismo and bravado. Such pragmatic re-labelling can reduce accountability while still transmitting derogatory meanings. Pragmatic implicature theory (Grice 1975; Levinson 1983) helps identify how indirect language conveys offensive or demeaning meanings without explicit lexical markers. Political actors often use indirectness—banter, metaphor, irony—to evade accountability while signaling hostile stances.

Interactional Sociolinguistics: footing, intonation, and performance

Goffman's reiterations on footing (1981) and Gumperz's social and contextualization cues (1982) explain how shifts in stance, intonation, and reported speech represent actions as joking, serious, or normative. Studies of parliamentary talk reveal how interruptions, overlaps, and prosody encode dominance and gendered expectations (Coates 2013; Holmes 2006). Interactional sociolinguistics helps explain how sexism becomes visible in talk. Gumperz (1982) shows that contextualization cues such as intonation, rhythm, and code choice guide interpretation. Goffman (1981) adds that footing shifts can change how a speaker is positioned in relation to what is being said. A speaker may distance themselves from offensive content by presenting it as quoted speech, sarcasm, or play.

Turn-taking and interruption are also crucial in ensuring footings and one's status in social interactions. Sacks, et al. (1974) provide the foundational account of how conversational turns are organized, while Brescoll (2011) shows that gender shapes who takes the floor and how interruptions are distributed. Zimmerman and West (1975) remain influential in showing that interruptions can function as dominance moves in mixed-gender talk. Holmes (2006) likewise demonstrates that workplace discourse often rewards masculine speech styles while devaluing women's contributions. These studies are useful for analysing parliamentary interactions, where interruption and floor control are central to political power.

The circulation of sexist discourse has intensified in digital environments. Couldry (2004) argues that media should be understood as practice, meaning that audiences, producers, and institutions all help shape what becomes visible. Tandoc and Maitra (2018) show that news organizations increasingly use social media to drive engagement, which can privilege emotionally charged or controversial content. Vosoughi et al. (2018) demonstrate that online content spreads rapidly when it is novel, emotional, or sensational. Ging and Siapera (2018) highlight how online misogyny operates as a social practice rather than merely individual abuse. In political contexts, that means sexist statements can be reframed, amplified, mocked, or normalized through digital circulation. The result is not only repetition of the original insult, but also the creation of a wider public

climate in which misogyny appears ordinary. This circulation is especially consequential in Malaysia, where mainstream news and social media often interact closely.

Theoretical framework

This study integrates CDA (Fairclough 1995), pragmatic implicature (Holmes 2006), and Interactional Sociolinguistics (Goffman 1981; Gumperz 1982). CDA is used to identify how media and political discourse reproduce hierarchy through lexical choice, framing, and representation. The three approaches complement one another. CDA reveals the ideological structure of discourse; pragmatics shows how offensive meaning is inferred; and interactional sociolinguistics explains how that meaning is interactionally signalled and socially ratified. Together, they allow a more complete analysis of how gender misrepresentation operates across political and media settings. This paper adopts an integrated framework consisting of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) following (Fairclough 1995) to examine macro and micro-level of the data and analyse power relations and media discourse depicting political rhetoric of Malaysia. Pragmatic implicature analysis will be to detect indirect offensive meaning behind ostensibly neutral or jocular utterances.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study looks at discourse analysis of news articles responding to selected parliamentary incidents or other political contexts involving sexist rhetoric and political gaffes. The time frame for the news articles is from January 2015 to March 2026 through purposive samplings: incidents selected for prominence, representativeness, and volume of media coverage. In light of ethical considerations, this study involves public-domain digital data, which does not require specific consent. However, the data were dealt with cautiously and contextually analyzed with the actual meaning still intact and without alterations to the actual text.

The data were analyzed with attention to how media framing reproduces or challenges sexist political speech. The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, the texts are examined for CDA features such as lexical choices, nomination, predication, and framing. Second, pragmatic implicatures are identified by analysing how meaning is conveyed indirectly through context, humour, or insinuation. Third, interactional or pragmatic features such as laughter cues, intonation, footing shifts, and interruption are considered where accessible in reported or transcribed excerpts.

Data selection criteria

The criteria for data selection are as follows:

1. Political utterance or issue contains explicit or suggestive gendered content or becomes subject to media commentary on gender.
2. Media or news article/commentary that directly responds to selected utterance or prominent issues circulating in various political contexts (including events and speeches).
3. News articles published from January 2015 to June 2026 by mainstream or independent media and newspapers in Malaysia

The analytical procedure is as follows:

Step 1: Identifying parliamentary interactions or those from other political events as reported by the media.

Step 2: CDA coding for thematic frames, actor representation, and linguistic choices.

Step 3: Pragmatic analysis to infer implicatures, following Gricean maxims and contextual clues.

Step 4: Interactional coding for footing shifts, interruptions, and gendered turn-taking patterns.

Step 5: Triangulation across datasets to identify recurrent patterns.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Among the findings that were observed, some news reporting pieces and articles depicting the political rhetoric involving gendered discourse are more prominent than others and here are some examples of the political contexts and media reactions:

Example	Context	Publication date
1. "Pondan" and "mungkin bocor" remarks in Parliament	In 2015, Malay Mail reported that Baling MP Abdul Azeez Abdul Rahim used the slur "pondan" against female MP Kasthuri Patto during a debate, and had earlier said non-Muslim women should not be invited to mosques because they "mungkin bocor" (might be leaking/menstruating). The report argued that the remarks were sexist, homophobic, and reflected a pattern of impunity in Parliament.	5 November 2015
2. Sexist remark involving the word "kok"	MalaysiaKini reported in 2022 that Tajuddin Abdul Rahman caused an uproar in 2016 by saying "the only woman with 'kok'," an allusion to Seputeh MP Teresa Kok. The article presented this as one of several classic sexist remarks in Parliament.	11 January 2022, referring to the 2016 incident
3. "Wear nothing" remark to Teresa Kok	In 2023, Langkawi MP Mohd Suhaimi Abdullah told Seputeh MP Teresa Kok that she could come to Langkawi "even if you're not wearing anything," after she asked about shorts being allowed on the island. The report framed it as a sexist remark and noted the backlash and apology that followed. MalaysiaKini	10 November 2023, with apology reported on 9–10 November 2023

Table 1: Findings examples from Malaysian media and parliamentary discourse

Objectification and stereotyping

One recurring strategy reported by the media is objectification in political rhetoric and interaction. Female politicians are not regarded as political actors but as emotional figures, vulnerable bodies, with political drama to unfold. This pattern is consistent with feminist CDA, which shows that representation often works by reducing women's agency and increasing their visibility as spectacle (Lazar, 2007; van Leeuwen, 2008). In media framing, such objectification may appear through headlines, imagery, and selective emphasis on emotional response even when the voice of criticism from the media is seen on the nature of political rhetoric.

Another pattern is on gender stereotyping where women are framed through myths of emotional instability, vulnerability, or unsuitability for power. These observations align with traditional gender ideologies that assign authority to masculinity and vulnerability to femininity (Baxter, 2003; Coates, 2013). These stereotypes in political coverage by the media sometimes appear to be common sense or expected rather than prejudice.

News article headlines and images often emphasized physical appearance or emotional vulnerability rather than political views and knowledge, using verbs and adjectives that diminish agency (e.g., "cried", "flustered", "tearful"). This can be seen from nominalization that turns actors into objects (e.g., "the outburst" rather than named speaker), passive constructions obscuring agency for male aggressors.

Pragmatic implicatures: emotionality and incompetence

A statement may be posed as humour, but the implied meaning may still be derogatory and indirectly sexist. Grice's (1975) framework is useful here because sexist meaning can arise when speakers deliberately flout conversational expectations to imply insult without stating it openly. Billig (2005) and Ford and Ferguson

(2004) show that ridicule and disparagement humour are effective because they allow prejudice to travel under the cover of amusement. An example of this can be seen in the following context and media reporting:

Context: An incident in the Dewan Rakyat involving Speaker Tan Sri Johari Abdul, who quipped, "Pull the mic closer; when it's far away it sounds very sexy" (tarik mic dekat sikit, bila jauh dengar seksi sangat) during Education Minister Fadhlina Sidek's winding-up speech. In deflecting the remark, the minister reminded the speaker that, "my husband is watching this (the Dewan Rakyat proceeding) live".

'Tan Sri Speaker, my husband is watching live' - Speaker draws laughter over sexy voice quip (New Straits Times, 20 Aug 2025)

Light moment or office harassment: Dewan Rakyat speaker's 'sexy voice' remark on 'soft spoken' Education Minister (Focus Malaysia, 22 Aug 2025)

This is particularly relevant to political rhetoric where women are framed as emotional wreck or unfit to lead, even when the speech may not always contain explicit slurs. Instead, the subtle sexism emerges through implicature, tone, and contextual knowledge. In that way, patriarchal meanings are embedded in discourse while remaining deniable. Political rhetoric employed mainly jocular metaphors and expressions, via implicature, portrayed women as irrational and overly emotional.

In the extract above, the Education Minister has been labeled as having a 'sexy voice' and 'soft spoken', which are deemed as expected female characteristics with weaknesses and inferiority strongly attached to them. The example shared above is framed as banter but implicated that female colleagues were unsuitable for decision-making roles and still required a male figure to tell them what to do. Sexist and crude remarks are frequently lobbed in Malaysian Parliament in the name of banter, or worse, legitimate language in debating the topics of the day. This is an example of flouting of quality and relevance maxims: speakers made exaggerated claims or non-sequiturs that implied ridicule without explicit insult.

Interactions were done by focusing on women's emotional responses, scandals, or "feminine" issues while downplaying political knowledge or policy expertise. This is considered as gender-stereotyped paradoxes while demanding women to be exceptionally competent while construing their presence as "unusual" or tokenistic. This reinforces the idea that women are outsiders in politics, even when they occupy the same seats as men.

Interactional cues: footing shifts, laughter, and interruption

Shifts in footing help speakers distance themselves from being accountable, which also reflects the subtle power play and distance. Goffman (1981) shows that a speaker can change their footing by quoting, joking, or aligning themselves differently with the content of an utterance, while cleverly manipulating the context as normal and acceptable. In sexist political exchanges, a remark can be redefined after the fact as friendly banter, joke, or misunderstanding. This act of camouflaging move weakens the force of criticism while protecting the speaker's public image.

Gumperz (1982) and Couper-Kuhlen (1998) demonstrate that intonation and contextualization cues are important in signalling how certain utterances should normally be taken. A rising tone, laughter, or exaggerated stress may mark sexist content as supposedly playful and even harmless. The result is a discourse environment where sexism survives by being reclassified as innocently done. Shifts in footing (reported speech vs. authorial stance) signalled by changes in prosody and reported utterances is also expected to normalize derogatory comments as banter. These utterances of banter regarded by them as harmless are performed consciously and willingly, without understanding the patriarchal consequences that they might help to cement for generations to come.

Discreet and open laughter and affiliative chuckles by male colleagues frequently recontextualized sexist remarks as socially acceptable humour. Interruptions: quantitative difference observed (male politicians interrupting female politicians more, though frequency occurs according to specific contexts), operationalized as overlapping speech and turn-taking denial, may hold more negative effects than we could fathom right now,

and making female representatives in Malaysian politics to feel unnecessarily small, which consequently might be affecting the performance for their respective portfolios. The lack of support and sense of solidarity and camaraderie in that environment projected by the male counterparts should be reevaluated and pondered upon for the goodness of positive mutual goals and overall fruitful impacts towards the society.

Interruptions and floor control

Acts and nature of interruptions are also significantly observed in the data. Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) provide the baseline model for turn-taking, but gendered asymmetries can shape who gets heard. Brescoll (2011) shows that women may have less floor time and greater difficulty maintaining conversational control in organizational settings. In political settings, interruptions can undermine authority by preventing completion, redirecting topics, or symbolically asserting dominance.

According to Zimmerman and West (1975), interruptions often function as gendered power moves rather than neutral conversational habits. Holmes (2006) similarly reiterates that women's speech is more likely to be evaluated through gendered norms of politeness and authority depending on their roles or identity. In parliamentary discourse, such dynamics are especially visible because the institution publicly rewards verbal force, quick response, and control of the floor. Gendered interruption therefore becomes both a conversational and ideological practice.

Media amplification and sensationalizing

Media framing can be seen to increase the effects of sexist political rhetoric. Entman (1993) and Iyengar (1991) demonstrate that selection and emphasis influence what audiences remember and how they interpret events. When media outlets foreground conflict, embarrassment, or emotional reaction, they may shift attention away from the structural sexism of the original utterance. This process can make patriarchal discourse appear like a momentary treatment or a fair coincidence rather than a symptom of wider inequality.

The role of digital media, with its advancement and endless outreach, has also been observed to further intensify this issue. Couldry (2004), Tandoc and Maitra (2018), and Vosoughi et al. (2018) show that media circulation increasingly depends on engagement, speed, and emotional response. Sexist content may thus travel because it is provocative, not because it is accurate or fair. In this environment, misogynistic discourse becomes highly shareable and socially sticky. News coverage tends to mirror the rhetoric and reproduce the male-centric framing, with headlines and lead paragraphs prioritizing conflict, scandal, and emotive display over substantive policy critique.

Discursive strategies sustaining patriarchy

Use of diminutives, metaphors (e.g., domestic metaphors), and competence-antonym collocations (e.g., "overly emotional / too sensitive") to anchor women as less fit for power and not able to lead. Interdiscursive links to cultural myths about gender roles (e.g., women as caretakers and nurturer, men as leaders and provider) evident across media and social responses, which tend to overspill in media discourse as well.

Implications for Malaysian politics and media

The combined discursive mechanisms marginalize women's political voices, reduce credibility, and discourage participation. Media's role is not merely reflective but constitutive: by sensationalizing and normalizing misogynistic frames, it amplifies harm. Similar patterns documented in other parliamentary democracies, but Malaysian context intersects with religious, ethnic, and cultural norms that produce distinct discursive textures—e.g., heightened moral framing and appeals to tradition. The findings indicate recurring strategies of objectification and the circulation of myths that sustain gender inequality. Through pragmatic implicatures and political rhetoric, women are constructed as emotional, ridiculed, and politically unfit subjects, thereby embedding patriarchal ideology through indirect insult and stereotyping. The analysis also points to the role of footing shifts and intonation in framing sexism as mere banter, as well as gendered patterns in interruption and floor control, revealing how discourse helps reproduce hegemony and maintain power asymmetries.

So what are the implications of gender misrepresentations in Malaysian political and media discourse especially on the involvement of women in political arena? The discursive analysis on media responses seems to be on the negative side and might discourage many females in Malaysia to participate in politics in the future. However, a wind of change might be slowly put in order, which is apparent in the following news reporting: "Sexist remarks have no place in Parliament" (Sarawak Tribune, 27 Aug 2025). This comes with a strong message that sexist language has no place in Malaysian democracy, and the Speaker (in the Parliament) must enforce the rules firmly and consistently, not with inappropriate humours that may undermine confidence in the institution. This also sparks some hope that things are looking up ahead for a more positive Malaysian gendered and political discourse in the future. If this continues, it may contribute to a better discrepancy in terms of the percentage of political participation by both genders, which hopefully will be close balancing the number between them for better gender representations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is highly recommended for future studies to follow up and examine this issue on gender representations and media discourse especially in political rhetoric by conducting longitudinal studies and analyzing quantitative data in similar contexts. A corpus-based frequency analysis to measure prevalence and change over time will be a strong line of inquiry of this type of critical discourse research.

CONCLUSION

This study illustrates how gendered and discriminatory political rhetoric, pragmatic implicatures, and interactional practices that are bloated and normalised by media framing and social-media reactions would work together to construct and sustain gender misrepresentations in Malaysian public discourse. By making visible the linguistic and interactional mechanisms that naturalize patriarchy, the paper calls for systemic and immediate media reform, strengthened parliamentary accountability, and ongoing research to dismantle these entrenched discursive practices. Gender (mis)representations are seen as constructed, and not natural or inevitable. They are produced through specific linguistic strategies, amplified through media choices and sustained through lack of critical challenge. Language adopted in media coverage shapes public perception of women's legitimacy and role in Malaysian politics and society. Therefore, these findings underscore the long overdue need for media liberation and discourse reform in Malaysia to achieve genuine representations of gender in today's political sphere.

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