



## GENDER BIAS IN THE JOURNALISM PROFESSION AGAINST WOMEN IN MEDAN CITY

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### ABSTRACT

*This research investigates the various forms and mechanisms of gender bias experienced by female journalists in Medan City and analyzes their impact on professional roles and career trajectories. Utilizing a qualitative phenomenological approach and a case study method, data were obtained through in-depth interviews, document analysis, and limited observation. Findings reveal persistent structural inequalities in task assignment, leadership access, and protection against gender-based violence. Cultural expectations reinforce domestic roles, limiting women's career development in journalism. This study affirms the relevance of structural feminist theory and intersectionality, offering empirical insights for policy reform and advocating for inclusive, gender-sensitive newsroom practices. Recommendations include institutional reforms, advocacy strengthening, and educational interventions to promote gender equity in media.*

**Keywords:** Gender Bias, Female Journalists, Gender Equality in Media

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The journalism profession is essentially open to anyone, regardless of gender. Normatively, men and women have equal rights to pursue careers in this field (Tahrún & Houtman, 2019). However, in practice, the world of journalism often reflects a patriarchal structure that creates gender bias, particularly against women. This phenomenon is increasingly evident in the dynamics of the media industry in major cities, including Medan. Although women have shown increasing participation in this profession, they still dominate lower-level positions and rarely occupy strategic or managerial positions.

According to data from the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI, 2024), only 25% of journalists in Indonesia are women, and of that number, only 6% hold senior editorial positions. Most women remain trapped in reporting positions,

generally involved in coverage categorized as "light" or "soft" coverage, such as lifestyle, social, and health. Meanwhile, issues considered "tough" such as politics, economics, or crime are still considered male-dominated (Hidayati et al., 2021; Yusuf & Fitriani, 2020). This bias hinders women from expanding their professional scope and hinders their path to promotion to higher career levels.

The gender gap in journalism is also reflected in compensation. A 2024 report from the Reuters Institute shows that women tend to receive lower pay than men for equivalent positions and work responsibilities. Furthermore, women face social expectations that dictate domestic roles, such as childcare and household responsibilities, creating double pressures in pursuing a media career that demands flexibility and high mobility (Chambers, Steiner, & Fleming, 2019; Dewi, 2023).

Even in today's digital age, when opportunities for publication and freedom of expression are increasingly open thanks to social media platforms and personal blogs, women still face various social stereotypes that hinder their full participation in public discourse (Rahmawati & Riyanto, 2016). In some cases, female journalists are more vulnerable to gender-based violence, including verbal harassment, body shaming, and even physical violence, as demonstrated by a 2023 AJI survey, which reported that more than 80% of female journalists had experienced sexual violence in the workplace.

In the context of Medan, as one of Indonesia's major cities with dynamic media development, this gender bias requires further investigation. Women working in Medan's journalism sector face social pressure, systemic discrimination, and minimal representation in editorial decision-making. There are few scientific studies specifically describing how female journalists in Medan interpret, face, and navigate these challenges.

Interviews with several journalists in Medan revealed various perceptions and experiences that reflect the real conditions related to gender bias in the journalism world in the region. In general, the interviews revealed that male journalists still dominate the field, particularly in covering difficult news and challenging areas. Conversely, women, while also active, are more involved in specific areas of coverage, such as social, cultural, and entertainment, which are considered more suitable or feasible for women.

Previous research, such as that conducted by Sipahutar (2022) in Medan, shows that stereotypes against female journalists remain strong, especially among the younger generation. Meanwhile, a study by Rafika Mastanora (2022) revealed that women have great potential in the digital era but are still hampered by violence and social pressures. Several other studies, such as those by Yusuf and Fitriani (2020) and Anggraini and Setiawan (2023), highlight women's limited access to strategic reporting and leadership positions in the media. However, no study has comprehensively explored the personal, structural, and cultural experiences of

female journalists in the local context of Medan City using a phenomenological approach and in-depth case studies.

The novelty of this research lies in its holistic analysis of the perceptions and experiences of female journalists in Medan City regarding gender bias in their profession, including aspects of representation in the field, access to managerial positions, experiences of gender-based discrimination, and the influence of socioeconomic factors affecting their careers. By exploring the subjective dimensions of those directly involved in the field, this research hopes to uncover "various forms of invisible bias" that have not been widely addressed in academic studies.

The purpose of this research is to analyze in-depth the influence of gender on the journalism profession for women in Medan, including representation in the field, structural positions, experiences of discrimination, and the role of socioeconomic factors in shaping their career dynamics. This research also seeks to formulate an understanding of how women interpret their existence as professionals in the masculine world of journalism.

Scientifically, this paper is expected to make a significant contribution to gender studies in the media, particularly in the realms of communication and journalism. This research provides new empirical data that can enrich the academic literature, serve as a reference for formulating gender-equitable policies in the media industry, and serve as a reflection for journalism educational institutions in developing future journalists who are more inclusive and sensitive to issues of equality.

Another practical benefit is that it can serve as a basis for evaluating media company policies in Medan to improve work systems, reduce the potential for discrimination, and encourage women's participation in strategic positions. For the journalist community itself, this research serves as a collective reflection on ongoing structural and cultural inequalities. Methodologically, this study employed a qualitative approach with phenomenology. The researchers gathered data through case studies of female journalists from various media outlets in Medan—using in-depth interviews. Furthermore, content analysis was used to examine media representations of women's roles in journalism. Data collection was conducted over two months (January–February 2025), complemented by a literature review of reputable journals and reports from sources such as AJI, UNESCO, and the Reuters Institute. This approach was chosen to capture the subjective meanings and firsthand experiences of female journalists as key actors in the social and structural realities of media.

With this systematic approach, it is hoped that this research will be able to voice the experiences of marginalized individuals, raise issues of inequality, and make a tangible contribution to the academic world, media practitioners, and policymakers in realizing a just and gender-equal journalism climate.

## **Gender Theory and Representation in Media**

Gender studies in media communication are rooted in the understanding that social and cultural structures shape the meaning of men's and women's roles in society (Butler, 1990). In the media context, representations of women are often framed within a subordinate symbolic space, not only through media content but also in the process of content production, including who is given space to write, report, and lead newsrooms (Byerly & Ross, 2006).

Recent research shows that gender bias in journalism persists, both implicitly and explicitly, even in countries with high equality indices. A Reuters Institute report (2024) confirmed that women in many newsrooms remain marginalized, despite possessing equal competence to male journalists. In the Indonesian context, the Association of Indonesian Journalists (AJI) (2023) reported that female journalists still face structural and cultural barriers, including harassment and professional stereotypes.

## **Feminist Perspectives in Media Sociology**

Feminist theory in media sociology offers a critique of patriarchal dominance in mass communication systems. This perspective underscores the unequal power relations between men and women in news production (Gallagher, 2010). Using a standpoint theory approach, women's experiences as a subordinate group become a legitimate and crucial epistemological resource for understanding unequal social systems (Harding, 1991).

Contemporary feminist research advocates the importance of gender-sensitive newsroom policies, namely editorial policies that address the needs, representation, and job security of female journalists (Dewi, 2023). This includes efforts to eliminate sexual harassment in the workplace, equitably redistribute coverage, and recognize female leadership in newsrooms (Hidayati et al., 2021).

## **Professional and Cultural Challenges for Female Journalists**

Female journalists face not only professional barriers in promoting and covering strategic issues, but also cultural burdens in the form of domestic role expectations (Rahmawati & Riyanto, 2016; García-Mingo, 2019). A study by Mastanora (2022) shows that female journalists in the digital era continue to face emotional and psychological challenges due to structural bias and gender-based violence. AJI data (2023) revealed that more than 80% of female journalists in Indonesia have experienced sexual violence, both physical and verbal.

Furthermore, women are often relegated to soft news stories such as lifestyle and social media, while male journalists are trusted with investigative and political reporting (Anggraini & Setiawan, 2023). This practice not only limits women's professional space but also creates a masculine-feminine dichotomy in journalistic duties (Yusuf & Fitriani, 2020).

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological method, aiming to describe and understand the subjective experiences of female journalists facing gender bias in the journalistic workplace. The phenomenological approach was used to explore the meaning of informants' firsthand experiences, particularly regarding discrimination, stereotypes, and access to strategic positions in the media.

The method used was phenomenology because this research focuses on the lived experiences of female journalists as subjects experiencing inequality in a profession still strongly dominated by masculinity. Phenomenology allows researchers to explore how informants interpret their work environment and the challenges they face as women in the journalism profession (Moustakas, 1994). The research was conducted in Medan, North Sumatra, from January to February 2025. This city was chosen because it is a hub for local and regional media, providing a relevant context for examining the dynamics of the female journalist profession.

Data collection techniques included: In-depth interviews using a semi-structured approach to elicit narratives of the experiences, perceptions, and reflections of female journalists working in various media outlets in Medan. Documentary studies, such as media reports, editorial policies, and professional organization data (e.g., the Alliance of Independent Journalists). Limited observations, conducted to understand the work environment and dynamics of social interactions in the newsroom, where possible.

Informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, with the following criteria: (1) women who had worked as journalists for at least two years, (2) active in reporting or within the editorial structure, and (3) willing to provide information openly. The number of informants was not determined quantitatively, but based on the principle of data saturation, which occurs when the data obtained is repetitive and does not add new information.

The data were analyzed using the Colaizzi model of phenomenological analysis, which involves several steps: Rereading interview transcripts thoroughly, Identifying important statements relevant to the phenomenon of gender bias. Grouping statements into themes and subthemes. Compiling textual descriptions (what was experienced) and structural descriptions (how the experience occurred). Summarizing the essential meaning of the informants' experiences. Validate the results through member checking with informants.

To ensure data validity, the following techniques were used: Source triangulation, which combines data from interviews, documents, and observations. Member checking, which seeks confirmation from informants to ensure that the researcher's findings and interpretations align with their experiences. Audit trail, which systematically records the entire data collection

and analysis process in a transparent manner. Reflexivity, which is the researcher's awareness of their social position and potential bias during the interpretation process.

### 3. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

#### **Male Dominance in Journalism Assignments and Gender-Based Role Division**

Interviews with journalists from various local media outlets in Medan show that within the journalism profession, a gender-stereotypical division of labor persists. Male journalists are more frequently assigned to cover areas considered challenging and high-risk, such as crime, political investigations, and conflict zones. Meanwhile, female journalists are more often assigned to cover culture, entertainment, education, or social issues, which are considered "safer" and "more suitable" for women. This division illustrates the persistent social construction that shapes gender-based role boundaries.

This pattern of task distribution reflects an editorial structure that is not yet fully gender-neutral. This division of labor does not always consider individual competencies and capacities, but is instead determined by norms and assumptions about the nature and abilities of a particular gender. This constitutes a form of implicit discrimination that can hinder women's opportunities to develop in the prestigious professional field of investigative journalism. According to Risman (2004), the social construction of gender often perpetuates structural inequality through everyday work routines that are considered normal.

In practice, female journalists who attempt to transcend these boundaries often face dual pressures, both from within the institution and from the social environment. Field assignments within a masculine context often make it difficult for female journalists to demonstrate their capabilities on an equal footing. While some women have successfully broken through these boundaries, the numbers remain very small and insufficient to change the prevailing patterns in the majority of media outlets.

This inequality is also evident in performance appraisal systems, which are not always objective. Challenging assignments are often seen as evidence of higher professional capacity, even though access to these types of assignments is inherently unequal. Consequently, female journalists will always be in a difficult position to demonstrate professional achievement in fields considered strategic or "hard" (see Figure 1). In this context, Connell (2005) emphasizes the importance of understanding that hegemonic masculinity plays an active role in defining the professional work arena, including journalism.

Therefore, there is a need for a reformulation of the media assignment system based on the principles of equality and objectivity, as well as managerial training that addresses gender bias. In this way, female journalists can be given fair space

to occupy various types of assignments without discrimination, while breaking down old stereotypes that limit their potential.

### **Normalizing Risk and Abuse: Professionalism or Structural Neglect?**

One striking finding from this study is the attitude of some female journalists who consider minor harassment and unprofessional treatment in the workplace to be part of the risks of the profession. Around 20 percent of female respondents stated that they did not particularly mind actions such as sexual comments, unwanted physical contact, or demeaning jokes. They believe that surviving in journalism requires high psychological resilience and the ability to tolerate harsh social dynamics.

This phenomenon reflects a form of structural internalization of inequality, where individuals, particularly women, adapt to unfair systems as a form of adaptation. Bourdieu (2001) refers to this condition as habitus, where social structures create behavioral tendencies that appear to be personal choices, but are actually forms of symbolic domination. In this case, professionalism is narrowly interpreted as the ability to accept unequal working conditions.

However, this normalization of the risk of harassment can be very dangerous. In addition to reinforcing an unsafe work culture, it also hinders the emergence of a collective consciousness among female journalists to demand better protection. In the long term, allowing these discriminatory practices to persist can undermine the quality and integrity of the journalism profession itself.

The need to build a gender-responsive work environment is urgent. Without clear protection mechanisms, harassment will continue to occur and be considered a "normal risk." However, according to a study by Paramita and Herawati (2020), harassment in the journalism workplace has a significant impact on victims' psychological well-being and professional performance. Therefore, a systemic approach and internal company policies are crucial to breaking this cycle of neglect.

It is also crucial to promote gender education within the editorial environment and strengthen the role of journalists' unions as oversight bodies. The existence of a journalistic code of ethics must be followed up by an accountable reporting and redress system. This way, female journalists are no longer required to be "personally strong," but rather able to work within a structurally just system.

### **Inequality of Access to Managerial Positions**

Another important finding in this study is the dominance of men in managerial positions in Medan's media. Nearly all interviewees stated that strategic positions such as editor-in-chief, senior editor, or head of coverage are predominantly filled by men. Although there are no formal regulations prohibiting women from holding these positions, women face various structural and cultural barriers.

The main barrier stems from social norms that still view women as primarily responsible for the domestic sphere. This pressure makes many women reluctant or even unable to compete for positions that require long work hours, high flexibility, and long-term commitment. According to Morrison, White, and Van Velsor (1987), this is a hallmark of the glass ceiling phenomenon, an invisible barrier that prevents women from reaching the pinnacle of leadership.

Furthermore, biased perceptions of women's leadership abilities also act as a limiting factor. Interviewees noted that media management tends to place greater trust in men's capacity to manage teams, organize schedules, and respond to crises. In fact, empirical evidence shows that women possess equal, or even superior, leadership skills in several areas, such as conflict management and communicative approaches (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

This phenomenon suggests that appointments to strategic positions are still not meritocratic. As a result, women with genuine abilities are denied opportunities to advance to higher career levels. Therefore, a transparent, performance- and competency-based promotion mechanism is needed, along with the elimination of biased perceptions in the job selection process.

This internal reform must also be supported by state policies, such as gender-affirmative regulations within media organizational structures and incentives for companies that implement gender equality. In the long term, unequal access to managerial positions not only disadvantages women but also limits the diversity of perspectives within journalism itself.

### **Lack of Protection for Female Journalists in the Media Work Environment**

Protection for female journalists in the newsroom and on the ground is still very limited in Medan. Interviews with several informants revealed that most media outlets lack adequate internal protocols for handling cases of sexual harassment, bullying, and other forms of gender-based violence. The absence of dedicated divisions such as Gender Desks, internal counselors, or secure and confidential reporting systems often leads victims to remain silent. They fear that reporting will backfire, harming their standing, both psychologically and professionally. In many cases, victims not only fail to obtain justice but also face social stigma or pressure from the workplace.

This lack of protection demonstrates how patriarchal systems operate not only through personal relationships but also through institutions that should be neutral. The harassment experienced by female journalists—whether verbal, physical, or symbolic—is inextricably linked to the power imbalance between perpetrators and victims. According to MacKinnon (1987), sexual harassment is a manifestation of deeply rooted patriarchal power in the workplace. When institutions do not provide safe channels for reporting violations, the organizational structure indirectly perpetuates violent practices. In the case of



female journalists, male dominance in managerial structures makes the reporting process not only complicated but also does not guarantee justice for victims.

One concrete example found in this research is the case of a female intern journalist who experienced inappropriate treatment from her superior, a senior editor at the media outlet where she was interning. Although the victim felt deeply disturbed and uncomfortable, she did not report the incident due to fear of repercussions on her internship and the lack of a confidential reporting mechanism. This incident is not an isolated incident; several other journalists have also reported experiencing similar forms of harassment, both in the newsroom and while on assignment in the field. This demonstrates that violations of gender-based work ethics are not isolated incidents, but rather reflect structural conditions that fail to provide comprehensive protection.

It is important to note that while these incidents often do not result in legal action or public attention, their psychological impact on victims cannot be underestimated. Several interviewees reported experiencing trauma, decreased work motivation, and even considering leaving the journalism profession altogether. This situation indicates that protection for female journalists should not be understood merely as an administrative necessity or policy formality, but rather as a fundamental right to work in safe, fair, and dignified conditions. If left unchecked, this phenomenon could reinforce a culture of impunity within the media environment and undermine public trust in press institutions.

Therefore, media outlets in Medan City need to immediately develop internal policies that prioritize the principle of gender-equality-based protection. Such policies should include an anonymous reporting system, psychological support, regular training on professional ethics and gender awareness, and disciplinary action against violations. The involvement of professional organizations such as the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) and the Press Council is also crucial in overseeing and providing guidance to media outlets in building a progressive protection system. In the long term, creating a safe journalistic workplace for women not only strengthens the rights of female workers but also improves the quality of journalism itself.

### **Local Social and Cultural Dynamics as Barriers to Gender Equality in the Journalism Profession**

Cultural constructions and social norms in Medan still play a significant role in shaping expectations and limiting women's roles in the public sphere, including in the journalism profession. In general, society still positions women within a domestic framework, namely as housewives, child caretakers, and maintainers of family harmony. This narrative strongly influences public perception, even extending into media institutions themselves. Consequently, when a female journalist takes on a more active role in the public sphere, such as night reporting or long-term out-of-town assignments, social pressure arises, both direct and

implicit, that she has "transcended" women. This pressure significantly influences female journalists' career decisions.

The view that women should work in "safer" or "lighter" environments than men comes not only from the general public but also from their immediate families, partners, and even superiors in media editorial offices. Many female interviewees stated that after getting married or having children, they faced pressure from their partners to reduce their workload, stop field reporting, or even quit journalism altogether. This pressure reflects a cultural view that still positions men as the primary breadwinners and women as complementary household members. Oakley's (1974) gender theory suggests that this imbalance between domestic and public roles is not biologically induced but rather a result of social construction across generations.

The double burden experienced by female journalists is also a major factor in their infrequent access to high-ranking positions in the media world. When faced with the choice between career development and fulfilling domestic responsibilities, many women ultimately choose to sacrifice their careers. However, this sacrifice is not a reflection of free choice, but rather the result of structural pressures and cultural norms that limit women's freedom of movement. As Crenshaw (1989) argues in her intersectional approach, women's experiences cannot be viewed solely from a gender perspective, but also from the interplay between social class, local culture, and patriarchal institutions, which mutually reinforce each other.

The absence of gender-affirming policies, either internally within the media or through local government regulations, further reinforces this inequality. For example, maternity leave policies, flexible working hours, or hybrid work systems are rarely found in media management practices in Medan. When women are not provided with the structural support to balance domestic and professional roles, it is not surprising that the retention rate of women in journalism is lower than that of men. In this context, the media fails to function as an agent of social change and instead becomes a reflection of cultural conservatism that hinders equality.

To overcome this obstacle, a multi-sectoral approach is needed involving the media, government, educational institutions, and traditional and religious leaders. Public awareness campaigns about the importance of women's roles in journalism need to be intensified, accompanied by the strengthening of internal policies based on the principle of equality. Furthermore, the media can also contribute to shaping a more inclusive public opinion through gender-sensitive coverage, the representation of women in media narratives, and training for editors to evaluate news and internal policies more fairly. Cultural transformation does not happen overnight, but with strong collective commitment, the shift towards an equitable journalism ecosystem can be realized gradually and sustainably.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This research aims to uncover and analyze the phenomenon of gender bias experienced by female journalists in Medan, particularly in aspects of professional representation, work experience, career opportunities, and protection against gender-based discrimination and violence. Based on data obtained through in-depth interviews, observations, and document reviews, it was found that gender bias in the world of journalism in Medan persists systematically and complexly. This inequality is reflected in the unequal distribution of journalistic duties, the dominance of men in strategic positions, weak protection for female journalists, and the strong influence of social and cultural norms that limit women's professional freedom.

The results of the study indicate that much of the inequality is not caused by the limited competence of female journalists, but rather by social and institutional structures that are not yet responsive to the principles of gender equality. In the context of news coverage, female journalists are often placed in "soft" fields considered to conform to feminine images, while "hard" fields such as politics, crime, or investigations tend to be dominated by men. Furthermore, verbal and non-verbal harassment remains a common experience for female journalists, while available protection mechanisms remain passive and do not guarantee justice. These findings theoretically strengthen the arguments of the structuralist feminist approach and intersectionality theory, which view gender domination as shaped by the interaction between social, cultural, and power systems.

Practically, the findings of this study can serve as a starting point for media outlets in Medan and Indonesia in general to reform their work systems and internal policies to better support the principles of gender equity. As a democratic institution, the media should not only be a transmitter of information but also a pioneer in implementing the values of equality and protecting the rights of workers, including women journalists. Therefore, the results of this study are expected to encourage the development of gender-based editorial policies, a safe and victim-friendly violence reporting system, and gender awareness training programs for decision-makers in the media industry. Furthermore, the formation of solidarity networks among women journalists needs to be strengthened to create a collective space for fighting for professional rights and justice.

This research also opens up opportunities for further development in both methodology and scope. Future research could employ quantitative or mixed methods approaches to strengthen the validity of the data, for example through surveys involving a wider number of respondents from various cities in Indonesia. Furthermore, the psychological dimensions of female journalists' experiences, such as the impact of work trauma, stress due to double burdens, and coping mechanisms, could be the focus of more specific follow-up research. Comparative studies across regions or media types (print, online, television) would also provide

a more comprehensive understanding of the structure and dynamics of gender inequality in the media industry nationally. Thus, this research is expected to not only contribute to the academic literature in the field of gender and communication studies but also provide a practical foundation for structural improvements in the world of journalism. Creating a fair, inclusive, and discrimination-free workplace is not only a need for women but also a fundamental foundation for credible and democratic media. Efforts to eliminate gender bias in the journalism profession are an integral part of the struggle for broader social justice and must be a collective commitment from all elements of the media nation, state, and society.

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