

Negotiating Care and Control: A Reflexive Thematic Analysis of Benevolent Sexism among Politically Active Women Married to Politically Active Men

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Abstract

Benevolent sexism refers to attitudes and practices that appear caring and protective toward women but simultaneously reinforce traditional gender roles and male dominance. While often less visible than hostile sexism, benevolent sexism plays a powerful role in shaping women's autonomy, agency, and participation in public life. This qualitative study explores how benevolent sexism is experienced, interpreted, and negotiated by politically active women married to politically active men. In-depth interviews were conducted with five politically active women from Kottayam District, Kerala. Data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) within a constructivist–interpretivist epistemological framework. Four themes were generated: (a) care as a gendered technology of control, (b) internalisation of dependence through gender ideologies, (c) the double burden of political visibility and domestic invisibility, and (d) shaping and silencing of women's political voice within marriage. The findings demonstrate that benevolent sexism operates relationally at the intersection of intimacy and politics, subtly constraining women's political autonomy while being normalised as love, safety, and support. The study highlights the need to critically interrogate gendered power within politically progressive spaces.

Keywords: Benevolent Sexism, Women in Politics, Marriage, Reflexive Thematic Analysis, Gender Power

Women's political participation has expanded considerably across the globe over recent decades, reflecting broader processes of democratisation, institutional reforms, and normative commitments to gender equality. Increased representation of women within legislative bodies, political parties, and governance structures is often interpreted as a marker of democratic deepening and inclusive political development. However, the numerical growth of women's partici-

pation has not necessarily translated into the transformation of entrenched gendered power relations that continue to shape the terms of women's political engagement. Persistent structural inequalities influence women's access to decision-making arenas, their authority within political organisations, and the recognition afforded to their leadership capacities. These dynamics indicate that formal inclusion alone does not dismantle the informal norms and relational practic-

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es through which gender hierarchies are reproduced. A key mechanism through which gender inequality persists is benevolent sexism, conceptualised within Ambivalent Sexism Theory. Benevolent sexism refers to subjectively positive yet paternalistic attitudes toward women that emphasise protection, affection, and moral elevation while simultaneously reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001). Unlike hostile sexism, which manifests through overt antagonism toward women who challenge gender norms, benevolent sexism operates through culturally sanctioned expressions of care that appear socially desirable and therefore evade scrutiny as forms of discrimination. By constructing women as inherently nurturing yet vulnerable, benevolent sexism subtly legitimises asymmetrical power relations and sustains male authority, often under the guise of respect or appreciation. Within marital relationships, benevolent sexism frequently manifests through practices framed as supportive interventions, including guidance in decision-making, protective oversight, or the assumption of responsibility in matters perceived as requiring male judgement. While these practices may be interpreted as expressions of concern, they can simultaneously constrain women's autonomy and reinforce expectations of dependence. When both spouses are politically active, these relational dynamics acquire additional significance, as the boundaries between private and public roles become blurred. Intimate gender relations may therefore shape not only domestic arrangements but also political legitimacy, leadership opportunities, and the distribution of influence within political networks. In the Indian socio-political context, patriarchal norms remain deeply institutionalised despite notable advances in women's representation through electoral participation and affirmative measures. Women who occupy public leadership roles frequently navigate tensions between their identities as political actors and the expectations embedded within familial structures

that privilege male authority. The coexistence of empowerment in the public sphere alongside persistent gender norms within the household creates complex negotiations that shape women's political trajectories, influencing both their capacity to exercise agency and the forms of support or constraint they encounter. Although existing scholarship has examined the psychological and organisational consequences of benevolent sexism, relatively limited qualitative research has explored how such dynamics are experienced within politically active marriages, particularly in contexts where both partners are engaged in political life. This study seeks to address this gap by examining how politically active women married to politically active men interpret and negotiate benevolent sexism across intimate and political domains. By foregrounding lived experiences, the research aims to illuminate the relational processes through which gendered power operates, is normalised, and is reproduced.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Ambivalent Sexism Theory and Feminist Standpoint Theory to conceptualise the operation of gendered power within politically active marriages. Ambivalent Sexism Theory conceptualises sexism as comprising two interrelated dimensions: hostile sexism, characterised by overtly negative attitudes toward women who challenge traditional gender roles, and benevolent sexism, which involves subjectively positive but paternalistic beliefs that idealise women as deserving protection and care (Glick & Fiske, 1996). These dimensions function together to sustain gender hierarchy by simultaneously punishing nonconformity and rewarding adherence to traditional expectations. Benevolent sexism, in particular, operates as a complementary mechanism that stabilises gender inequality by framing hierarchical relations as mutually beneficial and emotionally meaningful (Glick & Fiske, 2001). Within marital contexts, such attitudes may appear supportive while

reinforcing asymmetrical distributions of authority. Feminist Standpoint Theory emphasises that knowledge is socially situated and that marginalised groups possess epistemic privilege in understanding structures of domination because of their lived experiences (Harding, 1991). By foregrounding women's perspectives, this framework enables an analysis of how everyday interactions within marriage reflect broader socio-political arrangements. It also underscores the importance of examining how private experiences provide insight into systemic inequalities that may otherwise remain obscured. Together, these theoretical perspectives facilitate an examination of how benevolent sexism operates relationally, shaping both intimate experiences and public political engagement.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative exploratory research design to capture the complexity of participants' experiences and the meanings they attribute to marital and political interactions. Qualitative inquiry is particularly suited to examining subtle forms of power that operate through everyday practices and interpersonal relationships. Reflexive Thematic Analysis was employed to identify patterns of meaning across participants' narratives, enabling an interpretive analysis grounded in theoretical sensitivity.

Participants and Setting

The research was conducted in Kottayam District, Kerala, a region characterised by high literacy rates, vibrant political participation, and historically rooted social reform movements, yet also marked by enduring gender norms that shape familial and social relations. Participants consisted of five politically active women who were married to politically active men, with both partners occupying roles within contemporary political contexts. This setting provided a relevant context for examining how gendered power operates within house-

holds where political engagement is a shared domain.

Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants with direct experience of navigating political engagement within marital relationships. This strategy enabled the selection of information-rich cases capable of providing detailed insights into the operation of gendered power and relational dynamics.

Data Collection

Data were collected through unstructured, in-depth interviews designed to encourage participants to reflect on their political journeys, marital relationships, experiences of support or restriction, and decision-making processes across domestic and political spheres. Interviews were conducted with informed consent, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and preserve participants' voices.

Researcher Reflexivity

Recognising that qualitative research is shaped by the positionality of the researcher, reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process. The researcher engaged in ongoing reflection regarding her location within a gendered socio-political environment, acknowledging how assumptions and interpretive lenses may influence analysis. Memo writing and critical engagement with theoretical frameworks facilitated reflexive awareness and analytical rigour.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved iterative engagement with transcripts through familiarisation, coding, theme development, and refinement. Emphasis was placed on interpreting meanings, contradictions, and power relations rather than merely identifying recurring patterns. Themes were developed through an inductive-deductive process informed by theoretical concepts derived from Ambivalent Sexism Theory and Feminist Standpoint Theory.

Results

Theme 1: Care as a Gendered Technology of Control

Participants consistently described their husbands' involvement in their political lives as supportive, attentive, and motivated by concern for their safety and well-being. Acts such as accompanying them to meetings, advising on travel, or monitoring schedules were frequently narrated as expressions of care. However, closer examination reveals that these practices simultaneously operated as subtle mechanisms of regulation that shaped women's mobility, participation, and decision-making within political spaces.

The language of protection functioned as a legitimising discourse through which male oversight was normalised and rendered benevolent, thereby masking underlying asymmetries of authority. Rather than being perceived as restrictive, these interventions were often framed as necessary in response to perceived risks associated with women's public engagement. This framing illustrates how care can operate as a gendered technology of power, structuring the boundaries of acceptable participation while maintaining the appearance of mutual support. In effect, the discourse of care obscured the ways in which control was exercised, reinforcing patriarchal norms within both domestic and political contexts.

Theme 2: Internalisation of Dependence Through Gender Ideologies

Participants frequently articulated acceptance of various forms of restriction as natural, reasonable, or even beneficial, reflecting the deep internalisation of gender ideologies that position men as primary decision-makers within the household. Expressions of gratitude toward husbands for their guidance or protective behaviour were common, suggesting that dependence was not always experienced as coercive but rather as part of a normative marital arrangement.

At the same time, narratives revealed subtle tensions, as participants occasionally acknowledged limits on their autonomy while simultaneously justifying these limits as

appropriate or culturally expected. This coexistence of appreciation and constraint illustrates the operation of benevolent sexism, whereby practices that appear supportive reinforce structural inequalities by encouraging women to consent to arrangements that restrict their agency. The findings indicate that gender norms are reproduced not only through overt rules but also through internalised beliefs that shape how women interpret and respond to power relations in everyday life.

Theme 3: The Double Burden of Political Visibility and Domestic Responsibility

Although participants were actively involved in political activities, they continued to bear primary responsibility for domestic labour, including household management, caregiving, and emotional work. Political engagement did not substantially alter expectations within the household, and participants reported that their public roles were often accommodated around existing domestic obligations rather than leading to a redistribution of responsibilities.

This resulted in a persistent double burden, where women navigated the demands of political participation alongside extensive domestic duties. Many described time constraints, fatigue, and the need to prioritise family needs over political commitments, highlighting how structural expectations within the private sphere limited the scope of their public engagement. The findings suggest that political visibility does not automatically translate into empowerment within the household and that traditional gender roles continue to shape the conditions under which women participate in public life.

Theme 4: Shaping and Silencing of Women's Political Voice

Participants reported instances in which their political opinions were influenced, guided, or occasionally overridden by their spouses, particularly in matters such as voting decisions, public statements, or organisational strategies. While some framed this influence as collaborative discussion, others indicated that disagreement was discouraged or subtly managed, limiting opportuni-

ties to articulate independent political positions.

These dynamics contributed to varying degrees of self-censorship, as participants sometimes adjusted their views to maintain harmony within the household or avoid conflict. Over time, such patterns affected confidence and reinforced hierarchical relationships that extended beyond domestic interactions into political arenas. The shaping and, at times, silencing of women's political voice underscores how intimate power relations can influence democratic participation, revealing the interconnected nature of private authority and public expression

Discussion

The findings illustrate how benevolent sexism operates relationally within politically active marriages, blending expressions of care with mechanisms of control. Consistent with Ambivalent Sexism Theory, supportive behaviours can mask power asymmetries and render gender hierarchy socially acceptable (Glick & Fiske, 2001). Participants' narratives demonstrate that intimate relationships function as key sites where gender norms are reproduced and legitimised, shaping women's political participation and authority. From a Feminist Standpoint perspective, the study highlights how everyday experiences within marriage reveal broader patterns of political inequality. By centring women's perspectives, the research underscores the interconnectedness of private and public spheres and illustrates how domestic arrangements influence political agency (Harding, 1991). Benevolent sexism emerges as a subtle yet pervasive mechanism through which patriarchal authority is maintained. Within the broader socio-political environment, practices of protection and guidance are interpreted in complex ways involving acceptance, negotiation, and occasional resistance. These relational processes contribute to gendered outcomes such as constrained autonomy, limited political voice, and unequal distribution of labour, reinforcing structural inequalities across domains.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that benevolent sexism functions as a subtle yet influential force shaping the experiences of politically active women within marital relationships. Practices framed as care can simultaneously support and constrain, reinforcing hierarchical power relations while maintaining the appearance of harmony. By examining these dynamics through qualitative inquiry, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how gender inequality is reproduced at the intersection of intimate relationships and political participation. Addressing benevolent sexism within the private sphere is therefore essential for advancing substantive gender equality and enabling women to exercise political agency more fully.

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