

## The Media Construction of Women in the UK Labour Leadership Election

The media coverage of women in UK politics is problematic to say the least. Female MPs are more likely to attract [media scrutiny](#), and they are [underrepresented](#) in the media. What's more, the coverage they do receive is prone to focus on their [personal life and appearance](#), which [deters](#) them from being involved in politics.

The UK's Labour party are electing a new leader and Rebecca Long-Bailey, Keir Starmer and Lisa Nandy are the candidates in the running. Considering the presence of women in this race, [linguist Deborah Cameron](#) wondered if sexism would cease to be an issue. Unfortunately, this doesn't seem to be the case. A brief glimpse at the Times and the Sun's coverage shows Long-Bailey and Nandy are still portrayed in stereotypical and sexist ways.

### Stereotypical Portrayals of Women

According to theorist Rosabeth Moss Kanter, women in public roles are cast in one of [four categories](#):

1. The pet. The pet is usually described as sweet and girly. They could be the boss' favourite and are usually liked by the public, although they are rarely able to reach the top.
2. The battleaxe. The battleaxe is angry, aggressive and ruthless. Think Margaret Thatcher or Theresa May.
3. The seductress. Seductresses are described as flirts, and their actions are sexualised.
4. The mother. Perhaps the most common portrayal that women are constructed in, women in this role are seen as bossy or "mumsy", and often too motherly to run a country.

As Cameron notes, women can be constructed in multiple roles. This is what we see with Long-Bailey and Nandy: they are also conveyed in the role of the mother. But we will focus on the most common way each woman is portrayed.

### Long-Bailey: The Pet

Before Long-Bailey announced her candidacy, Cameron predicted she would be constructed as a pet. Evidently, her prediction has turned out to be true.

The media uses patronising language towards her, much like the way you might speak to a child. In the Sun, she is called a "[poppet](#)". The coverage isn't much better in the broadsheet papers. The Times have frequently reported on inconsistencies in her stories. But these aren't "lies", as they might be if told by a male politician. Instead, they're "[tall tales](#)" or "[porkies](#)". To make matters worse, this article also calls her "[an angel who must be missing a hyphen](#)". In doing so, these newspapers dismiss her credibility as a politician, and imply she is incapable of holding the leadership role.

Despite Jeremy Corbyn failing to endorse a candidate, Long-Bailey is dubbed "Corbyn's favourite" in the tabloids and broadsheet papers. She is pictured next to him more than any other candidate, which implies she cannot reach the top on her own merit.

### Nandy: The Battleaxe

Nandy is mostly constructed as a 'battleaxe'. According to the Sun, she is '[demanding](#)' and [blasts](#) her party. She has also launched "[scathing attacks](#)" about antisemitism. The Times have made multiple references to her tough stance and "[demands](#)" about transgender rights.

When women are constructed in this role, there is an implication they are [unnatural](#): these behaviours are typically viewed as masculine. The media have also constructed her within this masculine role, with the Sun using a pun on her surname to create the headline "[I'm your nan](#)". Her interview with the Times mentions she drinks [lager](#), and she thinks of herself as someone who would pass the "[beer test](#)". This reference to a stereotypical male activity reminds the reader that politics is a man's world, and implies she is unnatural.

### Other Misogynistic Media Coverage

Misogynistic media coverage isn't limited to these stereotypes. In this article, the female candidates [whine, shriek, moan and sneer](#). Interestingly, this article by the Times does not use negative language in the article, but the address bar says Long-Bailey "[hisses](#)" at Starmer. There is no such insults towards Starmer. In fact, when was the last time you heard a male politician "shriek" or "whine"?

As mentioned previously, coverage of women in politics can often emphasise trivial matters such as their [clothing](#) and [appearance](#). Thankfully, the leadership race has been void of sexist coverage such as the Daily Mail's infamous "Legs-it" headline, however, Long-Bailey still reports [online trolling](#) due to her appearance.

Overall, the fact two women have reached the final stages of the leadership race is encouraging. Unfortunately, the media still has to catch up. Using dated stereotypes reinforces the idea that politics is still a man's world, when [increases in women's political participation](#) actively challenges this.