

REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN NIGERIAN NEWSPAPERS: AN APPRAISAL**Qaribu Yahaya Nasidi¹, Abubakar M. Babale²& Shamsuddeen Muhammad³**^{1,3}Mass Communication Department Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria²Department of Mass Communication, Adamawa State Polytechnic, YolaCorresponding Author mail: qaribuyahaya@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

The systematic negative media portrayals of women in the Nigerian press are orchestrated by and worked out according to the conventional archetypes of the ruling elites to quench their patriarchal obsessive desire to ‘control the bodies’ of the female folks. Drawing upon the hegemonic approach and feminist critical theories, this study examines how Nigerian newspapers portray women and uncover the hidden ideological meanings embedded in these depictions. It explores the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality enacted and reproduced in newspapers. The study used secondary data as a method of soliciting data. The findings show that the newspaper coverage in Nigeria has been consistently negative and, at times, intimidating and hateful toward women. The study also figures out that the Nigerian press does little to challenge the age-old impressions of women as ‘weak’ and ‘vulnerable’; instead, they reinforce these preexisting patriarchal perceptions.

Keywords: Media, Women, Representations, Stereotype, Nigeria, Gender**Introduction**

As a tool of propaganda, mass media play a significant role in promoting dominant ideas and beliefs. Media promote socially-constructed ideologies (Fowler, 2013; Furia, 2006; Orłowski, 2006), and these ideologies are not always economic (i.e., material gaining); they can be social such as lifestyle, sexuality, health and so on. The evidently established power of the media has inspired many critical studies in areas such as gender, culture, criminology, and sociology. Such researches in media studies have revealed biased, stereotypical, sexist, or racist images in texts, illustrations, and photos. Among the prevailing dominant ideologies that circulate in both fictional and news media nowadays include gender stereotypes where males are portrayed as superior and more durable than females. That is why men are mostly featured as leading characters in action movies, while women are portrayed in supporting roles, which are mainly used to entertain the action doers. It is uncommon and doesn't make sense for a female, either in fictional or in real life, to commit a serious or violent crime. It was this assumption of male superiority and female weakness, as demonstrated in an article entitled gender in crime news: A case study test of the chivalry hypothesis, that makes female criminals to “receive more lenient treatment in the criminal

justice system and news coverage of their crimes than their male counterparts” (Grabe, Trager, Lear, & Rauch, 2006).

Feminist scholars criticize the media for constructing biased women’s victimization. They also challenge the media’s depiction of women as powerless and the marginalization of women’s experiences. In the process of creating these negative portrayals of victims and perpetrators, media draws from cultural stereotypes. The media, whose aim is to improve the lives of women and that of people in general, end up in constructing victimization (Bukowski & Buetow, 2011; Green, 2012; Oyugi, 2010; Washington, 2001). As a daily practice in a patriarchal society, women are seen both in media and in reality as weak and emotional. These socially constructed stereotypes associated with women suggest that women are unlikely to commit crimes, especially violent ones, and whenever a woman is involved in a crime, whether as a victim or a perpetrator, such a story receives so much attention from both media and the audiences. The crime story receives more comprehensive coverage due to several reasons. Crime news mostly gains popularity if the victim is famous, or if the victims are many, or if the victim or the villain is unusually attractive or wealthy. Crime story also becomes sensational if the method of the crime is unusual or horrifying.

The patriarchal dominant ideas and beliefs on how women are supposed to behave concerning violence in the Middle East led the U.S. Senate to pass a resolution stating that the participation of women in carrying out suicide bombings is contrary to the important role women must play in conflict prevention and resolve (Al-Ashtal, 2009; Sjoberg & Gentry, 2011). Women terrorists are subjected to different media stereotypes such as the technically unskilled suicide bomber, the attack bitch seeking revenge, the failed mother, the brainwashed victim, and the sexy babe with personal issues (Sternadori, 2007).

Sternadori (2007) noted that daily activities such as speaking or writings don’t portray the actual reality of the world, but we can create and represent reality. The truth, however, is always expressed from a certain point of view and through the values of a specific culture, paying particular attention to certain qualities of it and, at the same time, disregarding others. Based on this notion, this researcher argues that media contents contain overt and covert ideological messages which affect this depiction of reality. Feminists, anthropologists, sociologists, criminologists, communication researchers as well as gender scholars use various methods of textual analysis, such as semiotic analysis, rhetorical analysis, ideological criticism, and so on, to understand and reveal the latent meanings of these ideological messages of the mass media.

Literature Review

Women in Nigerian Mass Media

Despite the vast number of women in Nigeria, which amounts to half of the total population of the country yet the number of women represented structurally in the media is less than five percent (Obayelu & Ogunlade, 2006). This inadequacy of women in leadership positions in the media establishments has contributed so much to the increase of women stereotyping in Nigeria mass media. Although few women have ventured into the industry, the percentage of women in the journalism profession in Nigeria is exceptionally low. Those in decision-making capacity are nothing to be proud of. Moreover, the few that have been allowed to become part of this seclude circle are facing high resistance (Eritobor, 2017; Yerima & Aliyu, 2012). This was a result of the hegemony of the male gender in mass media.

The women's role in media has been a significant concern for many researchers, feminists, as well as activists. The discourse and overall plan for mass media are set such that women are viewed as 'pretty faces that are suitable mainly for entertainment purposes.' The structure of the media content in Nigeria has continued to promote the notion that women in the media should be reserved for roles of sexuality and trivialities. This subjective representation of women in the media industry of Nigeria is a significant source of concern for many reasons. First, it jeopardizes the rights of women and brings inequality regarding opportunities for advancement. Secondly, the relevant topics for women on the agenda of human development are never featured or fully executed in the media content. Thirdly, this also denies the Nigerian society to fully enjoy the potential and human resources of women in the national development process.

Historically, gender stereotypes are embedded in gender and media discourses (Brooks & Hébert, 2006; Gal & Kligman, 2012; Thorpe, 2008). The history of media establishment in Nigeria clearly shows that women have virtually no influence in determining the way they are portrayed. Therefore, media outputs are designed through the eyes of men and decision-makers. And a majority of Nigerian women seem to be satisfied with their media-assigned roles such as wives, mothers, and housekeepers, which are the images mostly depicted on television. Although each media organization has formal policies that govern its outputs, unfortunately, sexism rarely arises in these policies.

The history of mass media in Nigeria spans over one and a half-century with the founding of Iwe Irohin as the first newspaper, which was in vernacular and established in 1859. The broadcast media came much later when the first television station was opened in the western part of the country in 1959. Throughout these years, women in Nigeria have been excluded from the mainstream and are stereotyped by the mass media. Women constituted only 10 percent as the central focus of news in Nigeria's media, while men took the largest share of 90 percent (Ross & Carter, 2011; Spears, Seydegart, & Gallagher, 2000).

Despite the immense contributions from women, it is observed that the woman in Nigeria is reduced to a mere infidel and a second-class citizen. This misrepresentation of women starts right from the family level up to the larger society. In Nigeria, like in most patriarchal traditional societies, women are usually discriminated against in terms of acquiring formal education, in occupying the position of decision-making in workplaces, mistreated and perpetually kept as housemaids. The average Nigerian woman is seen as an available object for prostitution, forced marriage, street hawking, instrument of wide-range trafficking, and a misfit in the society (Makama, 2013).

In the culture of patriarchy, male dominance over female is the 'norm': men sit back at home to keep the family name and lineage while women are to be carried out; men are being trained for leadership activities, while women are 'chained' to domestic chores which are assigned to them by culture, which affects them later in life by making them lose self-confidence and have low self-esteem in their career and politics in adult life. This gender discrimination and inequality have reduced an average woman to an inferior commodity. These gruesome images of the conditions of Nigerian women are prevalent in the country's mass media, where it serves as a tool that supports, promotes, and protects patriarchy.

As a daily practice in a patriarchal society, women are victims of different types of crimes, either within their respective families (i.e., domestic violence) or in a societal setting. As state apparatus that is ideologically and strategically formed to serve and protect the interest of the status quo,

police and other related security agencies usually ignore such women victims. For example, at the 19th United Nations Session in New York in 1998, Hajo Sani, a former Nigerian Minister for Women and Social Developments revealed that when women victims of male violence report such cases to the authority, “The law enforcement agents do not readily entertain complaints of domestic violence. They treat such complaints as a minor offense of ‘two people fighting’ or laugh it off as ‘husband and wife problem’ (Makama, 2013).

Media Stereotypes of Nigerian Women

Media has a powerful effect on the audiences, who subconsciously adopt and internalize attitudes, beliefs, and values presented either textually, graphically, or both. Publics are unaware of how much media messages manipulate them. For instance, advertisements in all forms of mass media such as television, movies, magazines, newspapers, and radio are trying to sell various products to the audiences. But without fully realizing it, the viewers of such advertisements buy into beliefs and attitudes that govern their lives, as well as their way of thinking (Allam, 2008). As such, the power of the media in the making and unmaking cannot be denied or underestimated. This effect of media negatively affects women’s images of Nigerian women, and this contributes to the gender crisis in the country. Gender relations in Nigeria are characterized by a lot of imbalances, which finally is to be for the disadvantage of women. Tradition, culture, religion, and other related factors have continued to widen the gap and segregate between Nigerian men and women, by keeping women in a subordinate position to men. The male subculture and society in general, which mass media is a part of, still see women and their aspirations as inferior, resulting in a situation in which the marginalization, trivialization, and stereotyping of women are glaring aspects of Nigerian life (Wilmore, 2004).

When a group is depicted negatively, it is easier to rally against such a group. Psychologically, such a description makes it easier to discriminate against the members of the group. Less powerful groups such as women are being devalued and stereotyped by the news media outlets. Concerning media and gender, several studies on mainstream media in Nigeria reveal one dominant orientation: women are primarily seen and not heard. Their faces adorn newspapers and magazines. However, on critical national and international issues, they dwindle. Even when the women appear on the news, the story gets real prominence only if there is a male authority figure or newsmaker on the scene.

The reason why women suffer from these media stereotypes, where their bodies are marketed to sell everything from alcohol to cigarettes to cars, is partly due to the media’s tendency to ignore the fact that women are also intellectually capable, great decision-makers, and business-minded individuals capable of contributing immensely to societal as well as media development. This indifferent and unjust media treatment derives from the fact that historically Nigeria’s media objectives were based not on the cultural needs and values of Nigeria societies but its experiences and biases of culturally distant colonial masters. This media system was designed and forced upon African communities.

Even though women are marginalized in the media, whenever they appear in the news as the central focus, issues addressed in such stories usually are based on sex roles (i.e., family issues). In other words, news media in Nigeria, like anywhere else in the world, tend to identify women in terms of their marital or family status as a wife, mother, or daughter.

Victimization of Women in Nigerian Mass Media

Victimization is a common currency in the mass media (Spears et al., 2000). The media in Nigeria is reluctant to cover critical issues concerning females, such as circumcision or genital mutilation, wife battery, marital rape, sexual harassment, verbal and emotional abuse, incest, termination of employment as a result of pregnancy, and so on. Such cases are not considered as problematic enough to be highlighted in the news, talk less of taking them seriously. For many years in Nigeria, several instances of violence against women, such as acid baths, rape, and physical assaults, have and continue to occur. Still, unfortunately, it is only extreme cases of women's rights violation which results in death or permanent disability that earn the media attention and the police interests (Makama, 2013).

Most news stories on women portrayed them as the victims and sometimes the perpetrators of crime. While some news media outlets depicted them as celebrities and figures from the entertainment world, others interviewed politicians on issues of the day or presented women officiating at a public event. This, however, "reinforced the impression that the media allow very little space to women, and that they depict a society in which women do not intervene in public space. This raises the question of what is news, what makes the news, and why? (Spears et al., 2000).

Discussion

In this section, the portrayal of women based on their professions or occupations is discussed. The trades of women are limited, and working women are inferior or subordinate to male colleagues (women should engage only in womanly occupations such as nurses, secretaries, etc.). Family issues must be the priority of all working women (a woman may be a professional, but her first place is at home).

In this category of stereotype, women, both victims and perpetrators of a crime are mostly depicted as non-professionals, homemakers. The papers described how an unfortunate incident occurred and provided information about the deceased. Starting from the headline, the Daily Sun told its readers the occupation of the dead. "Puzzle for Police: Was late plumber a robber?" goes the headline. But throughout the report, the Daily Sun did not provide any detail about the occupation of his wife. The paper merely called her the deceased's widow, the nursing mother, and so on.

The study revealed that some news stories gave detailed information about the professions of the women reported there as either perpetrator or as victims of crimes. In contrast, other news reports completely lacked any details about women's occupational status. In cases where information about the occupations of women was provided, most of the professional women were depicted in supporting roles.

If a woman is successful at her home, however, the newspapers would depict her at work, in most cases, as "unskilled," "inept" and "professionally unsuccessful woman." The negative media portrayals of the "sit-at-home," "professional," as well as "super women" would, no doubt, promote and reinforce the dominant ideas and beliefs of patriarchy in society. To project the notions of inequality among the populace, the newspapers analyzed in this study indicate that the concerns of women from privileged class groups were the only ones worthy of receiving attention. In other words, the papers contain a large amount of gender and class discriminations. It has been noted in this study that while the privileged women wanted equality with men of their class, the feminist reformers aimed to gain social justice for women within the existing structure.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Media is an excellent tool which, due to its full accessibility, provides us with vast information, knowledge, and entertainment. Despite its considerable importance, media could also be harmful to society if the media owners and journalists do not stick to the prescribed laws and ethics of communication that regulate the entire journalism career. Following the mandates of fairness, equity, and objectivity in press coverage to the letter are the backbone of getting equal and just representations of all groups of the society. The negative and biased portrayal of any social group is not only unethical and unjust, but it also subjects members of such groups to humiliation and marginalization.

The systematic negative portrayal of a group or groups of people always occurs for a reason. For instance, the obsessive desire to 'control the bodies' of female folks in the patriarchal society led the ruling class to orchestrate a systematic subtle or blatant negative media portrayals of females. Unlike Western media, the negative descriptions of women in crime stories in the Nigerian tabloids found in this research are subtle. Although the negativity in the representations of female criminals and victims is there, yet the Nigerian journalists are usually covert and a little cautious in their reports. Nevertheless, the negative media portrayals of women are damaging to both female victims and perpetrators of crimes.

For this reason, news media must adhere to the ethics of journalism. And media portrayals of gender roles for women must be changed for good. When people do not question media presentations of women, it means that they generally accept these media messages about women, which stereotype both the female criminals and the victims by indicating that women are responsible for their victimization. Apart from the psychological manipulation of women (such as female victim-blaming and the creation of the 'culture of fear' among females), the tabloids studied in this research are found to be active participants in systematic marginalization of women socially and economically as well. The depicting of women as housewives and the portrayal of the working women in supporting roles are typical practices of patriarchal societies. It is also believed that Nigerian newspapers decided to help these biased and negative depictions just for the sake of reinforcing dominant ideas and beliefs of the ruling class. The social power abuse, dominance, and inequality reproduced by the mass media could be rejected and resisted through political and social activism. In line with the efforts of 'rescuing' women who are unjustly treated and portrayed as a 'powerless group,' studies like this would be a step forward in the right direction.

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