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## Gender Equality, Media and National Development: Appraising Media Representation of Women and Enhancing Gender Equality and Sustainable National Development in Nigeria

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### ABSTRACT

*The mass media has always been seen as having immense power to influence, control and bring about innovative change in society. It has the power to both hinder and accelerate progress. Thus this paper examines how media representation of the Nigerian woman perpetuates gender inequality. Using secondary data, the paper argues that women are more often underrepresented, misrepresented and stereotyped in the mass media. This not only further reinforces the gender inequality and discrimination they experience in society, thereby slowing the pace of achieving gender equality and empowerment. It inevitably also affects their ability to fully contribute to sustainable national development. The paper goes on to suggest that the same media can be constructively used to promote gender equality, making necessary recommendations to achieve this.*

**Keywords:** *Media representation, gender equality/inequality, sustainable national development.*

## INTRODUCTION

Women constitute half the population of Nigeria, and play very vital reproductive and productive roles in the home and the community, yet they are relegated to the background in every facet of life. Their participation in the formal and informal structures of society, particularly in decisions making on the use of societal resources has largely remain inconsequential (Makama, 2013; Yusuf and Yusufu, 2014). This is attributed to the gender based discrimination that is so entrenched in the Nigerian society, and has brought about intense gender inequality that has bestowed on women a lower status. Women are discriminated, marginalized, oppressed and exploited as a result of their gender. The mass media, through its representation of women and socializing function has reinforced gender discrimination and inequality by its constant underrepresentation, misrepresentation and stereotyping of women, thus retarding the pace of achieving gender equality and empowerment. Statistics show that Nigeria ranks 118 out of 134 countries in the Gender Equality Index (GNI, 2012). As such, much still needs to be done to improve the lot of women in Nigeria, particularly, in enforcing all international instruments that protect and promote gender rights and equality. Gender equality is critical for development and a necessary pre-requisite for the achievement of sustainable national development. Studies show that countries with high gender development indices do better in overall development and vice-versa (Okonofua, 2016).

### Theoretical framework: The hegemonic theory

This paper is anchored on the Hegemony Marxist theory. The theory holds that a dominant ruling class exercise cultural and social leadership or power by manipulating the



subordinate classes in the political, economic and cultural spheres, to impose their own their own world view making it the culturally accepted norm of the day. Thus, the media is controlled by the dominant class in the society and used as an instrument for exercising authority of the dominant class over the rest of the society..... In other words, the ideas of the ruling class become the ruling idea. This theory claims that the media does not reflect the changing role of women in the society. (Men produce an overwhelming majority of the news and dominate the top echelon of the media. Thus, they decide what will be in the news. Women are often invisible in the media. They are much less likely than men to participate or be featured in the news stories as politicians, business leaders, and newsmakers and even less likely to be interviewed as experts for their opinions)

### **Conceptual clarification: Gender Equality versus Gender inequality**

Gender equality or the lack of it thereof, deeply affects every sphere of women's daily lives. The International Labour Organization (2000) defines gender equality as "women and men having equal conditions for realizing their full human rights and for contributing to, and benefitting from, economic, social, cultural and political development". While some countries have made great progress in actualizing gender equality and women's empowerment, Nigeria still lags behind though she has ratified most international instruments that protect and promote gender rights and equality, she has failed to implement these instruments, thereby retarding the pace of women's empowerment and equality. Feminist scholars agree that the patriarchal nature of the society is a major factor cause of gender inequality. Patriarchy has been defined as "the hierarchal system of social organization in which cultural, political and economic structures are controlled by men" (Kendall et al, 2007 as cited by Makama, 2013). It is "a system of social stratification and differentiation on the basis of sex, which provides material advantages to males while simultaneously placing severe constraints on the role and activities of female"(Aina, 1998 as quoted by Makama, 2013). Men are seen as supreme and women as subordinate, as such men dominate women. Patriarchy is deeply embedded in our cultural/traditional system and religion, both have dictated the relationship between men and women for centuries and entrenched the oppression of women and the domination of men into the structure social institutions and organizations at all levels of leadership (Makama, 2013; Okoroafor and Iheriohanma, 2014; Yusuf et al, 2014). These two factors still play significant roles in hindering gender equality as attempts in 2016 to pass a gender equality bill in the National Assembly failed, with most senators citing religion and culture as their main reasons for refusing to pass the bill.

The role of men and women is clearly defined by tradition; women are confined to domestic activities, as homemaker and carers, while men are providers and leaders. Patriarchy sets the bounds for the structurally unequal relationship between men and women, as well as women's unequal position in the family and market "by condoning gender-differential terms in inheritance rights and legal adulthood, by tacitly condoning domestic and sexual violence and sanctioning differential wages for equal or comparable work" (Salaam, 2003). Through a rigorous socialization process, a patriarchal culture is institutionalized. This ensures that every member of the society is aware of what duties, roles and responsibilities are expected from them, this is seen as the right order, necessary



for family and communal harmony (Wamue-Nagare et al, 2011, in Igbelina-Igbokwe, 2013). Patriarchy has not only subjected and predisposed Nigerian women to various form of gender based discrimination, but also justifies them (Makama, 2013; Yusuf et al, 2014; Akpotor, 2016). Article 1 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) defines gender discrimination as,

*any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of man and woman, of human rights and fundamental freedoms on the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field (1979)*

As a result of gender inequality, women remain disproportionately represented among the country's poorest, having unequal access/unable to access economic resources/opportunities and political power. Rural women form a large proportion of the poor, constituting 76% of the entire rural population. They are largely uneducated and engage mostly in agriculture and petty trading. Though they produce 70% of the nation's food supply, yet they have access to less than 15% of the resources available in the agricultural sector (WIN 2005 as cited by Yusuf et al 2014). There is gender disparity in paid employment, with fewer women having access to formal work; and many receiving less pay compared to men in the same position. In the political arena, women are grossly under-represented in the legislative arm. Olurode (2011) in Ekpe, Aloba and John (2014) confirmed that Nigeria had one of the worst representation in Africa, having 5.9% on the women political participation index, lagging behind Uganda (34.6%), South Africa (43.2%), Ethiopia (27.7%), Cameroun (20%), Niger (12.3%) and DR Congo (8.0%). The implication of this is that it would be difficult to pass into law bills that would improve the lot of women, as already seen. Women and girls also have limited access to education, with many girls in the core north being deprived of education in preference for marriage. They have limited access to ownership of land and property/assets and are often denied equal treatment in inheritance. Under the Nigerian legal system women are discriminated against in many aspects as there are laws that discriminate and promote gender based violence against women. Laws such as Section 350 and 363 of the Criminal Code that deals with unlawful and indecent assault, but prescribes a lesser punishment when the victim is female. Women also suffer gender based violence, ranging from physical and mental abuse, rape, trafficking, Female Genital Mutilation, early marriage, their basic human rights are often violated with impunity, the list is endless.

### **Media Representation of Women**

There is no doubt that the media has assumed an enormous role in today's globalized world. The media has immense power to influence, control and bring about innovative change. Not only does it inform people about everyday happenings, facilitate the transfer of information, entertain, mobilize and set agenda for citizens on various issues, reproduce predominant culture and society, the media actively construct the reality, presenting particular versions of reality through the images and information they provide, thus providing a framework through which people can interpret the social world. Van Dijk (2000:33) posits that the media is the "main source of people's knowledge,



attitudes and ideology". In writing about gender and communication, Okunna (2005) noted that men and women, in every society have sufficient differences in their 'distinct behaviour patterns which qualified them to belong to two different cultures or subcultures. Citing Porter and samovar (1991) definition of subculture, which sees subculture as "a racial, ethnic, regional, economic or social community exhibiting characteristics patterns of behaviour sufficient to distinguish it from other within an embracing culture or society." She stressed that men and women belong to two such social communities or categories, as women's subordination and men's domination are so prominent that their subcultures are "literally separated by a world of difference." Thus this paper will view men and women as such. The way the media represents or portray women has always been a contentious issue. Wood (2007) proposes three themes that describe how media represents gender. First, is that women are underrepresented. Secondly, both men and women are portrayed in stereotypical ways that reflect and sustain socially accepted views of gender; and thirdly, are the depictions of the relationship between men and women that emphasize traditional roles and normalize violence against women.

- **Under-representation of women**

The media often under represents women, and this distorts reality, as it misrepresent the actual proportion of men and women in the population. This gives the impression that there are really more men than women in the population, and emphasize men as the cultural standard (Wood, 1994). Women are often invisible in the media. They are much less likely than men to participate or be featured in the news stories as politicians, business leaders, and newsmakers and even less likely to be interviewed as experts for their opinions. Particular categories of women, such as the poor, the elderly, working class women, those belonging to ethnic minorities and religious groups, as well as those with a different sexual orientation, are even less likely to be represented. Men produce an overwhelming majority of the news and dominate the top echelon of the media. Thus, they decide what will be in the news (Wood, 2007; Morna, 2002; Babatunde et al, 2013; Kangas, Huma, Fraser and Browne, 2015). A study conducted by the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) in 2000, to determine the extent of women participation in the media worldwide showed that in Nigeria men produce an overwhelming majority of the news, as 95% of journalist reporting news in the country's radio, television and newspaper were male. Women's participation in the news as subject was low at 17%. Women's appearance as news subjects in major topic areas like politics and government was 17% of the time, in Business and Economy 3% of the time, and as total new subjects 7% of the time. They are quoted in newspapers 13% of the time and appear in photographs 20% of the time (GMMP, 2000as quoted by Amobi, 2013).

There are parallels between the level of women's participation in the media and the low number of women that hold top positions in the media. This has implication for media contentas female media professionals are more likely to give better coverage to women's issues and reflect their needs and perspective, as well as portray them in a more positive light than their male counterparts. (Wood, 1994; Kangas et al, 2015). Okunna (2005) citing a study carried out in 2002 by Chude, Okonkwo and Okunna (2002) on four Nigerian newsmagazines (four issues of each magazine published in January and



February 2002) and five newspaper (ten daily issues of each of the newspapers published in May 2002) on women participation in the news as subject and journalists, observed that Nigerian women were still undistinguishable in the Nigerian news media. The findings revealed that of the 101 reporters whose by-lines appeared in the 42 newsmagazine stories, 92 (91%) of news were written by men, and only 9% by women. In terms of being subject of news, in the newsmagazines, 86% of people in the news were male, females accounted for only 14%. In the newspaper only 93(16%) out of the 566 news stories analysed involved women, and only 53 of these stories had women as their central focus. In addition to the low frequency of appearance, women were also not given prominence in being quoted and seen in photographs. Out of a total of 61 photographs used on the cover of the newsmagazines, only 10%, that is 6, were of women; and of the 263 photos that accompanied the full news report, only 30%, that is 11 were of women. The situation was no different from the newspaper.

Women's invisibility in the media denies them a voice or limits their voice in society. By excluding them, Amobi (2013) believes the media portrays them as objects who do not have a views. When women are able to achieve visibility, it is with biases and negative stereotypes. (Okunna, 2005; Amobi, 2013). In covering 'women's issues', the media tends to trivialize them, choosing to focus on domestic issues, ignoring to a large extent other categories such as politics, economy and sport. Violence against women sometimes may not be reported because it is deemed to belong in the private sphere. When it is reported, it is done in a sensational way that invariably places the blame on the victim (Morna, 2002).

### • **Stereotypical Representation/Portrayal of Women and Men**

The media portrays both women and men in stereotypical ways that are consistent with cultural views of gender. Men are generally portrayed as being powerful, dominant, active, adventurous, sexually aggressive, independent, unafraid, violent, "largely uninvolved with human relationship" and in total control of their emotions. Women, on the other hand portrayed as sex objects, who are passive, dependent on men and often incompetent and dumb. They are solely depicted as homemakers and carers of the family and people (Wood, 2007, Kangas et al, 2015). These portrayals give no room for alternative versions of masculinity or femininity. The media tends to demean those who perform tasks, possess traits or behave in a way that is not in line with their gender (Kangas et al, 2015). The Nigerian media stands accused of misrepresenting women. Amobi (2013) asserts that women are more often misrepresented with negative and unrealistic images outnumbering positive real representations. Nowhere is the negative stereotyping of Nigerian women more pronounced than in Nollywood, Nigeria's foremost film industry. Though women have managed to achieve a degree of visibility in this industry, the content of these movies reinforce gender disparity in their portrayal of women. Women are often portrayed as sex objects, wayward, immoral, easily lured by material things, weaker vessels, subservient to men, causes of family problem, fit for domestic rather than professional or career roles, lazy and dependent on men (Okunna, 2005; Amobi, 2013). Chika (2012) cited in Endong and Obonganwan (2015) mentions some examples of these negative stereotypes where the image of "the old and wrinkled woman became the image



of a wizard, the gorgeous lady becomes the prostitute and the loving and caring wife becomes the daft and unintelligent". Women's subservience to men is depicted in them playing the roles of receptionists, secretaries, nurses, teachers and domestic servants. They are rarely portrayed as executives and professionals.

Endong et al (2015) asserts that these negative portrays/representation not only depersonalize women and re-enforce traditional prejudices, but also re-enforces the stereotyping of women in the society, a view shared by both Amobi and Okunna, who emphasize that it was also having a 'cultivation effect' on young girls.

In a focal group study on the portrayal of women in some Igbo movies, Okunna (2012) also confirmed that the image of women and their roles were predominantly cast negatively. Secondly, that the negative image of women, though considered unrealistic by the audience, affected their perception about women, and behaviour towards them negatively. Since the media permeate our lives, Wood (2007) warns that the ways they misrepresent genders may distort how we see ourselves and what we perceive as normal and desirable for men and women.

- **Stereotypical Images of Relationship between Man and Women.**

Going beyond the stereotypical portrayal/representation of men and women, the media portrays the relationship that exists between them in like manner. Wood (2007) identifies four themes that the media reflect and promote the traditional arrangements between the sexes. These include: (1) **Women's dependence/men's independence:** Women are seen as dependent on men for identity, as such, male dominance/female subservient pattern/role permeates mediated representation of relationships. (2) **Men's authority/women's incompetence:** The media not only emphasizes men as authorities, but as competent authority who rescue women from their incompetence. The media portrays women as being helpless, waiting for men to help them. Also, using a male voice-over in commercials, even when the products are targeted at women, re-enforces the cultural view that men are authorities, and women depend on them to tell them what to do. (3) **Women as primary caregivers/men as breadwinners:** the media portrays women as homemakers and care givers, while men are providers. Even when women who work outside the home are portrayed, their careers are given little or no attention. They are shown predominantly as mothers, wives and home makers. This is especially the case in advertisements, as Okunna (2005) asserts that in most advertisements, women are still represented in traditional roles that reinforce gender stereotypes. Noting that in a study of 5 newspapers, out of 93 advertisements that used photographs of women, 33 (35%) showed women in domestic settings, while 31 (33%) used women's photo in the background for mere decoration. The media reinforces women's role in the home and men's role outside the home. (4) **Women as victims and sex objects versus men as aggressors:** The media represents women as objects of men's desire. The feminine qualities women are encouraged to develop to meet cultural definition of femininity contributes to their victimization. Likewise men are urged to exhibit aggressiveness, dominance, sexuality and strength, qualities that have been linked to abuse of women. An alternative portrayal of women is as decorative objects, that must attract men's attention to be valued. The most glaring examples where women are sex objects and men aggressors are in music



videos where scantily dressed women try to gain men's attention. Women are defined by their bodies (physical appearance) and how men treat them and not by their abilities (Wood, 2007; Morna, 2002).

### **Gender Equality, Media Representation – Impact on Sustainable National development**

There is no doubt that the negative media representation of women in Nigeria has served to reinforce cultural/traditional prejudices, gender discrimination and the inequality they experience. The roles and contributions of women have for long remained unappreciated and unrecognized, and their voices largely unheard because the media excludes them. Ukozor (2004) in Amobi (2013) observe that a closer look of media coverage of gender issues in Nigeria reveals a shameful image of women's exclusion or marginalization, in which rather than giving a balanced report of issues from women's and men's angles, the media excludes women's voices or portrays them as objects who have no opinions. This has negative impact on women's participation in public life and development, as it limits their level of participation, particularly in decision-making. Babatunde (2013: 26) agrees, and asserts that the 'politics of exclusion', as well as the dominance of the media industry by men "takes away the much needed voice of reasoning in women needed to enhance growth and sustainable development that would have contributed to eliminating gender bias and dependence on men as experts on issues of concern to women"

In her Doctoral thesis, 'Gender, Media and Development: The Role of the Media in the Cultural Struggle of Gender Transformation in Tanzania', Johannessen (2006) also examined the portrayal of Tanzanian women in the news/media, noting that though they were seen as an economic force, they were also portrayed in negative terms – as the source of moral decay and blamed for 'everything' that goes wrong in the society. This in her opinion, undermined women's ability to take active roles in society and development. The point being stressed here is that the negative media representations of women reinforce gender inequality, which hinders their active participation in promoting sustainable development. There is also negative psychological effect, as discrimination causes women to loss morale and be less motivated in contributing to development (Graham, 2017 as quoted by Ajayi and Omosulel, 2017).

Women's exclusion or invisibility in the media reflects their invisibility in society (Amobi, 2013). Johannessen (2006) posits that since Sustainable development goes along with gender transformation, women should be visible in the economy, civil society, the political system, economy and health, which are all important for development. Thus to attain this visibility, to have a voice, women need to be adequately, and positively represented by the media, especially in field that matter, such as those mentioned above. Gender equality is essential for achieving sustainable development. The underrepresentation also of women in all levels of government and decision making arena, as well as the increasing gender inequalities has been linked to the high levels of female poverty especially in the rural areas, hence the feminization of poverty. Gender equality and empowerment is not only a development strategy for reducing poverty, but ensures women are adequately represented and play their role in the economic, social, political and environmental aspects. (Reeves et al, 2000).



## The Role of the Media in Promoting Gender equality (and Sustainable Development)

The media has a significant role in advancing gender equality; hence it is one of the twelfth critical areas of concern in the Beijing Platform for Action. However, as we have seen, the media is more often part of the problem, as it helps to create and maintain gender stereotypes through its negative representation of women. The Beijing Platform for Action called for an increase in women's participation and access to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new communication technologies; and to promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of men and women in the media. While there is a slight improvement in women's participation in the media, as the GMMP report shows, much still needs to be done in the areas of access and representation of women. Changing people's mindset hardened by centuries of socialization and reinforced by custom, culture and religion is a major challenge (Morna, 2002). The media can create awareness and educate the public on gender equality. It can also empower people to challenge gender norms, promote gender justice and positive relationships among all genders" (Yingqun, 2017; Joof, 2013). By providing positive images of women, presenting them more often in non-traditional roles, the media will go a long way in changing the stereotypical way society sees women. Through its agenda setting function, the media can promote gender equality. Casserly (2016) agrees, stressing that the media can put 'gender' on everyone's agenda by moving gender issues from the private realm to the political agenda, where all gender issues are treated as political issues. Several approaches have also been put forward to enhance media participation in gender issues. These include: empowering women journalists, creating alternative media for women's voices to be heard and bringing about gender balance in the media, as well as in their editorial content (Morna, 2002).

## CONCLUSION

Gender based discrimination which is already deeply rooted in the Nigerian society has been enhanced by the media which often mis-represented, under-represented and stereotypically represented women. The media is a very powerful tool that can be used to make women relevant and at the same time has the power to portray them as irrelevant. Attempts to get most media involved in promoting gender issues have met with little success, as most merely create pages or programmes for women's issues, thereby continually trivializing women's issue and the perception society has about women. This trend has a way of affecting women's active participation and contribution in sustainable development.

## RECOMMENDATION

1. Women political office holders should be encouraged to intensify efforts towards ensuring that the bill on gender equality is passed into law.
2. The government at all levels should be coerced into appointing more women into political offices as this would enhance their representation in development issues both locally and globally.
3. Women should be encouraged to get involved in the media as news makers, presenters and media managers as this will help curb the negative misrepresentation of women.





4. Women should be incited to turn down commercials and roles that portray them as objects rather than subjects and aspire to only participate in roles that uphold and not degrade their femininity.
5. There should be a legal review of laws that do not fully protect the general wellbeing of women
6. Women empowerment programmes especially the educational programmes should be targeted at rural women. This will enable them to be more aware of their rights, civic responsibilities, capabilities and opportunities.

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