CHALLENGES OF GENDER REPORTING

B.J.C. Anyanwu[1]*, Ejem Agwu Agwu[2] & Ikenna Onuoha[3]

[1,3]Department of Mass Communication, Imo State University, Owerri, Nigeria.

[2] Landmark University, Omu Aran, Kwara State, Nigeria

*bjcanyanwu1@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: The media report on current events, provide frameworks for interpretation, mobilise citizens concerning various issues, reproduce predominant culture and society, and entertain. Through their various activities, they reflect, influence, and perpetuate negative gender identities, roles, and relations. That is why gender reporting in the media has been and continues to be a burgeoning issue among researchers. There is already a large body of empirical evidence to show that there are challenges facing gender reporting in Nigeria and the rest of the world. But in this paper, the writer looks at specific challenges, namely representation, misrepresentation or underrepresentation of men and women in news content, responsibility, and transparency, among others.

INTRODUCTION

As part of their roles in society, the media report on current events, provide frameworks for interpretation, mobilise citizens concerning various issues, entertain, and reproduce predominant culture and society (Llanos & Nina, 2011). Through their reports and various activities, the mass media have come to play crucial roles in the socialization and conditioning of members of society to accept or expected roles and behaviour (Owonibi, 2016). This has evoked a lot of curiosity and inspired a lot of research attention to understand how this media power reflects, influences, and perpetuates certain – mostly negative – identities, roles, and relations.

For instance, researchers have argued that the mass media have used their influence to play a crucial role in constructing and transmitting gender ideology, thereby influencing gender attitudes, values, and beliefs (Okunna, 2015; Fab-Ukozor, 2019; Lukas, 2002; Mosher & Tomkins, 1988, etc.). As such, the media is seen as an important actor in the promotion of gender equality or deepening gender inequality, both within the working environment (in terms of employment and promotion of female staff at all levels) and in the representation of women and men (in terms of fair gender portrayal and the use of neutral and non-gender specific language) (Kangas, Haider & Fraser, 2014).

In this context, gender refers to the socially and culturally constructed perceptions, expectations, requests, and evaluations based on the differences between the two sexes (Hom, Sharon & Chunying, 1995). In another vein, gender refers to learning the differences between men and women which are determined by social and cultural values. It is "a cultural construct that distinguishes the roles, behaviour, mental and emotional characteristics between male and female, developed by society; gender is the social meaning given to biological sex difference" (Keller, 1991, p. 153). That is, the concept of gender is shaped by culture and society.

It is relevant to understand, at this point, that outside biological differences, all other differences between men and women are socially constructed and have no logical relationships with their biological compositions. Therefore, gender is a social construct used in the classification of roles and relationships between men and women in a given cultural setting. It is anchored on sociological stereotypes which are different from biological makeup.

Gender matters have been topical issues in recent times all over the world. Gender ordinarily constitutes no social menace. It is, however, the stereotypes that are attached to it that have succeeded in introducing and generating controversies within our society. Studies on these spheres have brought to the limelight the fact that there exists a certain degree of discrimination and inequality as a result of this social construct. This situation is better clarified when one x-rays gender issues in media, politics, reproductive health, and education, amongst others (Ozoemena, 2007).

The way that gender is reported or presented in the media and all cultural agencies has been a subject of many academic inquiries (Adeniran, 2020; GMMP, 2015; Fab-Ukozor, 2019; Okunna, 2000; Okunna, 1996, etc.). Those studies concluded that the media present women in a way that reinforces their domination, objectification, and suppression in society. It has been said that gender reporting in Nigerian media is tilted to one side, thereby, favouring the male population (Ozoemena, 2007). The result is a misrepresentation and underrepresentation of women in our society.

Why is the way that gender is reported or presented in the media an issue that deserves any scholarly attention? News can influence policy agendas and public debate. Consequently, under-representation, insufficient media coverage, and the prevalence of stereotypical information are obstacles to the equal enjoyment of freedom of expression.

Even though women make up at least one-half of the country's population, "the Nigerian society is traditionally a male-dominated society," (Udiugwomen, 2004, p. 2, cited in Ozoemena, 2007). This has resulted in marginalization of women traditionally and socially in our country. Udiugwomen (2004, p. 2) further asserts that the nature of our society has resulted "in a good deal of social distance between men and women and that avenues for self-expression and self-realization by women are drastically limited by traditional and cultural practices."

All these have given rise to a concept that is known as gender-sensitive reporting, which is the practice of producing media content in a way that is sensitive to gender inequalities and portrays women and men fairly (Onyeji, 2018). For the media to accurately mirror societies and produce coverage that is complete and diverse, it must reflect the world as seen through the eyes of all genders. Journalists can help to change attitudes by portraying women and men as equally valued and diverse, rather than re-enforcing problematic gender-based stereotypes. However, research has shown that this has not been the case.

There is a body of empirical evidence to show that there are challenges facing gender reporting in Nigeria, and the rest of the world (Fab-Ukozor, 2019; Omenugha, 2006, etc.). In this paper, therefore, the writer looks at some of those challenges, namely representation, misrepresentation or underrepresentation of men and women in news content, responsibility, and transparency, among others.

Under-representation

A primary way in which media distort reality is by underrepresenting women. Underrepresentation means to be insufficiently represented, and, in the context of this paper, it falsely implies that men are the cultural standard and women are unimportant or invisible. Despite their monumental achievements, women's representation in media remains drastically low to that of their male counterparts. Whether it is prime-time television, in which there are three times as many men as women (Basow, 1992 p. 159), or children's programming, in which males outnumber females by two to one, or newscasts, in which women make up 16% of newscasters and in which stories about men are included 10 times more often than ones about women, media misrepresent actual proportions of men and women in the population. This constant distortion tempts us to believe that there really are more men than women and, further, that men are the cultural standard (Wood, 1994).

The representation of women in the news media has been a subject of inquiry for many years. There appears to be a general trend in the silencing of the female voice (Adeniran, 2020). In related empirical studies, women were often found to be underrepresented. Global surveys, such as the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) Reports, Global Report on the Status of Women in the News Media, have consistently reported wide disparities in the representation of women in the media with minimal progress being made over decades (GMMP, 2015; GMMP, 2005; IWMF 2011). Male dominance in the news media is well-established in the extant literature and continues to feature in the contemporary news media environment. Male dominance often manifests in terms of more males in editorial positions in news media organisations, in addition to their dominant role as sources of news (Adeniran, 2020; GMMP 2015).

Relating that to the Nigerian media landscape, the Nigerian mass media in almost all its ramifications are highly dominated by men. Women face a lot of underrepresentation in the Nigerian media, and evidence from the literature shows that it comes in two forms: they are underrepresented as newsmakers as well as in the top positions in media organisations (Fab-Ukozor, 2019; Onyeji, 2018, etc.). In other words, Adeniran (2020) states that men's dominance and women's underrepresentation is reflected in the form of participation, content, and hierarchical status.

Studies have found that although the number of women working in the media has been increasing globally, the top positions (producers, executives, chief editors, and publishers) are still very male-dominated (White, 2009). The perceived entrenchment of the male perspective in media coverage of issues may also be traced to masculine newsroom cultures; when (predominantly male) editors persist in the stereotypical beat assignment. Male reporters are preferred to "prestigious beats" such as politics, while women are assigned to less revered beats like education and fashion (Craft & Wanta 2004). The output from women who work within such newsrooms is likely to be shaped by dominant male viewpoints (Correa & Harp, 2011). Even when they are assigned beats in media organisations, female journalists are more likely to be assigned 'soft' subjects such as family, lifestyle, fashion, and arts. The 'hard' news, politics, and the economy are much less likely to be written or covered by women (GMMP, 2015). This is worse in patriarchal societies such as in Africa where cultural impediments to women fulfilling the role of journalist remain (e.g., travelling away from home, evening work, and covering issues such as politics and sports which are considered to fall within the masculine domain) (Myers, 2009).

There are other ways that women's voices and issues are continually underrepresented in the Nigerian media landscape: it is the participation of women in the field and the number of women who make the news. Data from the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) 2015 report on Nigeria notes relatively low participation of women in the field compared to their male counterparts. Women have also reportedly been invisible in Nigerian media content; they rarely feature as news subjects with only an 18 percent inclusion rate compared to 82 percent males (GMMP, 2015). The report notes a tendency for male reporters to focus attention on male news subjects in their stories whilst female reporters feature more feminine subjects, suggesting that the continuing domination of the news media by males tends to silence women's voices, along with their issues, interests, and aspirations within the society. The trend is not different from the report by GMMP revealed that 17 percent of news subjects were women, while 83 percent were men. (GMMP, 2000, p. 5 in Fab-Ukozor, 2019). Also, 59 percent of men were announcers and reporters in the mass media, while 41 percent were women. Similarly, UNESCO (2018) reports that women are the focus of only 10% of news stories, comprise just 20% of experts or spokespeople interviewed, and a mere 4% of news stories are deemed to challenge gender stereotypes.

Studies show that men are more likely to be quoted than women in the media and more likely to cover "serious" topics (Women's Media Center, 2012). Women have been seriously marginalized in certain news categories such as politics, law, and business; only about 30% of the news reports about the government refer to women, while less than 20% of the financial news includes female sources. Furthermore, the news media always cites more ordinary opinions from female witnesses or citizens but leaves the majority of insightful statements to men (Who Makes the News, 2010).

In the 2005 GMMP report, some progress in women's presence in the news was evident. 21 percent of news subjects were female, while 79 percent were male. This 3 percent increase in the preceding five years was statistically significant. The main finding, though, was that women continued to be almost completely absent from the news. Very little news—just under 10 percent of all stories—focused specifically on women, the Report (2005) added. Further findings show that women were rarely central in stories that comprised the bulk of the news agenda. Also, women were outnumbered by men as newsmakers in every major news topic.

The underrepresentation of females and the dominance of males in the Nigerian media also sometimes manifests in higher pay for male journalists. Adeniran (2020) states that there is a gender pay gap in favour of men. Similarly, a more recent report by Salary Explorer (2021) states that male journalist employees in Nigeria earn 19% more than their female counterparts on average. The gender bias in the Nigerian media may also be attributed to the absence of female ownership of the dominant mainstream news media outfits as they only feature as publishers of specialised magazines.

As newsmakers, The Global Media Monitoring Project (2015) finds that women are more likely than men to be featured as victims in news stories and to be identified according to family status. Women are also far less likely than men to be featured in the world's news headlines, and to be relied upon as 'spokespeople' or as 'experts'. Certain categories of women, such as the poor, older women, or those belonging to ethnic minorities, are even less visible.

Misrepresentation

Misrepresentation is also rife in the media, particularly of women. It can come in the form of stereotypes. Stereotypes are also prevalent in everyday media. Women are often misrepresented and portrayed solely as homemakers and carers of the family, dependent on men, or as objects of male attention (Gallagher et al., 2010). Fair gender representation and portrayal in the media does not only mean underrepresenting a particular gender, especially women (Bau, 2009), it also means portraying gender in a way that is unfair and dishonest. That is what is known as misrepresentation. Fair gender representation and portrayal in the media should be a professional and ethical aspiration, similar to respect for accuracy (White, 2009).

Men are also subjected to stereotyping in a way that connotes misrepresentation in the media. They are typically characterised as powerful and dominant. There is little room for alternative visions of masculinity. The media tends to demean men in caring or domestic roles or those who oppose violence. Such portrayals can influence perceptions in terms of what society may expect from men and women, but also what they may expect from themselves. They promote an unbalanced vision of the roles of women and men in society (Hickey, 2016; NerdLove, 2013).

There are allegations that women are mostly projected in the media as objects to be desired, often with the publication of glamorously-dressed, beautiful women to fill up media space, with a minimal projection of their contribution to society (Tijani-Adenle & Oso, 2014, cited in Adeniran, 2020). More often than not, they are rarely spoken to. Their voices, especially as expert sources on pressing public issues, are hardly projected (GMMP 2015).

Espinosa (2010) states that gender roles are prevalent in media, often portraying women as nurturing, gentle, cooperative, concerned with appearance, and sensitive to others; while men are viewed as logical, competitive, independent, assertive, financial providers, and skilled in business. Women in media tend to be represented more negatively than men (Rouner, 2003). While men are perceived as hard workers, amusing, directive, and physically aggressive (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004), women are displayed as likable, warm, submissive, passive, and weak (Dill & Thill, 2007; Ellis & Armstrong, 1989).

Women are also more likely than men to display empathic behaviours such as affection, sharing, giving, and concern for others (Glascock, 2001). Women are likely to be portrayed as sex objects in media (Morris, 2006 p. 78). According to Fareed (2012), the status of women in our society, especially in the cultural industry such as the media, has been very sympathetic for ages; they have never been given the importance they deserved. Our male chauvinistic society has always been eager to use women but never ready to give them the high pedestal that they justify. For ages and in most societies, women are defined as a commodity or an instrument of luxury.

Ukozor (2011) asserts that a certain image of men is created as an insensitive, wicked, and uncanny group of people which does not augur well for societal growth. She insists that there seems to be discrimination or marginalization in terms of excluding the voices of men that are ordinary or poor. Sim and Suying (2001) state that the roles assigned to women in the media were most likely to be depicted as non-occupational, and that women are very often shown as being preoccupied with their appearance.

On television, male characters are more likely to be shown as having a job (Glascock, 2001) and are more likely to be seen working (Signorielli & Kahlenberg, 2001). In addition to having jobs, male characters are also more likely than females to have leadership roles and power at work (Lauzen & Dozier, 2004). Female characters, in primetime programming, are younger than their male counterparts (Gerbner, 1997; Glascock, 2001). Additionally, females are more likely than males to be married and/or have children (Glascock, 2001). Female characters in feature films are younger than male characters and are seen in more traditional roles, such as caregivers (Smith & Granados, 2009). All these are stereotypical and tend to misrepresent each gender – male or female.

Responsibility

Balance in gender reporting helps to fulfil certain responsibilities. Research shows that female media professionals are more likely to reflect other women's needs and perspectives than their male colleagues. There is also consensus that the presence of women on the radio, television, and in print is more likely to provide positive role models for women and girls, to gain the confidence of women as sources and interviewees, and to attract a female audience (Tremblay, 2018). It can be inferred therefore that assigning women key roles in the media is a good way to refocus the responsibility of women in the media and society.

There is a link between the participation of women in the media and improvements in the representation of women. Stories by female reporters are more likely to challenge stereotypes than those filed by male reporters (Gallagher et al., 2010). Advocacy groups have argued that the dominance of male sources over women denies women the opportunity of shaping national discourse and the public continues and perspectives of women (Oppenheim, 2019).

Adeniran (2020) also stresses that male dominance in the media has implications for media coverage of issues. It has the potential to affect the types of stories that are reported, and how they are reported since the personal attributes and attitudes of individual journalists tend to influence media content (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Having more women in key decision-making positions in news media organisations may increase newsroom diversity, thus giving women more responsibility and enabling women to provide varied perspectives to coverage of issues (Correa & Harp, 2011; Craft & Wanta, 2004).

Disinformation

Gendered disinformation is the use of false or misleading gender and sex-based narratives against women, which ultimately pushes women out of public spaces. Gendered disinformation undermines democracy and is therefore an issue of concern to everyone. It is further explained by Boberg (2020) as a subset of online gendered abuse that uses false or misleading gender and sex-based narratives against women, often with some degree of coordination, aimed at deterring women from participating in the public sphere. It combines three defining characteristics of online disinformation: falsity, malign intent, and coordination.

To begin with, two main differing terms co-exist under the umbrella of what is colloquially known as fake news: misinformation and disinformation. Misinformation is the word used for false information shared with no intention of causing harm. Disinformation, on the other hand, contains the intent to harm in some way (Hinds, 2019). Because a growing body of research shows that false information is directly used with the intent to negatively impact the person

concerned, especially when it comes to gendered falsehoods, this article uses the term disinformation throughout

Disinformation is gendered if it targets women based on their identity as women. Research shows at least one of two contrasting approaches is usually taken when it comes to online attacks on women politicians. First, there is the presentation of women leaders as enemies and, secondly, as victims without agency (Sessa, 2020). In doing so, rather than directly attacking the policy decisions women make, as is the case with male politicians, gender stereotypical characteristics (like being emotional or polite) and physical appearance are used instead to challenge female politicians (Meco & Wilfore, 2021). Such disinformation may come in different forms, from harmful graphics to conspiracy theories. A well-researched instance is the 2016 US presidential election when Hillary Clinton was demonized through fabricated evidence of involvement in trafficking scandals and misconstrued videos about the state of her health (Stabille et al., 2019). In either case, the disinformation focused on objectification and reinforcement of gender stereotypical characteristics.

While the most recognizable disinformation campaigns are related to national politics, disinformers frequently employ narratives targeting women's gender and sexuality to disrupt democracy. According to the National Democratic Institute (NDI) (2021), the internet age has led to gendered disinformation, which means the use of false information to confuse or mislead by manipulating gender as a social cleavage to attack women and/or to sway political outcomes. It has three primary goals: to keep women out of politics; to change the views of women and men about women's political participation; and specifically, to change party policies or political outcomes. In short, it aims to undermine women's free and equal participation in politics to the detriment of an inclusive, resilient democracy.

As research shows more and more people use the Internet as a key source of information on politics and governance, it's critical to analyse the role social media outlets are playing, consciously or unconsciously, in the promotion of more gender-inclusive and participatory democracies – yet the intersection of gender, democracy, disinformation, and information technology remains understudied. Gendered disinformation is a worrisome issue in the information age.

As highlighted above, a common result of disinformation campaigns is that the female politician's fitness to lead is undermined. An obvious consequence of such is that negative public debate surrounding her is either initiated or amplified and that the woman politician concerned will find it harder to work effectively. Another devastating consequence is that women who observe these attacks happening to others may hesitate to enter politics in the first place. This kind of effect has been seen in the Georgian pre-election period when several female politicians signalled their intention to run and became targets of a smear campaign filled with fabricated intimate videos.

One research study that interviewed over eighty women politicians and experts shows gender-based abuse and disinformation in the digital space presents a serious "barrier for women who want to engage in politics and a serious disincentive for young women to consider a political career" (Hinds, 2019). Therefore, the direct negative consequences for the women targeted also confirm this chain effect as a challenge for women pursuing a political career.

Meco and Wilfore (2021) explained that gendered disinformation undermines women's credibility, poses obstacles to their electoral success, and ultimately represents a significant reason why many women abandon political careers. On some occasions, hate and online threats fuelled by gendered disinformation campaigns are followed by physical violence. Even in milder cases, the abuse can cause psychological harm and waste significant energy and time. Pushing women out of the political arena is often only the first step of a broader, dangerous strategy to erode democracy and human rights.

Deception

Based on the available body of literature, the phenomenon of gender deception has not been fully investigated (Ho et al., 2017). One salient dimension of online deception is users' misrepresentation of their gender (Ho & Hollister, 2013). This does not manifest in the mainstream media but in the new media, particularly, social media. As the adoption of computer-mediated communication increases, our social reliance on these technologies has made gender easily disguised online.

In the mainstream media, most media and gender activities seem to agree that the mass media are not just mirroring society but are encouraging gender inequality through the promotion of stereotypes and the stigmatization of certain groups of people, particularly women (Fab-Ukozor, 2019). Of the many influences on how we view men and women, media are the most pervasive and one of the most powerful. Woven throughout our daily lives, media insinuate their messages into our consciousness at every turn. Most of those activities are considered subtly deceptive. All forms of media communicate images of the sexes, many of which perpetuate unrealistic, stereotypical, and limiting perceptions (Wood, 1994).

Accountability

Gender accountability means obligation and responsibility on the part of state structures and public officials to implement gender mainstreaming and achieve gender equality policy objectives, to report on progress achieved, and to be answerable in the event of a failure to meet stated gender equality objectives (Ho et al., 2017). Women's relative lack of political and economic leverage reduces their ability to demand accountability. Why women must demand that their rights should be protected is that they are often least able to command accountability from public officials regarding issues about women — such as when women seek security and protection from violence (Sahin & Kula, 2018).

Gender-sensitive accountability requires that the decisions of public actors can be regularly assessed from the perspective of women's and men's needs and interests and that gender equality is one of the standards against which the performance of decision-makers is assessed (Unifem, 2009). There is a need to put mechanisms in place to ensure full accountability by non-state actors who violate women's human rights (Women's Aid Collective, 2008).

Several gender problems have been addressed by many international instruments. Nearly every country has ratified international conventions on equal rights for women and girls. Gender equality is also an important aim of the Millennium Development Goals. By signing these conventions, governments agree to remove discriminatory laws and other obstacles to equality, promote equality through affirmative action, and eliminate discriminatory attitudes, conduct, prejudices, and practices. Next is the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005). By

endorsing this international agreement, partner countries and donors have committed themselves to continue to increase efforts in harmonisation, alignment, and managing aid for results with a set of assessable actions and indicators. Mutual accountability is one of the principles of this declaration.: all the parties involved in the ratification and implementation of those international instruments must be accountable.

Gender accountability is not only about tackling elites unwilling to reach the poor, it concerns gender relations and power differences at all levels, and the lack of knowledge among politicians and providers regarding the specific situation, position, and demands of women. Girls and women encounter specific problems when dealing with public services that make it especially difficult for them to hold service providers or authorities accountable. These problems concern women's access to services, the extent to which women are visible and esteemed, and providers' knowledge of and conduct towards women.

Two main bases for gender accountability, according to Blankenberg (2007) and Evertzen (2007), are supporting women's empowerment and social inclusion. In the context of gender accountability, social inclusion means that providers and government/policymakers account for their services to poor women and men. It focuses on public services that take both women's and men's concerns and wishes into account, and involve the point of view of both in local development processes. Civil society has an important role in supporting the voices of the poor and holding the powerful accountable. They strengthen the voices of the poor, coordinate coalitions to advocate for women's rights, and demand greater service accountability. They counteract the gender biases in formal institutions and can play a watchdog role.

Transparency

The concept of transparency is a tool for gender equality. Enhancing the transparency of job selection, irrespective of the gender involved, is one important aspect of achieving gender equality. The call for more transparent procedures and more accountable decision-makers has its origins in gender research: women would benefit from more open and transparent procedures since (gender) bias is more likely to occur when assessments are based on obscure criteria and the process of evaluation kept confidential (Rees, 2004; Ziegler, 2001; Husu, 2000; Ledwith & Manfredi, 2000).

In the context of this paper, the writer looks at decisions or practices as 'transparent' when information about how they are carried out is accessible to insiders and outsiders in an accurate and comprehensible form. The purpose of transparency is closely connected to enabling outsiders to hold organizations to account for their policies and performance (Florini, 1999; Levay & Waks, 2009). Gender equality programmes frequently emphasize the importance of transparent appointment processes; transparency is seen as a way of increasing the likelihood of a fairer process and reducing bias. Studies on gender mechanisms in organizations emphasize that transparency enhances women's chances of promotion and decreases the chance of gender-related bias (Husu 2000; Ziegler 2001; Martin, 1994). All these studies argue that bias is more likely to occur if assessments are based on obscure criteria and the evaluation process is kept confidential

Conclusion/ Recommendations

The implication of the foregoing in Nigerian society is that women, in contrast to men do not enjoy the same degree of representation in the media as a result of the fact that they are given a subordinate stance in the affairs of the media; and this situation is caused and perpetuated by the Nigerian culture.

One can argue that the portrayal of gender in the media is only a reflection of how they are portrayed in society. That is to say, the Nigerian culture is entrenching balance or imbalance in news reporting concerning gender. There has been an age-long subjugation of women in African society. These roles usually put them in subservient positions to men. Our culture plays a vital part in the daily lives of the people and it is one in which the idea of the superiority of the males is deeply ingrained… it is within this cultural context that gender roles are defined and women's participation delimited or precluded in certain key spheres reserved for men (Omenugha, 2006).

Attention needs to be paid to identifying and addressing these various gender imbalances, deception, disinformation, and other gaps in the media. The European Commission (2010) recommends, for example, that there should be a set expectation of gender parity on expert panels on television or radio and the creation of a thematic database of women to be interviewed and used as experts by media professionals. In addition, conscious efforts should be made to portray women and men in non-stereotypical situations.

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