



Gender Perspective of Select Nigerian Newspapers Coverage of COVID-19 Responses and Political Activities

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Abstract:

This study examined gender perspective of Nigerian newspapers coverage of COVID-19 responses and politics associated to the responses. Agenda setting and feminist theories were used as theoretical framework. The study adopted the content analysis method. Newspaper editions that carried headline stories of COVID-19 responses and political activities were purposefully selected from 366 editions of *The Punch*, *Vanguard*, and *Daily Trust* newspapers published in April, May, June, and July, 2020, when COVID-19 response was high. This study then examined the 946 lead reports on the COVID-19 responses and the 302 lead reports on the political activities that appeared in newspapers, from a gender perspective. The findings reveal that lead stories on COVID-19 responses were the greatest, while politics was the fifth within the study time frame. This shows that the newspapers attached importance to COVID-19 lead stories. The decrease in the frequency of newspaper stories on COVID-19 responses following the confirmation of the index case in February was normal, as the media would ordinarily set an agenda on a quite current. Also, just 103 (11.0 percent) of the COVID-19 response lead stories were sourced from women, while 379 (34%) were obtained from males: 76 (25.0 percent) of the political lead reports were derived from women, as against 208 derived from men. It is recommended that the media continue to pay attention to serious issues in the society and particularly pay special attention to such pertinent issues from a gender-balanced frame.

Keywords: COVID-19, COVID-19 response, Politics, Women's political participation, Gender equality, Media coverage, Media gender representation

Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic that emerged in 2019 called COVID-19 has brought much-needed respite to difficulties concerning gender politics in Africa in general and women's inclusion in particular. The impacts of the epidemic are felt in many crucial areas, including the health sector, the economy, politics, and empowerment. Women's engagement in politics in Africa remains dangerously low for several reasons, which may be summed up as structural and social. From March 2020, many African nations proclaimed state of emergency in response to the COVID-19 epidemic, which had had both good and bad implications for women's political engagement and inclusion in COVID-19 responses. With several elections in Africa slated during the first and second waves of COVID-19, institutional and social hurdles to women's involvement in politics and inclusion in responses to COVID-19 continue to develop.

According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance [International IDEA] (2020, para. 2), "Gender-Based Violence; Political Finance; Cultural Values and Practices; Menstrual Health; Maternal Health; Comprehensive Sexuality Education and Adolescent Pregnancies; Safe Abortion; HIV and AIDS; and Sexual Diversity" are among the topics that have a close link with women inclusion in politics. Fundamentally, the question of inclusion has also come to the fore, with obvious gender differences seen in the assembling of COVID-19 response teams from different African nations, as well as in news headlines regarding COVID-19 response operations.

During the epidemic, elected officials, including men and women, have a unique chance to provide revolutionary leadership in their communities. This should entail mobilising resources to enhance community awareness of the epidemic as well as the delivery of palliatives to lessen its effect. Despite the COVID-19 outbreak, countries with elections during the first and second waves were in full campaign gear. With the threats that the pandemic has raised, as well as the potential for political benefit, the media are expected to seize the opportunity to advance the debate in the field of women's inclusion within and outside of political party lines, while also providing reasonable coverage of their community-centered efforts to mitigate the virus's impact.

However, in the fearful atmosphere occasioned by the first wave of the novel virus, the media are more likely to react to the stimulus of commodifying news, which may result in COVID-19 news gaining priority over other news. The media may also neglect to reflect the gender nuances within this COVID-19 news (International IDEA, 2020). With news of the COVID-19 response flooding the media, people with the financial resources to supply COVID-19 relief items and community help, which women may lack, are more likely to be news sources at this time, especially where women are not given fair consideration or representation in the task-force committee in-charge of COVID-19 responses. Nigeria has a similar scenario with two women out of the 12-member presidential task force committee in charge of COVID-19

responses. In response to this unfairness, the media may depict the reality and illusion of caring males at the cost of women in its news coverage. The media may also go further to underrepresent or fail to provide an equal playground for women in the politics of COVID-19 and political activities within this period.

Regardless of the gravity of the COVID-19 epidemic and the media's commitment to keeping the public informed, COVID-19 news must be integrated into complex topics such as politics, gender sensitivities, economics, health, and security. It would be fascinating to observe how much of the COVID-19 news is gender-sensitive or sourced from women, as well as how gender imbalance is dealt with in the electoral news within the first wave when the election for political posts was held. As a consequence, the research intends to reflect on the media's coverage of COVID-19 response and electoral activities during the first wave of the epidemic, with a focus on raising issues on women's inclusion—a gender-based approach to coverage from *The Punch*, *Daily Trust*, and *Vanguard* newspapers.

Statement of the problem

Gender discourse has attracted media attention as a societal concern. As an agenda-setter, the media has boosted gender relations discourse, particularly discourse on women's active engagement in political processes and the consequences for national development (Saka, Amusan & Aluko, 2017). They have equally been fundamentally implicated in perpetuating gender biases through imbalance reportage or underrepresentation or representation. Gender gaps are projected to intensify during the first and second waves of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of media coverage of COVID-19 responses and elections within the period, given men's control of most African political spheres and the media owned by them. Because the media is likely to react to the impulse of commodifying news in the confusing environment of the COVID-19 first wave, COVID-19 and political news' focus may not include women's efforts and/or fail to portray the gender nuances, which may further perpetual imbalance and gender inequality in media reports. With much discourse around how the media, as the Fourth Estate of the realm, have perpetuated gender imbalance; in this era when the trajectory of women's political involvement and efforts in nation-building are taking the front burner, it is expected that the media give serious attention to gender nuances in news coverage. Given this backdrop, it is crucial to close-examine the media's coverage of COVID-19 response and electoral activities during the COVID-19 epidemic, with a focus on *The Punch*, *Daily Trust*, and *Vanguard* newspapers' coverage.

Research questions

1. To what extent do *The Punch*, *Daily Trust*, and *Vanguard* newspapers cover responses to COVID-19 and political activities in Nigeria?

2. What are the issues *The Punch*, *Daily Trust*, and *Vanguard* newspapers cover during COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria?
3. To what extent do *The Punch*, *Daily Trust*, and *Vanguard* newspapers' coverage bring out the gender nuance within COVID-19 news in Nigeria?

Conceptual review

In the year 2020, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) epidemic shocked the globe and exhausted most countries' health systems. After the World Health Organization (WHO) proclaimed the outbreak of COVID-19, a new human coronavirus disease, a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on January 30, 2020 (WHO, 2020), organizations, governments, and people reacted to the call to rescue the world. Efforts to restrict the virus's spread were intense during the first and second waves. In Nigeria, a multi-sectoral pandemic response plan was implemented, serving as a model for a whole-of-government response. Furthermore, a network of existing testing facilities was extended. Meanwhile, individuals (men and women) and organizations—both private and public—put their support behind delivering relief items, both consumables, and medicals, to slow the spread of the virus and mitigate its economic impact on the Nigerian people. In this article, all of these initiatives by people, private and public organisations are recognised as COVID-19 responses; media reportage of these responses is considered COVID-19 news.

Getting involved in an academic activity, such as a debate on women's engagement in Nigerian politics, will result in the development of new or agreement with current conceptual frameworks in media, gender, and politics. Political inclusion in this context comprises a variety of activities, the most important of which are voting in elections and running for elected public office. This is not the same as representation. Representation entails holding elective or public positions in connection to other forms of representation. Both concepts are outside the purview of this paper. Meanwhile, in media studies, representation refers to the coverage of other forms of representation. Because everything in society is political, gender representation in the media has become politically motivated as well. According to Agbalajobi (2010), it is widely accepted that the male-dominated political atmosphere has socially conditioned the setting in which their female counterparts compete and, by extension how media operate. The COVID-19 epidemic has also brought with it gender politics in an atmosphere where women are striving to be relevant. Individual women and men have put their support behind delivering relief items, both consumables, and medicals, to slow the spread of the virus and it is only fair for the media to give them equal representation in covering such support and kind gestures. Women's awareness and inclusion modify values, allowing for a more free-for-women climate (Agbalajobi, 2010). Media fair representation of women's involvement in COVID-19 responses and electoral activities in this study is seen and examined through how much space is provided or how much mention is made of women by the media, in its coverage of these issues during the first wave.

Literature review

The mass media aims to improve the well-being of the people through its news reporting and emphasize critical issues like coronavirus and other deadly diseases. One of the significant roles of communication in modern society is to educate people about the risk and prevention of the spread of any virus (Onekutu & Ojebode, 2007, p. 83). In doing that, the media are expected to give a robust reportage that will reflect efforts to curb the spread of the virus from gender perspectives. This is due to the persistence of cultural stereotypes, the exploitation of religious and traditional practises, paternalistic social systems in which institutional, governmental, and hegemony are male-dominated, and the fundamental role that women have performed as the supporters of male elected figures (Agbalajobi, 2010). This kind of prejudice is not just a Nigerian or African problem, but it occurs around the world. While it has persisted for so centuries in this region of the globe, other industrialised countries throughout the world are making strides toward gender equality and fairness. Women are subjected to unjustified discrimination in a variety of ways. For example, according to (Agbalajobi, 2010), in certain Nigerian courts and police stations today, women who want to serve as sureties for accused people who have been granted bail are frequently excluded from doing so solely based on their gender identity. Although democracy has emerged as a critical instrument for achieving gender equality in societal settings across the globe, the influence of the idea of democracy remains ambiguous. Political involvement, which is a basic condition of democracy and enables the expression of many viewpoints and the engagement of both men and women, cannot prosper if the female population, which accounts for half of the global total, is excluded.

Given this, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action prioritise gender equality in the media (Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights, 1996). The proclamation encourages increased female expression, decision-making, and involvement in and via the media, with an emphasis on the non-stereotypical and fair representation of women in the media. This seems to be because the media is an extraordinarily effective means of information diffusion in human civilization. Through the information they deliver, they can change or accentuate societal values and behaviours. It may also motivate folks to take constructive action. In other words, as is commonly noted, knowledge is power. In this power formula, the media plays several critical roles. They provide informative frameworks, imitate dominant culture, organise people on a diversity of topics and, of course, entertain.

Women's engagement in politics has advanced significantly in several sectors of power today. According to UN Women (2011, p. 13), "Dilma Rousseff became President of Brazil in 2011, joining the six Latin American women democratically elected to their nation's highest office since 1990." The implementation of quota rules in several nations has had a significant role in raising the number of women elected to parliaments in comparison to prior years (UN Women, 2011). Another noticeable outcome of such foresight is the upsurge in female candidacy in several nations. According to UN Women (2011, p. 13), "Costa Rica, Bolivia, and Ecuador have altered their statutes and constitutions to

demand parity on candidate lists, with men and women alternated." Other nations, on the other hand, have not yet passed such measures or have implemented poorly constructed laws with a smaller number of women on candidate lists (UN Women, 2011). Notably, the majority of industrialised countries push for or promote female political engagement, not just giving them a fair chance of contesting political posts, but also creating an atmosphere of fair representation in the media. This cannot be true of African nations, even though women occupy key roles in various administrations. In other words, the issue bothering fair media coverage or media presentation is still largely problematic and seems unachievable.

Nigeria's condition is very concerning. Nigerian women have sought to obtain access to political posts since the restoration of democracy in 1999 by standing for elected seats at different levels. However, when the results of consecutive elections since 1999 are considered, their efforts have not resulted in a major gain. "Not only has there been marginal gain over the years, which is not very encouraging, but a decline in the number of elected female politicians in the 2015 general election shows a manifestation of female political disempowerment, which is even more concerning" (Bappayo and Kirfi, 2019, p. 71). Given this, Mwantok (2019) submits that the national average of women's political engagement in Nigeria has remained at 6.7 percent in elective and appointive posts, significantly behind the global average of 22.5 percent, the African Regional Average of 23.4 percent, and the West African Sub-Regional Average of 15 percent. President Buhari, for example, nominated just six women out of 36 cabinet appointments when he took office in 2015, representing 16.7 percent of the total. In the National Assembly, women make up 6.5 percent of senators and 5.6 percent of House of Representatives members. Furthermore, Mwantok (2019) wrote that no female governor has been elected in any of the Federation's 36 states throughout Nigeria's 20 years of unbroken democratic rule (1999–2019).

Despite this, women account for more than half of all people. Women's roles in society have yet to be recognized, given the critical role they play in their communities. This might be due to a lack of media coverage of women's activities. While the media is obliged to strive for honesty and fairness in its reporting, there are often disparities, especially when it comes to women and their opinions. For example, female politicians may be underreported in the media before and after elections. Several studies have shown this. In their recent research on newspaper coverage of women in politics, Bappayo and Kirfi (2019) observed that, when compared to their male counterparts, the Nigerian media did not offer women in politics the required coverage. To corroborate this conclusion, Oyesomi and Oyer (2012) noted a dearth of visibility and coverage of female political players in Nigerian publications during the 2011 elections. Their studies revealed that 90 percent of women's tales appeared on the front pages of newspapers, with no articles appearing on the back pages.

Meanwhile, the media is important for social change and can boost the number of women running for political office by publicising women's great contributions to the social, political, and economic well-being of Nigeria as well as COVID-19 responses during the epidemic's major waves.

Empirical review

Among the many explanations to be concerned about gender politics in the media are the necessity of progressing beyond stereotypical portrayals and the inclusion of a diverse range of storytellers in print media, film, and broadcast media, to name just a few of the more pressing concerns (Beard, Dunn, Huang & Krivkovich, 2020). Women are among the most ardent consumers of media products available on the market, making them an important target demographic for entertainment and media sources. Several studies have been conducted to solve this issue by evaluating media coverage from some viewpoints.

Apuke and Omar (2020) examined media coverage of COVID-19 in Nigeria with attention to the frequency and depth of coverage, story format, news sources, media tone and themes. Four widely read newspapers were content analysed between February 2020 and April 2020. Focus was on *Daily Sun*, *Vanguard*, *Daily Trust* and *Leadership*. Results indicated that the Nigerian media performed well in terms of covering the pandemic, which in turn created awareness. However, the coverage was not in-depth as most of the reported stories were short and were predominantly straight news. It was also observed that the media cited more of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) and government officials. Further findings disclosed that most of the stories were alarming and induced panic. Most common topics were coverage of cases in Nigeria, death rates and concerns about Nigeria's preparedness. Public sensitization and education were sparingly covered.

Television news coverage of the COVID-19 epidemic in Nigeria was analyzed by Apuke and Omar (2021) from February 2020 to July 2020. African Independent Television (AIT), a privately held network, and Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), a state-run network, were the primary points of interest. Thirty people were questioned to provide insight into public perception of the media's portrayal of the pandemic. The results indicate that the television networks gave the COVID-19 concerns the attention they deserved. However, COVID-19 was given more attention by the private media. Therefore, it may be inferred that the private media broadcast more COVID-19 items on its headline, which also served as the first headline in many instances. In addition, they aired a greater number of tales lasting 61 seconds or longer. The results also showed that the private media fought more about the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), while the government media mentioned more government authorities. Most of the private media's coverage featured visual and motion video, and the pieces had a more negative tone. The results as a whole indicate that media ownership and politics have a significant impact in the reporting of the COVID-19 outbreak in Nigeria. The public's perception of the pandemic has changed as a result; many now dismiss it as a politically motivated virus meant to draw attention to the shortcomings of the ruling party.

Umar and Dango (2020) conducted a survey of the role that Nigerian internet newspapers performed in educating the people about the Coronavirus. From February 28th, 2020

(one day after the first instance of the pandemic was recorded in Nigeria) to June 29th, 2020, researchers employed the content analysis study approach. To determine whether or not Nigerian online newspapers paid more attention to the Covid-19 pandemic than their print counterparts, we examined the online editions of the Vanguard, Daily Trust, and The Sun newspapers, paying special attention to the news stories, opinion pieces, and editorials that dealt with the disease. The findings demonstrate that the Covid-19 epidemic was given prominent coverage in each of the three newspapers examined. The article suggests prioritizing public health concerns and the breakout of a fatal disease. Reporters covering these stories need to be prepared to do their homework before writing about them.

Chinedu-Okeke, Agbasimelo, Obi, and Onyejelem (2021) used the Guardian, Daily Sun, Daily Trust, and This Day Newspapers to analyze the coverage of the fight against COVID-19 in Nigerian newspapers. McComb and Shaw's agenda-setting theory provided the theoretical foundation for this investigation since it describes the "ability (of the news media) to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda." It used content analysis to look at how frequently COVID-19 was mentioned, how prominently, and how the three chosen Nigerian media reported on the outbreak between March 2020 and July 2020. According to the data, COVID-19 concerns received extensive coverage in Nigerian newspapers. According to the research, the selected Nigerian dailies mainly used hard news, features, and editorials to cover and report on COVID-19. The study concludes that although Nigerian newspapers gave a wide coverage to COVID-19 issues, they do not give a significant prominence to COVID-19 pandemic in the placement of news, space allocated for the news, or frequency of report of such issues in the selected newspapers.

The front pages and headlines of The Guardian and The Vanguard, two major newspapers in Nigeria, were analyzed by Anyanwu, Okpevra, and Imiti (2022). These publications were chosen with deliberate intent to compare and contrast how the Nigerian government and general public viewed the recent coronavirus outbreak in print and online. Both government and public opinion were evaluated based on how much attention was paid to the pandemic's spread. The research period spanned four months, from the initial detection of the virus in February 2020 through the implementation and subsequent lifting of lockdown in June 2020. The results demonstrate that both publications provided thorough coverage of the pandemic. It found that despite widespread media coverage, citizens in Nigeria were unconcerned about Covid-19, indicating that the government was only giving the issue lip respect.

Frequency and depth of coverage, narrative structure, news sources, tone, and themes were all considered when Apuke, D. O., and Omar, B. (2020) analyzed media coverage of COVID-19 in Nigeria. Between February 2020 and April 2020, the content of four major newspapers was analyzed. There was a concentration on the Sun, Vanguard, Trust, and Leadership. According to the findings, Nigerian media outlets did a good job reporting on the pandemic and raising public awareness. The items that were reported were brief and mostly just the news, therefore the coverage was not particularly in-depth. It was also noted that the media made greater use of

quotes from government authorities and the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC). Further investigation revealed that the majority of the tales were terrifying and caused widespread terror. Coverage of the instances in Nigeria, fatality tolls, and fears about Nigeria's preparation were the most often discussed subjects. Public awareness campaigns and educational initiatives received scant attention.

In the Canadian Center for Digital and Media Literacy's (2020) study, it was concluded that although the number of women professionals has steadily increased over the last two decades, the majority of mainstream news coverage still relies on males as experts in the sectors of business, politics, and economics. Female news reporters employ sexist vocabulary when describing women in the news, and they are more likely to be included in stories concerning accidents, natural catastrophes, and domestic violence than stories about their professional qualities or knowledge. In one of the articles examined in this study, for example, it was observed that women accounted for 37% of the bylines in news headlines from across the world. Furthermore, according to a 2010 study of Canadian news sources, women made up only 29 percent of the sources cited in print and broadcast news. Another 2019 study of female members of the Canadian parliament found that 86% had faced prejudice because of their gender in politics. While many female world leaders were featured in the classroom publication TIME for Kids, their portrayals were almost always focused on their status as the first woman to hold a particular position rather than their actual accomplishments, or they were described as having stereotypically feminine characteristics.

Gender problems in Nigerian media coverage of maternal and child healthcare issues were the focus of Adeniran's (2020) study. The goal of this study was to look for developing gender problems in one year's worth of maternity and child health (MCH) coverage in Nigerian newspapers. To determine the prevalent gender lead in newspaper coverage of a women-centered issue, a mix of content analysis and in-depth interviews (IDI) is employed, as well as the underlying factors for the dominance. The study is based on the hypothesis of gender prejudice and journalistic standards. The content analytic technique was used to evaluate media coverage of maternity and child health (MCH) problems for twelve months. Four "national" newspapers, *The Punch*, *The Nation*, *Daily Trust*, and *Leadership*, were purposely selected for inclusion in this study due to their extensive readership throughout the country and in specific geographic regions. From July 2015 to June 2016, all print editions of the selected newspapers released during the 12-month sample period were reviewed for eligibility by flipping through the pages looking for MCH-related news and feature items. As part of the unit of study, a total of 1,046 items were examined, including 300 news articles and 746 feature stories. It also examines the viewpoints of male and female health journalists to determine whether there are any differences in their views on MCH media coverage. The study's results show a majority of male journalists and voices featured in coverage of MCH issues and related articles, but gender did not affect the overall coverage of the subjects. By doing so, the study differs from past media gender studies that credit women's underrepresentation in the

media to gender discrimination; instead, it finds that gender imbalance is often embedded in journalistic principles that permeate media operations.

Furthermore, Eshiet (2013) analysed the representation of political players in Nigerian print media based on their gender. The primary purpose of the research was to examine how political actors are portrayed in Nigerian print media and how this affects women's political involvement in the nation. This study included some methods, including content analysis and a cross-sectional survey. A content analysis of the coverage of the corruption allegations against two previous Speakers of the Lower House (male and female, respectively) during the 2007–2011 administration was conducted using two deliberately selected daily newspapers, *The Punch* and *the Guardian*. Following the disclosure of the corruption scheme against the female Speaker on August 21, 2007, the content analysis covered a period of 72 days (from August 21 to October 31, 2007); following the disclosure of the corruption scheme against her successor, the male Speaker, on October 20, 2008, the content analysis covered a period of 84 days (from October 20 to October 31, 2008). A cross-sectional survey was conducted to analyse women's impressions of how female politicians are depicted in the media to support the findings of the content analysis. A structured interview schedule was used in combination with a questionnaire to collect responses from one hundred randomly selected female respondents in the Lagos metropolis of Lagos State. According to the conclusions of the content analysis, the cases were presented in a gendered way, with the female speaker's case, among other things, being sensationalised, exaggerated, and trivialised. The study also indicated that the majority of respondents thought the coverage was appropriate, believing that the media simply conveyed the facts regarding the first female Speaker of the House.

Bappayo and Kirfi (2019) investigated newspaper coverage of political women. The study's research design was content analysis. To address the study's research questions, they examined articles from political publications as well as coverage of women in politics. For the eight-month research period, the *Daily Trust Newspaper* and *The Punch Newspaper* were used. The research used a simple random sample approach, and the data-gathering instrument was a code sheet. Only 56 of the 422 stories collected were about politics. As a result, the data presentation and analysis revealed that, in comparison to their male counterparts, Nigerian publications did not provide women in politics with the desired publicity. The research also demonstrates that mass media is important for social change and can boost the number of women running for political office. The researchers concluded that some reasons have delayed women's efforts in politics and it is obvious that women in Nigeria still have a long way to go before reaching the political decision-pinnacle. They recommended that women who have regularly done well in politics should get substantial publicity in the media, as well as a forum to teach them about their political rights.

For the 2011 Nigerian election, media coverage of women's participation was examined by Oyesomi and Oyero, (2012). This study used a research design based on content analysis. Participants in the research read issues of *The Punch*

and *The Guardian* from mid-2010 to mid-2011. The sample consisted of 288 issues of the publications under consideration. Each newspaper was assigned sixteen (16) issues each month. To come up with the sixteen issues, the researchers randomly selected four papers each week and multiplied that number by four weeks. According to the results, Nigerian publications underreported women's participation in politics relative to their male counterparts. A total of 464 anecdotes were gathered over nine months, with just 62 focused on women's involvement and 402 on men's involvement. Moreover, half of the 62 news items were found on the inner pages, with six (10 percent) on the front page, and no news on women on the back page. There were nine unfavorable tales in the data set, compared to 29 favorable articles and 24 unfavorable ones (38 percent that were neutral).

It is critical to emphasise as shown by these studies that the media has a considerable effect on society. They chronicle current events, provide interpretive frameworks, mobilise people in response to a range of problems, mimic dominant culture and society, and entertain the audience. The media equally have a role to play in changing perceived inimical cultural practices by providing interpretative frameworks that will re-create or re-enact new frames on which such practices are regarded and amended.

Theoretical framework

Several theories have examined the media in communication processes and their impacts on public policy. This study's framework is based on two of them. The first is the agenda-setting theory, which describes how the media can focus the public's attention on the most pressing concerns. As a consequence, the public's attention is diverted from other concerns. The media, therefore, give individuals a window into a world they may not be privy to. The media picks up on and emphasises everyday public problems. Simultaneously, they choose the actors in the news debates. Studies on politics and elections have shown a correlation between the popular significance of problems and media coverage of such concerns. That is the topics that the media concentrates on become the ones that the public recognises as worthy of debate (McQuail, 2005). Aspects of selection (and exclusion) of subjects and occurrences have been well addressed in framing and priming theories. As a consequence, media organisations are continually influenced by social, political, and economic factors that shape their perception of reality and how it is portrayed to the public. A gender perspective is thus crucial to communication processes because it brings to light the disparities that women confront due to the roles that are socially given to them and then perpetuated through the media. The deliberate inclusion of a gender "filter" raises journalists' and media outlets' understanding of their role as agents of social change in establishing more equal societies and helps them move away from reality-based perspectives that emphasise males while ignoring the existence and contributions of women. This is where agenda-setting theory becomes crucial to this study.

The second important sociological theory is the feminist theory, which analyses the condition of men and women in a cultural context to help women. Feminism is the

theoretical or philosophical elaboration of an idea. It examines the social roles and living experiences of women to better understand gender inequity (Crossman, 2020). Feminism is a political, cultural, or economic movement that attempts to empower women. However, most feminist thought focuses on gender inequity, oppression, and promoting women's rights, interests, and concerns within society. According to Alozie (2003), cultural feminism works within the symbolic world of women's culture, position, and place as formed and validated in a particularly patriarchal society. As a consequence, the hypothesis explains why the media are difficult to exonerate for their harmful contributions to gender inequality. This notion underpins research on COVID-19 responses in the Nigerian media. Examining media coverage of gender issues in the context of Nigerian society's male-dominated tendencies helps achieve this. Lueck (2003) claims that this approach will empower women and challenge pre-existing views about women's responsibilities in society. Recently, the media's male-centricity has been confirmed. The media directs people's attention to important participants in the COVID-19 responses and electoral activities. Without acknowledging the significance of gender equality in the COVID-19 pandemic response and electoral activities, media practitioners may perpetuate discourse that excludes women as key protagonists, relegating them to secondary roles via less coverage.

Method

The Content Analysis Approach was used in this study to analyse the manifest content of Nigerian media coverage on women in political participation in Nigeria during the COVID-19 epidemic. Oboh (2015) claims that this technique allowed him to "calculate the number of stories the newspapers covered on COVID-19 as well as other significant categories of stories." The study's content analysis technique comprises an objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the evident content of the communication. To determine the frequency of female sources of COVID-19 news in Nigerian newspapers, 212 front-page editions of the newspapers that carried headline stories of COVID-19 response activities were purposefully selected from papers 366 editions (122 per newspaper) of *The Punch*, *Vanguard*, and *Daily Trust* in April, May, June, and July, when COVID-19 response and electoral discussions were high. The three newspapers selected for the research are among the most prominent in Nigeria in terms of their spread and have their ownership spread across eastern, western, and northern geopolitical zones to cater to regional biases. The frequency of COVID-19 response/intervention coverage and political activities in selected newspapers were investigated using the following content categories: all lead stories published by newspapers about the COVID-19 response and political activities, the sources of the COVID-19 response and political activities lead stories and stories published about other lead issues during the COVID-19. Lead stories on COVID-19 responses were the greatest within this time frame. This is logical since, in a fearful situation, the media are more prone to react to the impulse of selling news, which may lead to COVID-19 news having priority over other issues. This shows that the newspapers attached importance to COVID-19 lead stories. Chinedu-Okeke, Agbasimelo, Obi, and Onyejelem (2021) confirmed this when they discovered

pandemic. The article then examined the 946 lead reports on the COVID-19 response activities and 302 lead reports on the political activities that appeared in newspapers in April, May, June, and July 2020 to assess the frequency and nuance of women's political engagement in the COVID-19 response and political news.

Inter-Coder Reliability

Trained two research assistants content analysed 10% of the news randomly selected for the study to identify the frequency and key concerns mentioned in the Nigerian media around COVID-19, with an emphasis on gender nuance in the news. Using Holsti's calculation, $=2 * M / (N1 + N2)$, the inter-coder reliability test was conducted.

M - The number of coding choices in which two coders agree.
 N1 and N2 - the number of coding choices made by each coder.

Inter-coder reliability was calculated to be 0.75, indicating strong reliability.

Data presentation and discussion of findings

Table 1 presents a cross-tabulation of data on the frequency distribution of Nigerian media reporting on the COVID-19 response, as well as the major issues covered in the newspapers in April, May, June, and July 2020. The front pages of the three newspapers included 3354 stories on the COVID-19 response and other matters, such as government, parliament, judiciary, politics, economy, security/crime, and obituaries. The newspapers carried 946 (36 percent) lead stories on COVID-19 response concerns, 573 (17 percent) news stories on obituaries/others, 515 (15 percent) news stories on security/crime, and 448 (13 percent) news stories on government activities.

Table 1. Cross-tabulation frequency distribution of the Nigerian newspapers' reports on COVID-19 response among other issues

Month	Newspapers	COVID-19	Government	Parliament	Judiciary	Politics	Economy	Security/Crime	Obituaries/Others	Total (%)
April	Punch	116	63	3	11	20	42	52	78	385(46%)
	Vanguard	120	32	-	8	17	20	32	37	266(32%)
	Daily Trust	71	10	7	3	5	29	26	28	179(22%)
April Total		307	105	10	22	42	91	110	143	830(100%)
May	Punch	124	58	11	20	38	26	77	77	431(51%)
	Vanguard	107	31	4	3	22	21	21	41	259(30%)
	Daily Trust	66	14	3	3	6	17	23	30	162(19%)
May Total		297	103	18	26	66	64	121	148	843(100%)
June	Punch	50	64	10	14	55	28	82	61	364(50%)
	Vanguard	52	18	2	13	22	30	31	51	219(30%)
	Daily Trust	76	16	5	2	9	10	20	11	149(20%)
June Total		178	98	17	29	86	68	133	123	732(100%)
July	Punch	92	60	23	19	35	45	81	65	420(44%)
	Vanguard	53	69	14	14	60	65	52	77	404(43%)
	Daily Trust	19	13	11	2	13	32	18	17	125(13%)
July Total		164	142	48	35	108	142	151	159	949(100%)
Grand Total		946	448	93	112	302	365	515	573	3354
		(36%)	(13%)	(3%)	(3%)	(9%)	(11%)	(15%)	(17%)	(100%)

that Nigerian newspapers gave a wide coverage to COVID-19 issues, they do not give a significant prominence to COVID-19 pandemic in the placement of news, space allocated for the news, or frequency of report of such issues in the selected newspapers. Furthermore, agenda-setting theory, as summarised by McQuail (2005), supports this finding by explaining how the media may focus public attention on

certain topics that are perceived to be the most significant at the moment. As a result, the public's attention is drawn to some topics while ignoring others. However, there seems to be a thread in the main articles of obituaries/others, which were the second most throughout this timeframe. The number of death announcements and lead stories was disturbing. This finding is in line with Apuke and Omar (2020), Apuke and Omar (2021), Umar and Dango (2020), Chinedu-Okeke, Agbasimelo, Obi, and Onyejelem (2021), and Anyanwu, Okpevra, and Imiti (2022) whose results indicated that the Nigerian media performed well by giving COVID-19 concerns extensively reportage. in Nigerian newspapers.

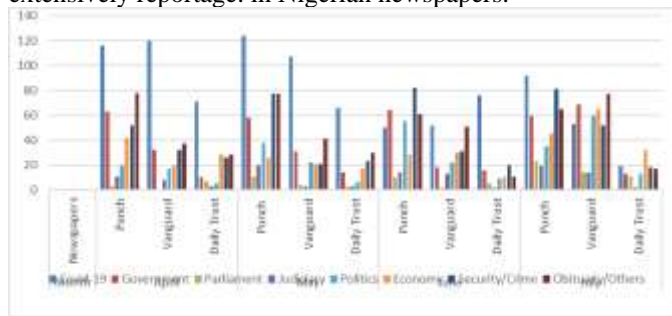


Figure 1. Newspapers summary of COVID-19 response and other issues as published by the newspapers from April to July 2020

As seen in Figure 1, it can be inferred that 946 (36 percent) Nigerian newspapers paid enough attention to the COVID-19 stories throughout the research period. In comparison to other topics covered, all of the newspapers have the most COVID-19 stories each month.

To identify the issues covered in the newspaper’s coverage of the COVID-19 response, the research looked at 946 news stories from the three newspapers that covered the COVID-19 responses (Table 2). According to the data, the media covered the most lead stories (32.5 percent) on COVID-19 response in April. This reinforces the idea that in a fearful climate, the media are more inclined to react to the impulse of selling news. The number of main articles on COVID-19 response, on the other hand, fell to 297 (31.4 percent) in May, as media interest in the epidemic started to wane. In June and July 2020, the number fell to 178 (18.8 percent) and 164 (17.3%) stories, respectively. The decrease in the frequency of newspaper stories on COVID-19 responses following the confirmation of the index case in February was normal, as the media would ordinarily set an agenda on a quite current and pertinent matter while continuing to provide updates on COVID-19-related news given its importance. In line with this, Apuke and Omar (2020) found that most common topics were coverage of cases in Nigeria, death rates and concerns about Nigeria’s preparedness.

Furthermore, with news of the COVID-19 response overwhelming the media throughout the period under analysis, people with the economic means to give COVID-19 emergency aid and communal help, which women may possess, are far more likely to be news sources at this time. In this respect, Table 2 examined the COVID-19 news sources from a gender standpoint.

Table 2. Cross Tabulation Frequency Distribution of sources of the Nigerian Newspapers’ Reports on COVID-19 Response

Month	Newspapers	Female	Male	Undisclosed	Others	Total (%)
April	Punch	8	57	35	16	116
	Vanguard	15	64	34	7	120
	Daily Trust	8	28	27	8	71
April Total		31	149	96	31	307(32.5%)
May	Punch	5	55	47	17	124
	Vanguard	31	29	27	20	107
	Daily Trust	3	28	26	9	66
May Total		39	112	100	46	297(31.4%)
June	Punch	2	12	28	8	50
	Vanguard	1	12	34	5	52
	Daily Trust	4	31	26	15	76
June Total		7	55	88	28	178(18.8%)
July	Punch	16	35	23	18	92
	Vanguard	7	17	14	15	53
	Daily Trust	3	11	4	1	19
July Total		27	64	41	34	164(17.3%)
Grand Total		103(11.0%)	379(40.0%)	325(34.0%)	139(15.0%)	946(100%)

According to Table 2, just 103 (11.0 percent) of the COVID-19 response lead stories were derived from women who are politically significant throughout the nation for four months, while 379 (34% of the COVID-19 lead stories) were obtained from males. When COVID-19 stories with gendered identified sources were extricated from others as seen in Figure 2, female-sourced news accounted for just 21.0 percent of the entry top stories with gender nausea. However, males were responsible for 79 percent of the lead stories. Meanwhile, Vanguard newspaper accounted for 52 percent out of the 21.0 percent (i.e., 103 female-sourced COVID-19 stories). This shows that Vanguard newspaper was fairer or gave more voice to women than other newspapers. This finding reinforces the view that, given men's hegemony in most African nations' political spheres, gender inequities would intensify during the COVID-19 pandemic. Bappayo and Kirfi (2019), given this finding, revealed that, in comparison to their male counterparts, Nigerian publications did not provide women with the desired publicity. The research also demonstrates that mass media are important for social change and can boost the number of women running for political office. This is also corroborated by Oyesomi and Oyero (2012). They found that when compared to the coverage of their male counterparts, Nigerian newspapers did not give women's engagement the attention it deserved. During the nine-month research period, 464 stories were collected, with just 62 focusing on women's participation and 402 on males.

Table 3. Cross Tabulation Frequency Distribution of sources of the Nigerian Newspapers’ Reports on Political activities

Month	Newspapers	Female	Male	Undisclosed	Others	Total (%)
April	Punch	5	14	-	1	20
	Vanguard	7	10	-	1	17
	Daily Trust	-	5	-	-	5
April Total		12	29	-	1	42(14%)
May	Punch	11	24	1	2	38
	Vanguard	9	11	1	1	22
	Daily Trust	1	5	-	-	6
May Total		21	40	2	3	66(22%)
June	Punch	9	41	3	2	55
	Vanguard	5	17	-	-	22
	Daily Trust	1	7	-	1	9
June Total		15	65	3	3	86(28%)
July	Punch	8	24	-	3	35
	Vanguard	20	38	-	2	60
	Daily Trust	-	12	-	1	13
July Total		28	74	-	6	108(36%)
Grand Total		76(25.0%)	208(69.0%)	5(2.0%)	13(4.0%)	302(100%)

According to Table 3, just 76 (25.0 percent) of the political activities lead stories were derived from women who are politically significant throughout the nation during four months, while 208 (69.0% of the political activities lead

stories) were obtained from males. When political stories with gendered identified sources were extricated from others as seen in Figure 3, female-sourced news accounted for just 27.0 percent of the entry top stories with gender nuance. However, males were responsible for 73 percent of the lead stories. Meanwhile, *Vanguard* newspaper accounted for 54 percent out of the 27.0 percent (i.e. 78 female-sourced political news). This shows that *Vanguard* newspaper gave more voices to women than other newspapers. This finding reinforces the view that, given men's hegemony in most African nations' political spheres, gender inequities would intensify during the COVID-19 pandemic. Bappayo and Kirfi (2019), given this finding, revealed that, in comparison to their male counterparts, Nigerian publications did not provide women in politics with the desired publicity. The research also demonstrates that mass media is important for social change and can boost the number of women running for political office. This is also corroborated by Oyesomi and Oyer (2012) who found that Nigerian newspapers did not give women's engagement the attention it deserved. Also, Apuke and Omar (2021) noted that the private media fought more about the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), while the government media mentioned more government authorities. Most of the private media's coverage featured visual and motion video, and the pieces had a more negative tone.

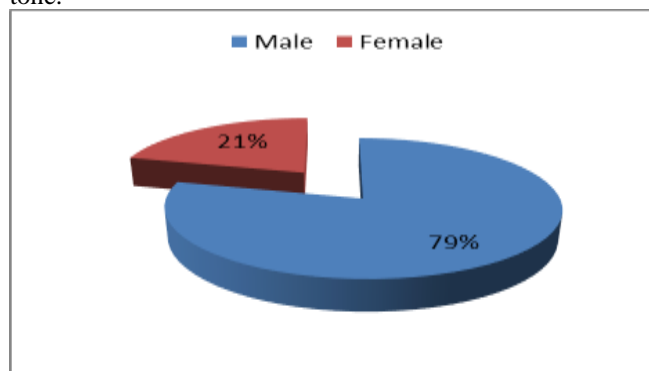


Figure 2: Summary of gender-based COVID-19 news sources of the newspapers

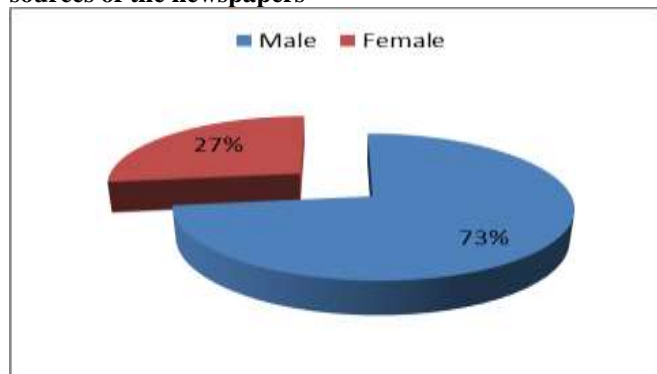


Figure 3: Summary of gender-based political news sources of the newspapers

Figures 2 and 3 show how the media have reacted to the desire to sell news by failing to adequately depict women's political engagement or gender nuance within the COVID-19. Women leaders have been underrepresented in the press on COVID-19 response and politics due to the large gender gap. Despite this,

women constitute roughly half of Nigeria's demographic. In truth, the unacknowledged role of women in Nigerian society may be attributable to a lack of media attention to women's activities. While the media are obliged to strive for truth and fairness in its reporting, facts reveal that there are regular inequalities, especially when it comes to women and their opinions.

The Canadian Center for Digital and Media Literacy (2020) concluded, based on a review of the literature on media coverage of women and women's issues, that despite a steady increase in the number of women professionals over the last 20 years, most mainstream press coverage continues to rely on men as experts in the fields of business, politics, and economics. Furthermore, Eshiet (2013) discovered that, after newspaper reports on the male Speaker and the female Speaker's corruption charges, among other things, the stories on the female Speaker were sensationalised, inflated, and trivialised.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In a democratic society, the media have the potential to be a very effective means of information dissemination. The messages they convey have the potential to alter or reinforce societal mores and behaviours, as well as galvanise individuals to take positive action. While it is ideal for the media to aim for truth and objectivity, in practise, there are frequently inequalities in coverage, particularly when it comes to women and their points of view. Though there is no doubt about how serious the COVID-19 epidemic is and how important it is for the media to keep the masses aware, COVID-19 news should be interwoven with other important issues such as political involvement with women, gender responses and economics. Consequently, the research concludes that *The Punch*, *Daily Trust*, and *Vanguard* newspapers did not significantly portray the voices of women in their COVID-19 response and political lead stories. And more importantly, the media presentation of women is crucial to expanding their political engagement in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, which is now in its twenty-four years.

Based on the results of this research, it is recommended that the media continue to pay attention to serious issues in the society and particularly pay special attention to such issues from gender perspectives.

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