

## **GENDER, MEDIA AND POLITICS: A CASE STUDY OF NIGERIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Gender has become one of the "fault-lines" running through the political landscape of Nigeria. Since independence in 1960, Nigerian women have been challenging their role in society. The formation of women movement in the country has lent an impetus to the struggle of women and helps put women issues in the forefront. Consequently, a few Nigerian women have been appointed to important position and pocket of them have won election. The elections of 2003 in the country have not given a push to women; rather the elections have served as dividing lines between women and men. Consequently, "gender politics" has polarized Nigerian political landscape into two camps. The first camp is predominantly dominated by those who want to maintain societal traditions. The second camp is populated by women who are in pursuit of dismantling the patriarchal structure of society. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines the involvement of women in Nigerian politics and their degree of acceptance by the menfolk.*

**Keywords:** Gender, Media, Politics, Nigerian women.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Gender has become one of the "fault-lines" running through the political landscape of Nigeria. Since independence in 1960, Nigerian women have been challenging their role in society. The formation of women movement in the country has lent an impetus to the struggle of women and helps put women issues in the front burner. Consequently, a few Nigerian women have been appointed to important position and pocket of them have won election. The elections of 2003 in the country have not given a push to women; rather the elections have served as dividing lines between women and men. Consequently, "gender politics" has polarized Nigeria political landscape into two camps. The first camp is predominantly dominated by those who want to maintain societal traditions. The second camp is populated by women who are in pursuit of dismantling the patriarchal structure of society.

Many studies have considered the issue of women's marginalization in Nigeria. For examples, Ejiogu (1982) considers barriers placed to keep women from prestigious positions. Lewis (1980) in her fascinating studies focuses on women's role in African society, their contributions, and the reason women have been excluded from development programs. Byrne et al, (1986) Afonji

(1981) maintains that modernization theory cannot explain female subordination in Nigeria. The study use Yoruba women as a case study, and concludes that the value places on women as biological and sociological reproduction function.

As research on the interface between women, media, and politics begin to develop the common means to begin to look at early research. In *Images of Women in Mass Media*, Tuchman (1978) coins the words "symbolic annihilation" to describe "the media's condemnation, trivialization and omission of women." Since then an avalanche of scholarship has quantified and qualified the news media's sin against women. (Fountain, ) For examples: Coverage of gender, media and politics has been explored by Norris, (1997): institutional sexism that relegates women to 'maternal punditry slots' by Wolf, (1993). Media presentation of women politicians in a gendered lens in terms of sex role (see, Ross, (1996); Rakow, (1994); and Koch (1999); Iyengar, (1991) discussed the effect of framing and Jamieson (2003) considers how media set the agenda for national debates. Based on this background, the way media portray women is contentious (Norris, 1997). This paper explores whether media coverage of women in Nigeria reinforces rather than challenges the dominant culture, and thereby contributes to the marginalization of women in public life. Added to this, the paper seeks to explore whether the media depict women through gender-relevant or gender-neutral perspective. In order to do this, the central question to answer are: are there significant differences in reporting news about women? Are women in Nigeria portrayed in sex oriented terms? And finally, is the portrayal of women seen in the news as gendered frame, (Norris, 1997). It can failed in their functions as instrument for educating the masses.

The starting point is to examine our understanding of stereotyping and framing in the media establishment. Stereotypes connote a means to describe individuals positively or negatively on the basis of characteristics which can be in terms of their personal traits (Norris, 1997). It must be noted that, it is imposed on us that women are soft, caring, weak and sensitive. That being a feminist is tantamount to anti-family (Ibid.) it is also believed that women must care, emotional and submissive. For men, the society assigns that they must be aggressive and domineering.

Framing theory is a new research tool to analyze the study of media and gender (Fountain & McGregor, 1999). Since its adoption, it has provided a useful conceptual tool to examine how women are covered. It is informative to ask what the concept of media framing is and how is it relevant to the contemporary study of women? Framing connotes how news media cover events and issues and how individuals make sense of these events (ibid.). Fountain & McGregor provide us with two relevant commonsense understandings what it means to 'frame'. First, the media can be said to frame events and issues in the same way as a photographer frames a photograph, choosing what parts to leave out (Cappella & Jamieson).

Media framing can also be linked to the frame of a house providing the structure around which everything else fits, and influencing overall style of construction (Fountain & McGregor, 1999). Framing theory is important in analyzing media and politics because it brings out the relevance of media and politics and more importantly, framing theorists use it to study the framing of women's issues and how these issues are presented in the media (Fountain & McGregor, 1999).

Entman (1993) refers to training as "selecting and highlighting some elements of reality and suppressing others, in a way that constructs a story about social problem, its cause, its moral nature and its possible remedies" (p. 142).

#### **BACKGROUND:**

Woefully, few women have gained access to the highest, male dominated level of legislative activity in Nigeria. Lagos becomes the first state to have a woman deputy governor in 1999. The

number of women elected to the House of Representatives is indeed very small when one compares the population of women in Nigeria. Some States have not made concerted efforts to elect a woman to the House of Representatives even as Nigeria moved from military rule to a democratic rule.

Women have not been able to breakthrough this male dominated institution in droves, because women are still been treated as "the second sex." While this fact serves as a stumbling block, many women themselves think that their place is in the home. Added to this, the major parties "have had women's divisions; a fact which kept women's influence very weak." (ibid. p. 16).

If politics is said to have been borne out of the resources and values allocated within a social unit for the purpose of meeting the needs, and desires of its members, then it will be customary for countries to set up their political apparatus in a way that will lend credence, encompass, accommodate, and include all political aspirants regardless of gender. But in spite of the many number of women groups, the population of women and those aspiring for elected offices, the disproportionate number of women elected to the Nigerian House of Representatives is nothing to be proud off.

One would have thought that subsequent elections would produce more women, at least in a society where women out number men substantially. Among the major contributing factors hampering Nigerian women stemmed from social inequality, lack of concrete economic development, fear of the unknown in men dominated political scene and the acceptability of Nigerian women as a major decision maker. It must be noted here that since the making of Nigeria the political stage has been dominated by men seeking and wielding power, wealth, and other political attributes associated with being in the fore-front of political domination.

Stereotypes of Nigerian Women:

In Nigeria like any other country television, radio and print media dominate and direct public's thinking. Since women in politics are a novel thing in the country, one would have thought that the Nigeria media will pander to women in a more palatable way than stereotyping them. The rationale for trivialization of women is expressed by an article written by pollo Bitros. He writes:

In Nigeria situation, a lot of historical, social researchers (sic) conducted, indicated that (sic) women's place is in the home. Right from childhood, children (male and female) are taught to keep the roles associated with their sexes. It must be noted that a boy must not be taught how to cook in the kitchen except after his seem day (sic) education he may be interested in catering studies as a profession.

To drive this point home he adds:

The Nigerian constitution is the only document which would have nil (sic) and void the role of women as mothers in our homes only provides for equality in terms of voting and contesting elections.

What Bitros means here is that Nigerian women should aspire to seek equality with their male counterparts because constitution does not relieve them from children bearing and domestic duties that society assigned to them(Bourgault, 1995). As Bourgault points out, "it does not occur to (added Bitros) new model of thinking or a new code of society."

(Bourgault, 1994, p. 193-194) It should be added that Nigerian press is evident of this conservative and traditional stance (ibid.).Given the wide spread of such belief as expressed by Bitros and endorsed by the general population. When such occurs, less powerful groups such as

women are at risk of being devalued and stereotyped by the news outlets. As Short et al, (2002) pointed out, when a group is constructed negatively; it is easier to rally against such group. "Such a label makes it psychologically easier to dominate against the member of that group,"

Endorsing this viewpoint, Anyanwu writes:

A content analysis of main stream media in Nigeria reveals one dominant orientation: Women are largely seen and not heard. Their faces adorn newspapers. However, on important national and international issues they fade out. Even when the news is about them, the story only gains real prominence if there is a male authority figure or newsmaker on the scene.

(Anyanwu, 2001, p.68)

Not to be heard, that is Nigerian women can adorn the pages of newspapers for commercialization purposes, Anyanwu, (2001) continues:

*The punch*, the widest circulating daily in Nigeria, did something savvy October 20, on the cover, Stella the gorgeous wife of the president, was stepping out for an occasion with two equally gorgeously dressed women. There was no detail on where they went; no words heard from them. No stories just big pictures.

On the day the article appeared, nine other women made the cover and back pages and seven other pages, but nothing was written about them (ibid). The Nigerian media see women as cash crops that must be packaged like candy bars. News about women rarely makes the front page. They make news as appendages of their husbands, (Anyanwu). There are two factors that have contributed to the marginalization of Nigerian women in the mass media. First, the domination of the news media by men and the preponderance of male perspective in the reporting, 'this has triggered' a situation where there is little focus on the participation of women in the political and economic spheres of the country. (Anyanwu, 2001). It should be noted that 80 percent of journalists in the country are men. Second, the belief in traditional societies such as Nigeria, that women are presumed to be less competent to men and that their place is in the kitchen. As Carli et al (2001) emphasize in the study entitled "Gender, hierarchy, and leadership: an Introduction" that, "these belief foster hierarchical patterns of social interaction through which men exert more influence and exercise more leadership" (Carli et al, 2001. p. 269) at the crux of this tradition. Consider this: In 1999, the country embarked on a contentious political issue concerning electoral bill to prepare her for the elections of 2003. The Senate passed the bill in the midst of controversy, thereby creating an atmosphere of noisy debate in the media. The voices of the women in the federal legislature were not heard. The hearts of searching questions were: "Did they not participate in the debate? What were their views? Nobody would know because the main stream media have muffled their opinions. Overall, the coverage of women in the Nigerian media is abysmal. This can be explained according to Mead, (1934) by the dominance of men in the mainstream media of the country. Consequently, these have led to dethematization of news concerning women and have helped to prepare this position by gender.

In her article on gender stereotypes, Madeline Heilman (2001) wrote that the scarcity of women in upper levels of organization is a consequence of gender bias in evaluation. Dodge, Gilroy and Fenzel (1995) Leuptow, Garovich and Leuptow, (1995) noted that stereotyped beliefs about men and women are pervasive and widely shared, and as such have been proved to be very resistant to change. Balkan, (1966) surmised that men and women are thought to differ both in terms of achievement-oriented traits. The notion that men are aggressive, forceful, independent, and decisive is not a new phenomenon. On the other hand the perception that women are known to be

kind, helpful, and sympathetic and concerned for others is not new as well. Should that be the yardstick by which women contributions to society are measured?

### **THE MEDIA:**

Nigeria mainstream media have been dominated by men since its inception and even today the apparatus of bias and gender inequality is written all over the establishment. Anyanwu, (2001) expressed the view that very little attention is given to real life issues that shape the quality of living, things that dominate the minds and hearts of the populace. Women issues belong to a genre of information considered light weight she concluded. This is an indictment of the Nigerian media.

Thus, publications that feature women in large numbers are easily branded women's publication note Anyanwu, (2001). The media continues to be selective in the nature of news carried and covered relegating and obscuring women issues. The visibility of women in elected offices observed Anyanwu, (2001) is relatively low in spite of the number of women in prominent capacities. The media is eager to put women's picture on the cover page of the newspaper for her beauty and elegance to sell newspapers but always short of substance where the women voices are to be heard.

Anyanwu (2001) lamented that the silence of women on national issues gives an impression that women do not care about things happening around them. She went on to say that some females' assembly members have complained the press has always short changed them even when they grant interviews. The end result is that, these prominent women are either grossly misquoted or they are not reported. This one sided view of media seriously undermines and cast doubts on whether Nigerian media practitioners take into considerations, the functions of the media within the structure of society.

It must be noted that the media serve as a watchdog and serve as the eyes and ears of those that are not where news event occur. The media in Nigeria failed to call a spade a spade and thus failed woefully in the marginalization of women issues in the press. By all account the media must be fair, accurate, balanced and objective. Women should not have to go out of their way to engage with the news media for adequate coverage. It is the duty and obligation of the media to cover all issues without reservation. If the media continues to engage in this selective coverage and reporting, then the trust placed in the media could very well go into oblivion.

Media coverage of women issues in Nigeria has been unimpressive. The growing criticism of the media is borne out of the need to improve on news coverage and reporting hence to be fair and accurate. The question of whether Nigerian media practitioners are fulfilling their roles as the mouth piece of the people dedicated to looking at all issues without predetermined notion of relegating one gender in preference to the other is questionable. Thus, it will be wrong to say that the work of journalist unimportant in a democratic society. The fact remains, that the Nigerian media practitioners are not living up to par and will seriously be ineffective if a segment of the Nigerian society is unheard.

The media is not created to serve the few, but to serve all, men and women alike. The New York Sun when it was established in 1833 carried a slogan "It shines for all". The same was true the, the same is true today. In the book, Elements of Journalism. Bill Kovach and Tom Rosentiel (2001) enumerate and catalogue the purpose of journalism in what they dubbed the 'nine principles as journalism's first obligation is to the truth, its first loyalty is to citizens, its essence is a discipline of verification, its practitioners must maintain independence from those they cover, serve as an independent monitor of power, provide forum for public criticism and compromise, strive to make the significant interesting relevant, keep the news comprehensive

not proportional, and that practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience. Taking a snap shot of the principles, Nigerian media practitioners have failed woefully to adhere to the rules of engagement. The need for urgent redress is almost apparent in all the facets of the media leadership.

According to the United Nations' Report on African women in 1995, the media help to perpetuate gender inequality by stereotyping and negative portrayal. The media over the years continue to cater to urban elites featuring articles and information about men seen in the front pages of newspapers across the continent. News about elites and men in places of power becomes newsworthy while those of women fall short of the categorical indices of the media. African women the United Nations report noted are portrayed as sex objects, gazing through the pages of newspapers with nothing to show for it. They only made headlines when they are abused and battered by their husbands.

Leadership with the media industries, stakeholders and media practitioners must come to a realization that the issue and placement of women in the media can not improve unless adequate provisions are put in place to enable women to be actively involved in the media and trained in managerial roles. The report concluded that so long as women are powerless, the follow of information and types coverage accorded them will continue to persist.

#### **PROPELLING FACTORS:**

The number of Nigerian women that occupy elected position is nothing short of marginalization of women, even though their numbers increased from nothing to what is currently there; the number is not a good representation of their roles and contributions to the Nigerian populace. It is quite apparent that Nigerian women have minimal participation in politics due to various variables that can be alleviated if the Peoples Democratic Party redefine itself and invest in vigorous effort to make Nigerian women political participation an agenda to grapple with, making issues of women a top concern.

In recognition of the many opportunities and the lack of many as well as the need to serve their respective communities, and the country at large, these women will change the make up of the Nigeria House of Representatives and things will never be the same. Furthermore, elected women had missions to accomplish, goals and objectives in mind and decided on how to partake in the political process to foster and promote positive change through legislative pronouncement that will enhance educational, cultural, economics, and much needed ethical values that seem to be evading the Nigerian society. After all, participation is the progress of any job.

Political participation in developed countries is a general phenomenon characterizing a truly democratic society. Thus the right to vote and partake in political process is embedded in the Nigerian constitution and opened the door for those who might have otherwise been disenfranchised.

Throughout the history of Nigeria, women have grappled with the problem of discrimination, economic, and social disparities, and a situation that impact on their status. It would take continuous struggle and active as well as effective political participation to win acceptance. It must be noted here that a host of hopeless and social conditions plagued women participation in politics such as raising family, keeping the home together, and the totalistic view and perception that women are home makers are always the culprit of every societal ills.

All these conditions precipitated the many reasons women should decide to right the wrongs and seek political offices and work to bring the much needed change that will eventually bring the reality of Nigerian political actualization to the disadvantaged.

And as Heider Fritz, 1(1985) observed;

People have awareness of their surroundings and events in it (the life space), they attain this awareness through perception and other processes, and impersonal Environment, they are able to (can) and try to cause these changes, they have wishes (wants) and sentiments, they can stand in the unit to other entities (belonging), and they, are accountable according to certain standards (ought). All these characteristics determine what role the other person plays in our own life space and how we react to him. (p. 187)

A sentiment echoed by Jennifer Crocker in her study on confirming and disconfirming information in stereotyping in a paper presented at the annual convention of American Psychological Association, August 24-26, (1981) She lamented:

“those individuals can be aware of themselves as social objects by exposing them to an unfamiliar audience, a television camera or large mirror, or by providing them with feedback from audio visual recordings. Although, a state of public awareness may be induced in any person, individuals differ in how dispositionally concerned they are about impressions they make on others (p. 120).

Gil Tunnell (1981) presented a paper on his findings in the area of variability in self-presentation to others. He worked from general belief that audience influences one's self-orientation. William Jones (1980) wrote that the individual has as many selves as there are persons known to him, and to each of these persons he shows a different side of himself. Other scholars of interpersonal relations like Mead (1934), Rogers, (1959) Goffman, (1959) ; and Snyder, (1979) have noted the "different sides" of individuals.

Thus the problems of stereotyping women in Nigeria continue to rear its ugly face through Nigerian media. Political hegemony and a host of other human conflicts continuing disparities in all aspects of Nigerian society makes it almost impossible to close the political gap between male and female politicians in the country.

The dynamics of social development as Lerner (1958) sees it, is the development of a nucleus of mobile, change accepting personalities; then the emergence of growing mass media system to spread the idea and attitudes of social mobility and change through interaction and urbanization.

### ANALYSIS

To further illustrate the patterns of gender inequality vis-a-vis stereotype in Nigeria media and politics, newspapers were randomly selected from August 2006 through December 2006. Within these periods, there were 80 pictures of women, nothing was written to support or rather explain why the pictures were there. Pictures were there only to grace the pages of the newspapers.

The only fascinating articles with picture as well a story to support it was the one that cautioned women about the need to look good. In all it is not unusual for newspapers in Nigeria to use women as window dressing in their various news articles with nothing written to explain why they were there other than to show their beautiful faces. Some may have the women pictures as supporters of their husbands, promoting women's fashion without ever writing anything about the women who appeared in the fashion pictures. Many will sandwich these women in one single picture with no explanation. In all many pictures of women graced the pages of the newspaper as a show of interest to those reading the newspapers with no illustration or anything written to accurately describe the need for the picture.

### **THE NEED FOR CHANGE;**

As we continue to take stride through the millennium, the need for change cannot be over emphasized. And it is now apparent that the People's Democratic Party must foster change in the institution, because this is the party that has become endorsed by many women across the political, economic, social, cultural and ethnic spectrum of the Nigerian society. The people's Democratic Party leaders must decentralize the status quo and open the leadership areas to all, and create a positive atmosphere of political inclusion in matters of concern to the party. The party must be interested in promoting development, must encourage, and facilitate social changes that are fundamental to the mobilization of women in order to further the cause of democracy and make women the Party's flag bearers.

Karl Deustch, (1963) defines social mobilization as the process in which major clusters of old, social, economic, and psychological commitment are eroded or broken, and people become available partners of socialization and behavior. Happily and as it is, the People's Democratic Party needs a serious house cleaning and work toward economic and political integration, and reach out to women from all sphere of influence. The issue and plight of women must be at the fore front of party politics.

Thus as the People's Democratic Party recognizes that gender reforms and development cannot be effected successfully without having women in strategic and recognizable positions, the need for a multi channeled information flow will be the underlying factor which must be created to foster systematic political mix.

Today the People's Democratic Party cannot accomplish much without the participation of women; otherwise other parties will become dominant. If the people's Democratic Party is to take the leadership role they are now holding, they must attune to the voices of dissent and the new generations of women that are now emerging from all sectors and are quickly becoming part of the mainstream.

One of the most obvious questions about leadership is also most elusive according to Richard Nixon, (1982) who enumerated the trait of a successful leader. He proclaimed that, high intelligence, courage, and hard work, tenacity, judgment, dedication to a great cause and a certain measure of charm as the key ingredients, (p.331) nothing can be more accurate and assertive as a prescription for the People's Democratic Party. Now is the opportune time to reach out to the disenfranchised women, the grassroots of the Nigerian women and increase their numbers within the hierarchy of the party; and work hard to maintain their trust.

Thus the need to empower women across Nigeria can not be over emphasized. United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Annan echoed the fact that "there is no tool not development more effective than the empowerment of women." Provisions must be made to accommodate women who are pregnant, married or otherwise to continue with their profession. Journalism is not a male dominated profession, rather it is a profession adored by both men and women and therefore women should be encouraged to move through the leadership ladder of success.

### **CONCLUSION:**

The need for gender equality is simply the thing to do especially in this age of globalization and change. The need has not been more urgent in the current political dispensation in Nigeria, leaders must provide political developmental program that will propel women in economic, political and social development.

Educational institution across Nigeria must include women studies in their curriculum, women roles in politics, economy, nations' building, commerce, social and cultural as well as gender equality must be at the forefront of every university's curriculum if we are to fulfill the wordings



of the Nigerian constitution which specifically discourage any form of discrimination relating to gender, education, religion, ethnic origin and other societal aspect. All state^ national and private media should put in place changes that will put women in places of authority and enhance their participation at all levels.

It is believed that injustices directed at women in the current Nigeria political dispensation necessitated the need for a change of attitude to bring about sustainable political emancipation. This will help correct problems borne out of lack of direct access to the necessary resources that should make it possible for women in Nigeria to combat poverty, and other societal ills. The power of the media to effect social change cannot be questioned

The media must recognize the importance of women issues, write about the issues and place appropriate emphasis of issues of importance to women. The era of using women pictures to glaze the pages of newspapers is gone. Media practitioners across the country must develop a change of attitude towards women issues, they must use the media to write about and push women agenda to the fore-front of Nigeria mainstream. The underrepresentation of women in leadership roles within the media industry is an indictment of our current leaders and should be rectified. Gender roles must be re-conceptualized to enhance women's emancipation.

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