

Redressing Social and Economic Anomalies Affecting Nigerian Women: the Role of Mass Media

Ugulah, Bright, PhD, MALD, MA, PGD (Mgt), Bsc (Hons) FIMIM, MNIPR, ACIPM.
Department of Theatre Arts,
Niger Delta University, Faculty of Arts, Wilberforce Island,
Bayelsa State, Nigeria.

Abstract

Feminism and gender balance remains a critical issue that poses serious concerns for the development of the social, political and economic structures all over the world. Perhaps, it is on this backdrop women's agenda became more pronounced arising from their agitation and claim that what a man can do, woman can do even better. Since their quest and claims from the Beijing conference, women have been considered to be critical in contributing towards the growth and well being of people both at the family and societal levels. Based on this background, the focus of this article is to identify the factors responsible for such maligned treatment by their male counterparts using various stereotypes especially the mass media in Nigeria as a platform to redress the anomalies. The paper further highlight the roles and contributions of women towards a sustainably political and economic order in the country.

Keywords: *Gender, Inequality, Women, Mass Media and Development.*

Background to the Study

Gender inequality is embedded in most fundamental aspects of the society which consists in the socio-cultural, religious and structural ways of being citizens. However, resolving these inequalities demands critically, systematic approaches in articulating the fundamental causes and effects of equality in initiating policies and institutional mechanisms capable of creating the enabling environment for women to have access to policy formulation and decision-making structures in governance (IDEA, 2001). These requirements have becomes

necessary in the sense that women have played pertinent roles in the climatic processes of development, democratization and the struggle for change towards a new political order in Nigeria.

It is succinct to note that women are called upon in most cases of struggles to mobilize and fight for freedom in order to bring about change in the administration of justice, equity and fairness towards democratic values. This was the case of Winnie Mandela a woman who was instrumental to the liberation struggles of South Africa during the obnoxious white regime. No wonder Nelson Mandela during the Soweto students uprising said "Though banned, Winnie picked up where she left off, and the authorities were dismayed about her popularity with the young radicals of Soweto (Mandela, 1995:493)". The likes of Mrs. Fumilaya Ransom Kuti's struggle for social change are few just to be mentioned in the case of Nigeria.

The crucial point is that, even in the daily reportage of events depicts heinous disparity in issues of news coverage and presentation in the Nigerian mass media. More so, seldom all these antecedence of women's contributions to the socio-political and economic developments, are the fruits of battle share not equally between women and men. Perhaps these maligned treatments may be attributable to so many factors, including the attitude of women as a major challenge. It is on this backdrop, this article is built to explicate the excruciating pains of gender imbalance with the view of re-invigorating women's participation and contributions towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in Nigeria.

Objective of the Study

The objective of this study is to redress social anomalies affecting the Nigerian women, using the mass media.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The history of the modern communications' media is not only an economic history of their growing incorporation into a capitalist economic system, but also a political history of their increasing centrality to the exercise of citizenship and the right to participate fully in social life with the tendencies to help shape the forms it might take in future (Murdock 1999:8). According to Curran & Gurevitch (2005:65), this is evident translating this right from a high sounding rhetoric into everyday reality which requires that people have access to a range of cultural and communicative resources that supports equal participation of men and women in order to achieve the dividends of democratic sustainability. Succinctly, it is on this platform the theoretical foundation of this article is predicated on the Reflective- Projective Theory and Heider's Balance Theory of the mass media.

The Reflective Projective Theory which was postulated by Lee Loevinger posits that, the mass media mirrors or reflects the issues and activities of the environment with a view of protecting the rights of people in order to promote economic and social involvement that propels development imperatives in the society. In the same vein, the audience or members of the society equally projects their own cognition into the images reflected by the mass media (Aina, 2003:193).

Explicating from the above, it means that human beings interpret issues reflected by the media to justify their behavioral patterns (in this case, between men and women) and sustainability of relationships. The major relevance of this theory hinges on the ability of the mass media to reflect and project gender balance issues that enhances mutual co-existence between women and men based on fairness and equity, especially in the areas of news coverage, information packing and dissemination to the heterogeneous society.

The Balance Theory advocated by Fritz Heider focuses on how individuals organize their own perception and thoughts through attitudes devoid of defrauding other persons. According to Heider as cited in Aina (2003:219), a situation can be balanced or unbalanced. When it is balanced the perceived units, and the experience within them (women and men), maintains a stress-free relationship. While the unbalanced situation generate tension, acrimony, disparity, unfair treatments, complaints and at worse, promotes injustice.

In Nigeria, despite women's contributions to the emancipation democratic civility and enhancement to the political order for sustainable developments to thrive, women are maligned and marginalized in the area of power sharing and position allocation by their male counterparts (IDEA, 2001:107). More so, the inequality cut-across responsibilities assigned, activities undertaken, access and control over resources, as well as decision making opportunities.

The inequality as noted by Ekpeneidua (2008:60) has shown on the Nigerian Mass Media. The problem of women's invisibility in the news is a reflection of the fundamental issues of disparity against women. It is on this backdrop, both the Reflective Projective and Heider's Balance Theories of the mass media becomes relevant for a study of this nature.

The Mass Media, Culture and Social Change towards Gender Equality

The issues of gender inequality have its orthodox characteristics which factors are ascribed to cultural limitations. The mass media in discharge of its orthodox functions transmits cultural heritage from one generation to another and these transmissions propel social changes in human society.

The term "Mass Media" is subscribed for the field of mass communication, and mass communication is a process of transmission of information, cultures, opinions, attitudes and so forth through a channel of communication (mass medium) to a relatively large, heterogeneous or even anonymous audiences simultaneously (Sambe, 2004). In supporting this view, Bitner (1977:9) observes that for mass communication to exist, we need an intermediate transmitter of information a mass medium here in referred to as Mass Media. In other words, the aforementioned assertion implies that without the mass media, mass communication wouldn't have happened. Indeed, communication would have been limited to face-to-face setting (Ate, 2008:63).

Culture, which is the totality of people's way of life, plays an important role in the society as people's views are explored and greatly influenced by cultural variables. No wonder, Ate (2008:55-56), opines that culture as the totality of people's way of life, is a characteristics of

members of the society which is habited by men and women, including various tools of knowledge and patterned ways of reasoning and acting that are learned, shared, but are not the direct products of biological inheritance.

The most propelling aspect of social change is subscribed from the tributaries of cultural change which juxtapositions are made manifest of the modifications of the body of knowledge of people and their tools. According to Okolocha (1999:218), social change is the modifications in the mode of interactions of members of a society which approaches are either evolutionary or revolutionary. However, the obstacles of social change have been identified by communications scholars and sociological pundits based on the reasons as enunciated below:-

1. Inferiority complex
2. Inability to embrace new concepts
3. Procrastination
4. Fear of breaking one's tradition and societal norms, including
5. Inability to set priorities.

The mass media as a vehicle could serve as the purveyor of people's conscience through informative and entertaining programmes. Often times, issues of women are seldom articulated in their presentations especially in the print media of communication. It is on this backdrop, some astute scholars have linked female disparity to cultural practices imbued with serious consequences for social change which tendencies are tilted towards promoting sustainable developments of news reports in Nigeria.

The Nigerian Mass Media and Women Issues: The Way/forward

Feminists have for decades challenged mass media portrayals of women by forming independent media sources and channels. The reasons for this are that critical areas of scholarship have been de-emphasized on women issues. These neglect cut-across particularly, wealth communication, pornography, advertising, and new media technology or internet studies from an appropriate multiplicity of international contexts. Moreso, in the area of media production research on women, racism and ethnicity has been limited when compared with the amount of research conducted on representation (Curran & Gurevitch, 2005:338).

It is succinct to note that media production is often times, studied by feminists through ethnography which highlights women as producers of alternative media and through observational studies, surveys or interviews that examines women in media professions who struggle against racism and sexism to influence media production, while other studies accentuate the ideological influence that production has on media content. According to Gurevitch & Curran (2005), the process of creating alternative media forms make women the primary subjects of struggle and thus, change in communication systems, beg developing oppositional and proactive alternatives that influence language, representations and communication technologies.

In Nigeria, some women activists tend to see male conspiracy in the continuing gender inequality especially in the mass media as a clear disconnect from the normal. According to Ekpenedua (2008:61), men are deliberately putting down women and the male rulers of the land are doing nothing to remedy the situation. Perhaps, the reason is that, there could be some merit in applying the conspiracy theory to the problem of gender discrimination in the country where women are even more invisible in governance than they are in the media (out of the 36 states, non is a woman governor of any state in Nigeria). In collaborating these noticeable facts, Okunna (2002), posits that many of the forces that puts Nigerian women down have their root in cultural and religious inclinations.

The Association of Women Writers (AWW) conducted an independent investigation of some selected Newspaper publications in a day in Nigeria. The Guardian, Sun and This Day newspapers were sampled for one day. The aim is to ascertain the number of female columnists and bylines of news stories including the total number of appearances of women issues on the pages of newspaper.

The outcome reflected serious under representation and invisibility of women issues in majority of the newspapers. Worried by the reflection of women issues, Ekpenedua (2008:60) observed that women make little news and are truly “invisible” in the media in these regards based on the fact that a huge majority of news subjects and writers are men. Women make positive news mostly when they are house wives of prominent men or influential figures in public mobilizations during political participation. In the area of classical theatre and dramatic productions, Ewvierhoima (2013:69), highlighted the patriarchal attitude towards women and noted that it dates back to the classical era, when in 8th century BC, writers such as Homer portray women as subordinate, unfaithful and evil. For instance, one example is found in the way Helen's infidelity is portrayed as the cause of the Trojan War. However, this is synoptic of female characterization in drama, but displays the bias towards women by men writers.

The twist of events in various platforms to redress stereotypes in the packaging and reporting of women issues in the mass media have generated serious concerns for women liberation struggles and empowerments arising from so many debates and platforms on women issues in the world over. For instance, it was agreed at the 4th World Conference on women in Beijing that what men can do, women can do even better. More so, the outcome of the conference stated inter-alia women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society in decision making processES and access to power are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace (Evwurhoma, 2002:62).

Conclusion

Gender equality proponents and activists have continued to express heinous and serious reservations about the character and nature of the status of women in Nigeria. Often times the indications of gender inequality points to systemic and structural exclusion by those vested with power and authority which consists mainly, of the men folk.

It is succinct to note that most of the mass media institutions particularly at the state and local levels are either government owned or have not lived up to their constitution obligations as impartial umpires and monitors of the processes of governance. Where the media are mindful of their responsibilities, they are usually the fulcrum for promoting democratic culture by providing the enabling environment for public discuss, policy input and credible checks on the excesses of state power (IDEA, 2001). The absence of this critical role by the Nigerian mass media is quite evident when we speak of issues of women in public life.

More so, even when the media mention issues of women, only little attention is given with old prejudice and stereotypes. It is on these backdrops, this article recommends that issues of women maligned treatments and disparity should be equitably handled by stakeholders to bring about democratic sustainability and equal participation for sustainability of socio-economic and political activities in Nigeria.

Recommendation

Empirical studies of media organizations and news events have identified a number of factors in addition to journalists, audiences and ownership that influence contents. Succinctly, these prepositions are seriously noted on the area of media restrictions and issues of women in media reports which according to Davison, Boylan & Frederick (1976:74) are based on the political setting. The differences in the political environment cause defenses in media contents even in such similar industrialized democracies as Great Britain and the United States of America. More so, these factors cut-across the news infrastructure, personnel and audiences amongst others.

The issues of women been projected through the mass media have juxtaposing and infused with several concerted efforts in order to mitigate further occurrence and protect women empowerment polices in all strata of livelihood activities in Nigeria and the world over. The study therefore recommends as follows,

1. All efforts at redressing women's inequality should examine the unequal division of labour, access to resources, and the different ways in which women and men are affected by media programmes and policies that are expected to benefit society at large.
2. Since women marginalization is structurally inclined and institutionalized either unconsciously or otherwise, is imbued in socio-cultural processes. Therefore, systematic strategies are required to address gender-differential roles, responsibilities and comprehensive decision making on issues of women in Nigeria.
3. Integrated political agenda and policy framework which promotes women's agenda should be set through the mass media. Specifically for the media, adequate policy on fair gender portrayal should be of premium.
4. Censorship of women, pornographic displays, and violence against women should be enforced to protect women been exploited and exposed to undue harassments by their male counterparts.

5. Mass media apparatuses should embark on advocacy in order to build strong alliance and accord more women voices to be heard and watched in the media.
6. The issue of legal rights and protection should be addressed by the government which of course, must be publicized through the mass media, specially highlighting issues regarding women.

References

- Aina, (2003), "Anatomy of Communications." Sabo Abeokuta: Julian Publishers.
- Ate, A. A. (2008), "Facilitating Social Change in Nigeria via Community Journalism." Akure: Pamma Press.
- Bitner, J. (1977), "Introduction to Mass Communication." New York: Hutton Mifflin
- Curran, & Gurevitch (2005), "Mass Media & Society." (4th edition) New York: Oxford University Press Inc.
- Davison, W. P, Boylan J. & Frederick T.C. (1976), "Mass Media Systems & Effects." Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Ekpeneidua, (2008), "Gender & the Mass Media." Ibadan: Justice, Development & Peace Commission (JDPC).
- Evwierhorma, (2013), "Female Empowerment & Dramatic Creativity in Nigeria." Lagos: Concept Publications Limited.
- Evwierhorma, (2013), "Issues in Gender, Drama and Culture in Nigeria." Lagos: Concept Publications Limited.
- IDEA (2001), "Democracy in Nigeria: Continuing Dialogue(s) for Nation Building." A Report of International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA).
- Mandela, (1995), "Long Walk to Freedom." New York: Hachette Book Group.
- Murdock, G. (1995), "Capitalism, Communication & Class Relations" in J. Curran, M. Gurevitch & J. Woollacott (eds), Mass Communication & society. London: Edward Arnold.
- Okolocha, C. F, Nwanunobi, C. O & Igbo, E. U. M (1999), "Introductory Sociology Lagos." Acquitas
- Okunna, S. C (2002), "Women: as ever in the Nigeria's News Media." International of Media & Cultural Politics Vol. 1, No 1.