

Gender Inequality in Media Coverage: Analysis of Nigerian Newspapers

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Abstract

For decades the media have been accused of gender bias in their reports in favour of males. These bias forms reflect in both selection process and media content. Much of these claims are however, result of studies in Europe and North America. This study therefore investigates the type of media coverage male and female ministers received during President Muhammadu Buhari's first tenure (2015-2019). Anchored on the Cultivation theory, the study investigates whether journalists exhibited gender bias in their reports on male and female cabinet ministers. Specifically, the study content analyses three Nigerian daily newspapers: Daily Trust, The Nation and Vanguard, from November 2015 – November 2019. Findings indicate that there is no gender bias against the female ministers. Male ministers constitute less news sources and/or subjects; higher number of direct and indirect quotes of the women ministers as against male ministers and a higher use of female pictures than the male. In all, the newspapers exhibited bias in favour of the female ministers.

Keywords: Gender bias, inequality, media coverage, ministers, newspapers.

1. Introduction

The enunciation of the United Nation's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which seeks to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" (sustainabledevelopment.un.org: 18), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action ([icsspe.org>files](https://icsspe.org/files)), and UNESCO's Priority Gender Equality Action Plan 2008-2013 ([peacewomen.org>node](https://peacewomen.org/node)), have given a boost to tackling the problem of gender bias in the media. Concerns over gender inequality arouse from the plethora of avenues or systems in which it was felt that the female gender should be 'seen but not heard.' Consequently, the acknowledgment of this existing bias against women has not only infused momentum into gender issues, it has attracted more research and global interests. Specifically, it has become a phenomenon in assessing social balance in media practice, especially with reference to women and politics.

The media and politics are usually seen as Siamese twins as politics breeds the activities that are covered by the media. The political actors thus covered are both male and female politicians. Such political figures could be party elected representatives, appointed people, `stalwarts, sympathisers and followers, to mention but a few. However, United Nation's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which seeks to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" (sustainabledevelopment.un.org: 18), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action ([icsspe.org>files](https://icsspe.org/files)), and UNESCO's Priority Gender Equality Action Plan 2008-2013 ([peacewomen.org>node](https://peacewomen.org/node)), avers that the role of women in politics, in the developed world, has taken a wider dimension, predicated on the high literacy level of that society whereas the patriarchal prism used in seeing the role of women in politics, in the developing world, excludes them from the field. Predicated on the above scenario, men are seen as being more in the political arena than their female counterpart. Research has also highlighted women in politics being proportionally less visible than men in news coverage, and that where they are presented, the media tend to portray them in a biased way, using stereotypes or discriminating against them (Council of Europe Study DGI, 2018).

Much researches on the matter have found that media practitioners have generally shown some levels of gender bias in their reports (Shor, Rijt and Fotouhi, 2019; Mazraeh, Lopes, Gautam, Gonzales, Rao, &Taboada, 2021; Thomas, 2015; Rao and Taboada, 2021; Van der pas and Aaldering, 2020). The bias, the authors note, is skewed against women. Other authors have, however, shown that issues of gender bias in media reports are becoming less egregious (Kinnick, 2010;

Wood, 1998). As a result, traditional notions of gender bias need to be reassessed (Hooghe, Jacobs & Claes, 2015; Eastman and Billings, 2000;). Such conclusions are based on findings in which increasing representation of women in political, social and other spheres is leveraging on gender balance, particularly visibility of women in media reports (Kinnick, 2010).

Some believe, however, that the foundation of gender bias is so intrinsic to our humanity that the growing participation of women in politics, including leadership of media houses, is not sufficient to alter the imbalance. Johannsdottir and Einarsdottir (2015, p.207) argue that “representation of women in the news either in numbers or in their portrayal” has not changed. This is in spite of increase in the number of women who are journalists and indeed managers and decision makers in the media industry (Kassova, 2020b).

These findings paint a complicated picture of both the subject and research findings. One finds the intellectual contentions even more limiting to the extent that almost all the researches were carried out in North America (Van der Pas and Aldering, 2020) and Europe (Wood, 1994; Kinnick, 1998; Devitt, 2002). Thus, the studies may, at best, be generalized with caution.

Much of previous studies on gender bias have also focused on partisan politics and electoral campaigns. Our focus in this study is on post-election period. This is a period of routine governance, when issues of public policy, expectedly, become the yardstick for both the media and the general public. Specifically, the research investigates whether journalists treat male and female cabinet ministers during the President Muhammadu Buhari’s first tenure (2015 – 2018) equally or differently.

2. Media Themes In Gender Bias

2.1 Gender

The term gender is looked at from two perspectives: that which deals with a human being’s sex and secondary it is looked at from the grammatical perspective. The first perspective deals with the issues of identities of human beings while the second deals, in a loose manner, with attributes of sex. There is also confusion between gender and sex. In more instances than not, gender is taken as a synonym of sex, which is not so. People often use the terms “sex” and “gender” interchangeably, but this is incorrect. The World Health Organization (WHO) (2002) looks at gender as a description of the socially constructed characteristics of women and men. In other words, these socially constructed roles, behaviours, and attributes are basically put forward by society as being appropriate for men and women. Newman (2021) defines sex as those physical differences that exist between people who are male, female or ‘intersex’, due to their assigned sex at birth on the basis of physiological characteristics, genitalia and chromosome composition. The definition of gender above, differentiating it from sex, leads to the understanding that people within groups should know to the behaviours and or attributes socially constructed for such groups. The result of this thinking is the birth of ‘gender stereotype’. Cook and Cusack (2010: 9) define “gender stereotype” as “a generalised view or preconception about attributes or characteristics that are or ought to be possessed by, or the roles that are or should be performed by, men and women”.

Predicated on these attributes, characteristics or behaviours, men and women are “expected” to behave in certain ways and or be treated in specific ways, also seen in official circles sometimes. The OHCHR (2013) states that the different types of gender stereotypes include “sex stereotypes,” “sexual stereotypes,” “sex-role stereotypes” and “compounded stereotypes.” Based on the characteristics attached to the various stereotypes, women are treated in specific ways that are different from how men are treated in similar situations.

2.2 Underrepresentation

Generally, women are believed to be underrepresented in the media. They receive less visibility, compared to men Johannsdottir and Einarsdottir (2020). This is regardless of the proportion of women in relation to men. Even where both genders are placed in equal numeric proportion, including same “occupational strata” Shor, Rijt & Fotouhi (2020) argue that women still receive less media coverage. This underrepresentation Woods (1998) believes is a form of distortion of reality, because it does devalue the numerical strength of women and creates the false belief that there are more men than women.

The underrepresentation reflects in terms of sources used and coverage given. A study by Senet. *al.* (2016) reflects this underrepresentation when it found that men received more coverage both in texts and images. Even in situations where journalists seek experts as sources, more often than not, the selection is skewed in such a way that men still dominate the numbers (Patil, 2018). Kalra and Boukes (2020) trace this form of underrepresentation to selection bias. The foundation of this selection bias is rooted in the reality of selection as the inevitable principle for journalistic activity.

Indeed, no journalistic activity is possible without application of the selection principle. It is in the process of selecting which story to publish as well as the sources to use, that journalists often take active and conscious decisions, a process that makes women underrepresentation seem a deliberate form of bias.

2.3 Use of sources

There is also less use of women as sources in news. The contention is that, often, journalists prefer and indeed use more men as sources than they use women. Even when they are dealing with expert opinions, Balra and Boukes (2020) note that journalists often use more men than women. This, they explain, is most visible in science, business and sports. A Global Media monitoring Project (2010) research findings support this contention. It found that only one out of five authorities interviewed by journalists was a woman.

2.4 Stereotypes

These are seen as existing attitudes and biases formed, based on previous generalized knowledge, and which serve as a basis for subsequent behaviour. Stereotypically, men are portrayed based on their policy stands (Devitt, 2002), intelligence, business, economics and foreign policy.

2.5 Bias

Bias is subject and context sensitive. The interpretation of bias in a judgment delivered by a judge, for instance, may be different from the interpretation of bias in a news story. The Concise Oxford English Dictionary (1964), for instance, defines bias as simply prejudice, and traces its origin from a game of bowls, where due to lop-sided construction the ball gives bias – a twist in its trajectory or path. In this study, bias is seen as a unfair treatment of sources, by a journalist, which shows unequal treatment, favouritism or otherwise, of one party over another. Generally, bias distorts. As a result, it is viewed from two prisms: one, unintentional bias, which results from the normal process of human cognition without a conscious intention to distort. What Trumbo, Dunwoody and Griffin (1998: 240) describe as “cognitive bias”. This sort of bias is almost inevitable. It is environment driven and a function of the selection process. Sometimes, it is a professional necessity. The second bias is the intentional bias, which is a deliberate act of malpractice.

Researchers have relied on two criteria set by Clark (1972) to identify bias. The first is the “quantitative presence of the group interest”. The second is “respect, the treatment and status accorded to this group”. To operationalize this criterion in media content, Wood (1994) outlines three frames: underrepresentation of women as a result of cultural norms; application of gender-normative-stereotypes to correspond with social expectations on men and women; depicting men and women in a manner that re-establishes traditional gender roles. The basic problem with all of these studies and their findings is that they relied on disproportionate number of men and women in their study of equality. To overcome this challenge, we selected the same number of men and women, who also share other similarities, for the study.

3. Methodology

The aim of this study is to identify the existence of gender bias in the coverage of male and female Cabinet Ministers. To do so, we utilized content analysis. Three Nigerian newspapers with a national circulation were purposively selected in accordance with a purposive stratification of the country into North, South and East. Consequently, *Daily Trust*, the *Nation* and *Vanguard* were purposively selected, each chosen from one of the stratified regions (*Daily Trust*: North; the *Nation*: South and *Vanguard*: East).

The first three years of President Muhammadu Buhari’s first term, were selected starting from November 11, 2015, when he swore-in his administration’s ministers to November 12, 2018, after which partisan campaigns were to commence for the next election. We used the chosen time frame to construct a composite calendar for the study. A fortnightly interval was used to produce the sample size that was content analysed. Thus, the study period had 158 weeks, which gave a population of 474 editions. A sample size of 237 editions was arrived at, using the composite calendar, with one day being selected from each of the weeks, starting with Wednesday, 11/11/2015, the day the ministers were sworn-in. Only work days were selected, since weekends are mostly for entertainment and analysis. Thus, we terminated our staggered selection from Mondays to Fridays, excluding Saturdays and Sundays.

The selection of ministers was purposively on Cabinet Ministers. A disproportionate technique was used to select three male and three female ministers, reflecting the three identified geographical zones.

We examined the stories reported on the ministers and how the stories are reported. We considered the raw number of reports on each minister and the frequency, including their use as sources, their quotes, and their mention, slant, and use of their pictures in the news stories or as independent picture. We adopted the use of manual coding to provide the necessary data for analysis.

Specifically, we measured bias as existence of inequality and a measure of disproportionate representation in, and coverage in news reports and use of photos, direct and indirect quotes, and frequency of mention, source and slant. We relied on a manual count of number of occurrence in the variables under study.

4. Data Analysis

Table 1: Coverage of female ministers

		No of Stories	Photo	Mention	Direct quote	Indirect Quote	Source	Slant		
								Favourable	Unfavourable	Neutral
Amina Mohammed	<i>Daily Trust</i>	9	1	1		1	1			9
	<i>The Nation</i>	1		1		2				1
	<i>Vanguard</i>	4		3		1	1			2
	Total	14	1	5		4	2			12
Aisha Alhassan	<i>Daily Trust</i>	2								2
	<i>The Nation</i>	5	2	13	2		13			5
	<i>Vanguard</i>	3		10	4	2	3			3
Total	10	2	23	6	2	16			10	

KemiAdeosun	Daily Trust	21	47	22	18	25	8		3	18
	The Nation	23	14	15	26	21			2	20
	Vanguard	36	44	18	17	7		1	4	31
Total		80	105	55	61	53	8	1	9	69

Data in Table 1 shows the coverage female ministers received from journalists. Out of 139 stories studied, 104 or 75% were on female ministers. Of this number, the finance minister received the highest number of 80 or 58% of the stories on female ministers. Of the number, *Vanguard* has the highest number of 43 or 41% of the stories while *Daily Trust* has the least number of 32 or 30%.

On the use of pictures, the three newspapers have a total of 108 female minister's pictures. Of this number, 105 representing 97% of the total female minister's pictures were photos of the Finance minister. Of the total number of the pictures on the female ministers, *Daily Trust* has 48 or 44%, while *The Nation* has the least number of 6 representing 15% of pictures on female ministers.

Table 1 similarly indicates that the female ministers were mentioned 83 times out of 129 mentions in the stories representing 64% of the total mentions, and 40% of the total female mentions were on the finance minister. Of the total mentions *Vanguard* has the highest number of 31 or 24%. *Daily Trust* has the least mentions of 23 or 27%.

The table also shows that the female ministers were quoted 67 times in direct quotation representing 70% of all direct quotes in the 139 stories. Of the direct quotes from female ministers, 91% or 61 direct quotes were those of the finance minister, 9% or 6 direct quotes were from minister of women affairs while the environment minister received no direct quote. *The Nation* reported the highest number of direct quotes on the female ministers (28 or 41%).

For indirect quotes, the female ministers received a total of 59 or 77% of the 77 indirect quotes. Of the 77, the finance minister received 53 or 69% of the indirect quotes and 90% of the female minister's indirect quotes. *Daily Trust* reported the highest number of indirect quotes representing 44% or 26 quotes.

The ministers were used as sources 33 times. Of this number, the female ministers were used as sources 26 times representing 79%. The Minister for Women Affairs was most used 16 times as a story source, representing 48%. Generally, *The Nation* has the highest number of female sources used (13 or 50%), while *Vanguard* has the least number of 4 representing 15%.

On story slant which was measured on the basis of favourable, unfavourable and neutral, a total of 91 (90%) stories on female ministers were neutral, 10 stories or 10% were unfavourable. Of the neutral stories, the finance minister has 69 (68%) stories. *Vanguard* has 36 or 36% of the neutral stories representing the highest number and four or 40% unfavourable stories. *The Nation* has the least number of 26 neutral stories and two or 2% unfavourable stories.

Table 2: coverage of male ministers

		No of Stories	Photo	Mention	Direct quote	Indirect Quote	Source	Slant		
								Favourable	Unfavourable	Neutral
Mohammed Bello	<i>Daily Trust</i>									
	<i>The Nation</i>	3		5	7	8				3
	<i>Vanguard</i>	1								1
	Total	4		5	7	8				4
Isaac Adewole	<i>Daily Trust</i>	6		1					1	5
	<i>The Nation</i>	6		10	7	8		2		4
	<i>Vanguard</i>	9	1	20	9	2	5			9

Total		21	1	31	16	10	5	2	1	18
Dan Ali	Daily Trust	4		3	10	4		1		3
	The Nation	2								2
	Vanguard	4		7		1			2	
Total		10		10	10	5		1	2	5

Table 2 deals with data on newspaper coverage of male ministers. Out of the total of 139 stories 35 or 25% were on male ministers. Of this number, the FCT Minister received the least number of stories (4 or 3%) reported in the newspapers, while health minister received the highest number of 21 stories or 15% of the stories.

The table further shows that only one, representing 0.9% of the photos used was the picture of a male minister. The table also shows that male ministers were mentioned 46 times or 33% in the 139 stories and out of the total of 129 mentions, for both genders. Of the 46 mentions, the health minister has the highest number of mentions (31 or 67%) among the male ministers.

On direct quotes, a total of 29 direct quotes were those of the male ministers. This represents 21% of the total stories and 30 percent of all direct quotes. Of the 29, the health minister has the highest number of 16 or 55% of the direct quotes from male ministers. Only a total of 18 indirect quotes representing 12% of the 139 stories and 23% of all indirect quotes were attributed to the male ministers.

Data in the table further indicate that on sources, male ministers appeared as sources for only 7 times representing 5% of the total stories and 21% of total sources used. This is in contrast to the 26 times or 78% female ministers were used as sources.

Of the 35 stories on male ministers, 27 or 77% of the stories were neutral in contrast to the 91 on female ministers, while 3 or 25% were unfavourable and another 3 or 8% favourable.

5. Discussion of findings

Findings of this study suggest that female ministers (women) received higher media coverage than the male ministers. As shown in this study, the female ministers have higher media coverage by more than 50%. This result suggests, claims of previous research that men receive greater media coverage (Ovrebø, 2015; Asr, Mazraeh, Lopes, Gautam, Gonzales, Rao, P., et al. 2021; Cook, & Cusack, 2010; Devitt, 2002; Hooghe, Jacobs, & Claes, 2015; Kassova, 2020b) and that low number of women are portrayed as news subjects (GMM, 2020), may no longer be tenable. In this study, male ministers constitute less than 30% of sources or subjects. They represent a ratio of three to one in favour of the women.

This further suggests that the greater media coverage men generally receive is rather proportionate to the numerical advantage they have in social and political positions and which results into news worthy actions.

The higher number of direct and indirect quotes of the women ministers suggests that women received greater visibility in the media. These findings support similar GMM, (2010) findings indicating that since 2000, there has been a proportionate rise in the number of women that are used as news sources or subjects. This suggests an undergirding influence of changing social and political realities, and that previous research findings may be unrealistic today.

The greater media visibility women enjoy is most striking in the preference of journalists' use of pictures of female ministers. It is clear paradigm shift that has estranged stereotyping of women as suffering significant bias in media depiction in which the female gender is portrayed as more serious minded and trusted, beyond just been good for entertainment, household, and dependent value. This explains why the female ministers have a favourable photo-exposure ratio of 1 to 9 over the male ministers.

The fact that the female ministers have received greater coverage, both in text and pictures suggests Ovrebo, (2015),Johannsdottir and Einarsdottir, (2015), Rao&Taboada (2021) claims that men generally receive greater media coverage may be losing its reality. Specifically, the study findings indicate that media coverage in Nigerian newspaper is not biased against the female. If anything, it is eschewed against the male.

6. Conclusion

This study focused on three newspapers *Daily Trust*, *The Nation* and *Vanguard*. It sought to find out whether newspapers exhibit gender bias in favour of men, in the way they report news stories. To do so, three female and three male ministers were selected for the study. The conclusion drawn from the findings is that there is no evidence of gender bias against women. The women have greater media visibility both in media texts and pictures.

Thus, the results of previous studies that suggests otherwise may have measured equality based on a disproportionate number of men and women. Such measurements are most likely to produce results that align with numerical inequalities on shared variables. Clearly, this is a questionable premise on which to measure "balanced" coverage. This research therefore suggests that further studies of gender bias in media coverage need to be evaluated on the basis of more balanced and proportionate criteria, and within a context that is not subject to disproportionate variables.

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