



Nigerian Women, Memories of the Past and Visions of the Future through the Communication Narratives of the Media

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Abstract

Nigerian women have come a long way from the pre-colonial, to the colonial era to the contemporary era. There are great stories that seem not to have been told about Nigerian women. The inability to adequately capture the stories may have been due to inefficient communication and documentation. These stories bring out the essence these of women not only in nation building but as custodians of great legacy in a country with rich cultures and potential. In spite of the great role that women play in this clime, it seems that little or no effort is made to portray, promote and document their role. This paper seeks to look into the narratives surrounding Nigerian women in their journey towards political, social and economic empowerment and the influence of media and communication in aiding women to achieve empowerment in all spheres of their lives, through great memories and projected visions of possible futures. The media are a powerful tool that can be used to assist Nigerian women in asserting their voices so that their stories can be told and documented in an emulative manner. Communication according to scholars like Lasswell, Macquail and Wright informs educates and mobilizes, sensitizes and informs; therefore theories of communication and how they can be used to better the lives of Nigerian women are examined in this paper. The focus here is the use of the media especially radio which is the most widely used medium of women in Nigeria, especially women at the grassroots, to effect communication and change. A review of relevant literature, discussion and recommendations will be made in this paper.

Keywords: Communication; Media; Nigerian indigenous community

Introduction

The traditional Nigerian indigenous community believes that the woman's role is predominantly in the home where she is expected to act as a wife, mother and housekeeper. This implies that she is to be catered for by her husband whom she is solely dependent on. It is often seen as odd if she fend for herself or takes on any form of occupational activity which is considered to be for men. According to Adamu [1] the cultural orientation by which a woman is seen as dependent on her husband is what creates the enabling environment for her subordination and restriction in pursuing education. In Nigeria presently, women are beginning to break out of such stereotypes. This is evident in their achievements in the various fields of endeavors which they now engage in.

Nigerian women have continued to evolve since the pre-colonial era, their continuous portrayal as the helpless, oppressed and marginalized lot has led to little recognition being given to them in history. This is why Awe [2] asserts that our history has not been gender sensitive and that data has neglected the contributions of females to society. According to Okereke Nigerian history has not been gender sensitive in their analysis of the contributions of females to development and this invisibility affects the country in terms of development. The irony here is that Nigerian women have always played a significant role in social and economic activities in the society. They have engaged in activities such as food processing, pottery making, and mat weaving and cooking. Land was communally owned and women were given access to land through their husbands or where applicable their parents. However, the patrilineal nature of the Nigerian culture emphasized the role of the man as the head of the family. The control of labor and the younger members of the family were given to older women.

Nigerian Women in the Pre-Colonial Era

The role of Nigerian women in the pre-colonial era was characterized by their involvement in keeping their kin groups.

At that time, the economy was largely subsistence in nature and the women played their role in the economy by producing and distributing goods and services. This they did in addition to their primary role of nurturing children and as mothers, playing their roles as wives and performing domestic duties.

In order to ensure that their families had enough to feed on, they farmed with their husbands and children. Notably, in the south eastern part of Nigeria, women were involved in the production of palm oil and palm kernel, their successes in long distance trade in different parts of the country also accounted for the distribution of various food items and commodities. As a result of the hard working nature of the women, they were involved in the processing of food. Fish drying was done in the coastal areas of Calabar, Oron and the Niger Delta, women in Okposi, Yala and Uburu were known for salt production. Pottery making and weaving was popular among the Afikpo women. The women in the north, even those in purdah were also involved in food processing and trading. The resourceful nature of these women made able to contribute to the sustenance of their families.

Essentially, the women were also able to provide health care and spiritual services as most traditional religions had immortal females as goddesses. Most of these goddesses who were always portrayed as river goddesses had the solution to fertility issues and other ailments. Women acted as healer, priestesses, diviners, birth attendants, custodians of the sanctuaries of gods and goddesses etc.

During this period, women in most Nigerian societies were considered as free adults under customary law. This however does not mean that there were no limitations as they were subordinated to male authority though they had independence in terms of income. In spite of the fact that land was communally owned; in most societies women could not inherit land even though they tilled the land with men.

Education for women was functional as they had to acquire the skills to make income. Any woman had no skills was totally dependent on her husband. Politically they were integrated into their communities and they played complementary functions. The political influence of women in the pre-colonial era was documented by Odah and Awe [2,3]. For instance in Bornu women were adept at the administration of the state, they occupied important positions in the royal family. Some of these positions were Megira (Queen Mother) and Gumsu (First wife of the Mai or King. Similarly, in the history of ancient Zaria, women performed significant political functions. Modern Zaria was founded by Queen Bakwa Turuk in the first half of the 16th century and her daughter Amina succeeded her as Queen. Amina was very powerful and a warrior, In order to protect city, she built a wall around it and extended its territories to Bauchi. The people of Katsina and Kano paid her tributes and she made her city a commercial center of repute. On the contrary, in ancient Yoruba land, the Oba ruled but with the assistance of ladies of the palace as Iyalodes, Iyalojas and Iyalaje . Moremi of Ife was known to have played a prominent role. In the ancient Benin kingdom Queen Emotan displayed bravery in politics. Other notable women are Iyalode Efunsetan Aniwura of Ibadan and Princess Inikpi of Igala land.

Madam Tinubu ruled Lagos from 1830-1887 and she was a seasoned politician who used her power to support Akintoye to become the rightful king of Lagos during his feud with Kosoko.

Women in the Colonial Era

This period was not particularly favourable to women. It only advanced the economic situation of British, Lebanese, Syrian and some Nigerian Merchants. The economy which was export oriented did not boost the traditional occupations of Nigerian women it undermined it. The emergence of expatriate such as John Holt, Lever Brothers and United African Company firms led to the failure of smaller markets which were previously operated by women. Women were not given access to medium and large scales loans which they required for the making bulk purchases to enable them function in the economy. Even in agriculture, women were not given access to cash crop incentives, technology and innovation. These facilities were for men. The deprivation of women is also observable in the educational curriculum which emphasized religious instruction, clerical skills for boys and domestic science for girls to make them good home makers rather than empowering them financially. Technological and scientific education was not given encouragement.

Politically, the gender bias evident in Nigeria emanated from colonialism. According to Erunke and Abdul, the western cultural idea of colonialism was built around male superiority and this was observable in their relations with Nigerians. In the same light assert that the 1922 Clifford Constitution of pre-colonial Nigeria disenfranchised women and this led to their subjugation as well as limiting the wealth of adult males. However according to Agbalajobi this does not mean that there was the absence of gender inequality in traditional states and stateless Nigeria but it was only made worse by colonial rule. According to Lenin [4] women are important in the society and we cannot go forward without them. This importance can be observed in the role played by women like Mrs Obasa who formed the Lagos women league in 1901. This was pressure group used to better the sanitary conditions of women and the education of women. Similarly, Mrs Ransome Kuti founded the Abeokuta women union in 1946. This union was used for raising the standard of womanhood by eradicating illiteracy among women. The contributions of women can also be observed in the Aba women's riot of 1929 against colonial repression. Fifty women were killed and some narratives were that the women were violent and unlawful but the women were only fighting to protect their rights.

The colonial era did not help in the empowerment of women because they seemed to be relegated to the background during this period. According to Boserup colonialism used gender inequality as means of perpetuating the subordination, subjugation and exploitation of women. Colonialism set the tone for creating an inferiority complex for women. This is why Okunna [5] argues that the Nigerian woman is characterized by low self-esteem because the society does not see her as important but inferior to her male counterpart. The fact that at that time the existing media

which was the British Broadcasting Corporation was focused on disseminating information on radio to the people did not give a voice to women also did not help women. Radio at that time was used for nation building and fostering the struggle for independence by the nationalists. Where information on Nigerians was relayed it focused on the activities of men and not women. Women had no voice they were only seen but not heard.

Women in the Post-Colonial Era

In this era, Nigerian women started significant roles in the nation's national development. They took up traditional agriculture largely because of the exodus of able-bodied men who had opted for waged labor. The involvement of Nigerian women in agriculture saw those contributing 70% of Nigeria's food requirements.

However, the situation in the public service remained unsatisfactory but a lot different from what was observable in the pre-colonial and colonial eras. Five years post-independence only the percentage of the salaried work force had only 6.9% of women by 1970, 8.7% of the total number of staff in the Federal Civil Service were women. Ten years later, in 1980 there was an increase of the women to 12.6%. This trend was also maintained in the state Civil Service. The contributions of women to other sectors during this period can also be seen in areas such as agriculture, artisanship and craftsmanship, other professions and the medical profession.

The economic recession of the mid 1980s had a huge impact on the education in Nigeria. As a result of the high cost of education most parents especially those in the rural areas sent their boys to school and withdrew their girls from school. In order to check this trend some state governments made education free for girls up to certain levels. This helped to curtail early marriages.

In terms of rights, the legal system which was inherited from the colonial era did not favor women empowerment and participation to national development. They had to obtain the permission of their spouses before they could be issued national passports. Until recently women were not allowed to stand bail for suspects. The statutory provisions did not also favour women in issues of divorce and inheritance. The legal system did not create room for the empowerment of women politically, socially and economically.

Politically, Nigerian women since post 1960 politics cannot be said to have fared well. This is so because in spite of the fact that women are known to give massive support to political parties they are not well represented in appointments and policy making. By 1960 in the southern part of Nigeria, women already had franchise which enabled Mrs Esan Wuraola to become a member of parliament. A year later in 1961, Mrs Margret Ekpo contested elections under the platform of the (NCNC) and won a seat in the Eastern Nigeria House of Assembly. Others who won seats are Mrs Janet N.Mokelu and Miss Ekpo A. Young. The situation was not the same in Northern Nigeria as women were not given the opportunity to take part in politics until 1979 this mean that prominent

female politicians like Hajia Qambo Sawaba could not vote and were not eligible to be voted for.

The second republic (1979-1983) brought some women into limelight when they succeeded in getting elected into the House of Representatives. Some of these women are Mrs J.C Eze of the Nigerian Peoples party Uzouwani constituency, Mrs V.O Nnaji representing Isu and Mrs Abiola Babatope of the Unity Party of Nigeria who represented Mushin Central 11 of Lagos. However this was not a significant representation as the numbers of females elected were few. At that time only two women were appointed as Federal Ministers, they were Chief Mrs Akinrinade and Mrs Egun Oyagbola, Ministers for Internal Affairs and National Planning respectively, Mrs Francesca Yetunde Emmanuel was the only female Permanent Secretary. She was initially in the Federal Ministry of Establishment and later Federal Ministry of Health. A number of women were appointed commissioners in their states. In 1983 Ms Franca Afegbua became the first woman to be elected into the senate as a senator. Few women contested and won elections in the local Government Councils.

The Military governments which came after President Shehu Shagari's regime did not really do much for women despite the fact that the First ladies tried to use their pet projects Better life for Rural Women (Maryam Babangida) and Family Support Programme (Maryam Abacha) and Women's Rights Advancement Association (Fatima Abubakar).

Presently the lot of women has improved politically as more women are in government. However, this does not in any way signify that the gender gap in politics has been closed. There is still so much to be done so that women can occupy executive political positions and contribute to the decision making process in Nigeria.

The Portrayal of Women by the Media

In spite of several Nigerian women movements mobilizing themselves and calling for an end to the incessant negative media portrayals and harsh cultural practices plaguing Nigerian women, it is sad to note that much is not being done in this regard. Women are often objectified as sex symbols rather than as professionals or respectable community members. The real representations of women are ignored by the media because they want to create a stereotype of women. There seems to be an attempt by the media to downplay the numerous success stories of women, this assertion is supported by GMMP which identifies media treatment of women issues as unbalanced because the success stories of women, the sufferings and exploitations are not captured and projected by the media. Since the media are strong social institutions which have the ability to influence the society by the type of agenda they set, they should perform their functions of informing their audiences in line with Lasswell media functions theory, survey their environment for opportunities and threats and develop and enhance their skills for exploiting the opportunities and countering threats through keeping people informed and educated about the legitimate strategies and responses and at the same time entertaining them [6]. The negative representations of women

in the media fall short of what is expected of them. According Amobi [7] gender inequality seems to be supported by the media because the media, ignores, denies or makes women invisible. It is disheartening to observe that in spite of the platform action adoptions made at the Beijing Conference in 1995 where the constant depiction of women in negative and debasing image and their unequal access to information communication technology were seen as major concerns the media are yet to deviate from these practices. The media should be used effectively to champion women empowerment, through the enhancement of skills and knowledge and access to information communication technology.

However, one area where women have achieved a lot of visibility is in the Nigerian movie industry which produces Nigerian home videos. The Nigerian movie industry popularly known as Nollywood was named after Hollywood and Bollywood. Nollywood has grown into a major part of the Nigerian economy. The industry which has had its own fair share of challenges in terms of infrastructural development now enjoys so much patronage within and outside the country. Dozens of movies are released into the market weekly. The irony is that Nollywood which gives Nigerian women visibility appears to reinforce gender disparity instead of correcting societal ills and portraying women favourably. In these movies Nigerian women are often portrayed as wayward, materialistic, selfish and murderous. Some movies portray women as sex objects and weaker vessels. They also make so much effort to reinforce the subservience of women to men by casting them as receptionist, nurses, teachers, and domestic servants. Women are rarely cast as executives and professionals. These depictions make one wonder why the achievements of successful women such as Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala Former Finance Minister, and Vice President of the World Bank and Dr Obiagiele Ekwesili Former Education Minister and Head of African Educational Project of the World Bank and a host of others who have succeeded in shattering the glass ceiling in their contributions to the economic and educational growth of the Nigeria are not captured. The Global Media Monitoring Project validates these observations in their survey which showed that in Africa, 77% of stories in the media represented gender stereotypes almost eight times higher than stories that challenge such 5%.

Theoretical Framework

Gender theories

The gender inequity in the Nigerian media can be attributed to the adherence to the patriarchal structures which exist in our traditional institutions. These institutions are yet to imbibe modern ways of looking at gender and the paradigm shift which other climes have adopted. To address this inequity, Shirley and Edwin Ardener propounded the Feminist Muted Group theory in 1978. This theory explains why some groups are muted, silenced or not heard. Their suggestion is that in every society there are hierarchical structures that give some groups privileges over others. The groups which are at the top

of the hierarchy of the communication system of the society have power over the muted group which is the low end of the pole. In Nigeria, it obvious that women are the muted group as in most Nigerian cultures women are meant to be seen but not heard. The patriarchal nature does not also give a voice to the Nigerian women. This muteness is also displayed in the representation the media gives to women and issues affecting them. Similarly Allen and Falluga [8] in their Introduction to Theories of Gender and Sex note that gender theorists can be divided into various sub-schools such as materialist feminist, foucauldian theorists of gender, postmodern and poststructuralist theorists of gender. This study because it looks into the economic empowerment of women using information and education, situates in the materialist feminist approach. By empowering women we are concerned with how women can contribute to world economic development by tapping into their income generating abilities. They can achieve this by utilizing the skills and opportunities available to them in a world where they being under-valued and seemingly relegated to the background as second class citizens. Therefore it is felt that the media as agents of change should prioritize the education of women rather than under-representing them and displaying negative images of them.

Agenda setting theory

The study of Nigerian women, memories of the past and visions of the future through the communication narratives of the media is based on the agenda setting theory which shows that members of the society tend to be influenced by the dominant media in their lives. Therefore the narratives which the media portray to society about women tend to shape the perceptions that people have of women. It has been observed that the negative portrayal of women by the media does not in any way help to elevate the status of women rather it debases women and portrays them as sex objects, weaker vessels and under-achievers. To a great extent, this study feels that the media, especially through its communications have a great role to play in telling the stories of Nigerian women who reside in the urban, sub-urban and rural areas. Bearing in mind the assertion of Siband which says in Africa, radio is and will continue for a long time to be the most appropriate communication technology available to majority of people in the developing countries particularly the disenfranchised communities, women, children and youth. One is encouraged that radio can be used to reach women in the sub-urban and rural areas. On the influence of the media in shaping and directing public discourse, McCombs and Shaw saw the ability of the mass media to effect cognitive change among individuals, to structure their thinking and they labeled this effect the agenda setting function of the media. It is believed that he media has the ability to eliminate messages that subjugate women and brand them as sex objects. The media can also practice gender fair reporting by eliminating negative stereotypes and images of women. To empower women, the media can give them greater visibility in decision making and executive position. Through its agenda setting function, media can be used to shape gender realities by changing mindsets and fostering women rights. Media space monitoring and

content monitoring would also help in changing negative perceptions of women.

Developmental Communication theory by McQuail deriving from Everett Roger's Diffusion Innovation theory and Daniel Lerner's Modernization theory.

This theory sees media and communication as means propelling modernization and modern physical and social economic development in their environments and societies. In Nigeria, a significant proportion of women reside in the sub-urban rural areas. These women need to be exposed to communication from the media which helps in developing them socially, economically and politically. The diffusion of innovation theory propounded by Everett Rogers proposes using communication to transfer development to clients by development agencies to create the desire for change and modernization among members of the public. With development as one of the major functions and desired effect of media and communication, the media especially those in developing societies of Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe should endeavor to make information, education and enlightenment their priority as these will go a long way in empowering women. It is also noteworthy to add that technology has a huge role to play in the engagement of media and communication for development purposes as prescribed by McQuail.

Spiral of silence theory

Elizabeth Neumann's spiral of silence theory of 1974 posits that women, often find themselves as minorities in most public discursive environments. This makes them adopt silence when faced with masculine dominance of expressed public opinion. This explains the reason why women are not given adequate representation in the media; their voices are drowned by those of men who have claimed the public sphere as their space. This situation is even made worse for sub-urban and rural women who do not really have access to the media. In these areas the major means of getting information at the grassroots is radio which is mostly community based. This means that their yearnings and aspiration are not pushed beyond their immediate communities and they do not enjoy a rich programme content which is likely to empower them.

Uses and gratification theory

The uses and gratification theory by Herzog posits that the audience patronize those media from which they get gratification. Therefore the popularity of a medium is likely to be directly proportional to the usefulness the audience ascribes to it. This being so it would be logical to argue that since women constitute media audiences and some of them have specific ones they depend on for information, education and entertainment. These same media should be used in helping to empower them socially, economically and politically. Women at the grassroots can be reached through radio which happens to be popular among them. Empowerment in terms of the type of content and communication would have a positive impact on their lives.

The media can also be used to tell their stories and document their histories. News reporting in the papers should be balanced in terms of representation; home videos should give the real perspectives of women. Television programmes and radio programmes should be used to mobilize women to attain their potential in the society. The media can also help in breaking the stereotypes that hinder the growth and progress of women in Nigeria.

Literature Review

Gender and media

There have been a lot of scholarly work done on gender and the media in Nigeria and Africa in general and most of it centres on media representations in films, information communication technology, media production and hidden histories. This trend tends to be encouraged by the need to empower women socially, economically and politically. To further strengthen the focus of scholarly research, the Beijing conference also highlighted the insensitivity of the media to stereotyping women and called for the promotion, positive portrayal and participation of women in the media. The media are very strong social institutions which construct reality; this is why Tuchman [9] examined how news organizations construct reality. This study was not really about women but it helped to show the gendered dimensions of news. This study helps us to understand gender representations in the news and the resultant imbalance of reporting news of men and women. Similarly Mbilinyi and Omari [10] addressed issues of gendered images of women in different kinds of media such as school textbooks, radio programmes, advertisements, newspapers, poetry and songs. Their concern was about the de-construction of socially constructed social relations. This supports one's argument that the media which creates stereotyped of women can also be used to create images that would advance that socially, politically and economically. According Johannessen the dominant gender discourse in the media is backed by a social conservative force which is likely to hinder women in actively participating in the society and development. Her assertion is validated by the inability of societies to move ahead with times and change stringent cultural beliefs and practices which limit women. In Nigeria the singular fact that women are still being seen as those who should not be given a voice, limits them from playing active roles as their male counterparts. The media by not giving a voice to the voiceless tend to substantiate this conservative stand. While looking at the representation of women in film, Dipio [11] posits that the Nigerian Films do not portray images of women as professionals who are able to tackle social problems. This form of representation also stems from traditionally assigned gender roles. This type of portrayal shapes the way people look at women in the society. If women are cast as successful professionals who can tackle social problems, this will change the psyche of people and this would encourage them to see women in a different way. The stories of women told through films should be those that empower and inspire women. These stories should place women in their

rightful position and not enhance or reinforce their traditional roles.

Information Communication Technology and Gender

Information communication technology is often seen as a means of empowering women in Nigeria. However, some women especially those at the grassroots who do not have access to them or know how to use them are disadvantaged. According to Somolu [12] research on women blogging for social change shows how women embrace social ICTs and use them to bypass mainstream media and produce content that is empowering and addresses their need. This study reveals the fact that women have a voice on another platform. The use of ICTs by women who have access to them and can use them is inspiring for women empowerment.

Media Production Practices and Hidden Histories

Media producers have often been accused of not adequately representing women in their productions. This trend exists mostly because in the newsroom male journalists outnumber their female counterparts. This is largely due to gender discrimination. Okunna [13] observes that after in spite of the years of attempting to improve the status of women in the media, media is still male dominated as Nigerian female journalists are not seen. On the documentation of women's histories this can help in breaking hierarchies and stereotypes as the important roles played by women are lost if not properly preserved in the form of film, documentaries and texts. The Nigerian experience is pathetic because apart from the scholarly works that document some of the narratives of women. There seem to be very few films if any that capture the great legacies these women left behind. One would not be surprised to see that there so many women in Nigerian history who have been left behind in the documentation available.

Recommendations

The question of how media and communication can be used to enrich the lives of women is one which should always be on the minds of media organizations. The solutions are not far-fetched as they merely involve undoing some practices which do not favor women. It also requires creative thinking on the part of the media in developing strategies which will help in empowering women. The following recommendations are made:

The media should educate people on the dangers of a single story by stopping the stereotyping of women.

They should use their gatekeeping function in ensuring that images that debase women are not carried by the media.

For their educational function to be impactful, they should reduce their contents into scores of languages in Nigeria as this would help to mobilize the semi-literate and illiterate

urban and rural dwellers especially women and girls to cope with the demands of the modern world.

The government, media and private individuals should establish community based media i.e. newspapers, radio and television stations which give women and other people the opportunity to get information on all issues. The absence of information leads to limited interaction, ignorance and manipulation.

Greater visibility should be given to women in the society as this will help shape gender realities and change mindsets by fostering the rights of women.

Conclusion

Nigerian women have great histories and bright futures some of them have been able to break through the glass ceiling in their chosen fields. However, to be able to move them to the next level of greatness they need to be mobilized by the media through the narratives woven around them. Recently the gender equality bill was thrown out of the Nigerian senate, little or no publicity was given to this unfair act, this shows the imbalance in the coverage of media issues which we have been asking the media to change. It is pertinent to note that with these great memories and narratives of Nigerian women, it can be argued that the projected future holds great potentials for them. However, these potential cannot be achieved if the media do not partner with the women to empower and project them.

The media have to be more focused on issues with affect women. They endeavor to create programmes which can empower women, socially, politically and economically. While doing this they must not forget the women at the grassroots who also need their stories to be heard and told. There are still several issues militating against women in Nigeria one of the key ones is education. Many women in Nigeria especially those at the grassroots still lack basic education and education is a key factor of empowerment. The media should take it upon themselves to lead a campaign for the education of women and girls in our society. Inadequate education creates the problem of low income generation. The media should help in the development of income generation skills in women so that they can be empowered economically. Politically there is still much to be desired for women as they are not well represented in leadership though give massive support during elections.

Presently, it appears that the media is working in favor of the nation's minority elite class and the larger majority who are females who dwell in the rural areas benefit very little from the media. The empowerment of women translates to national development as empowerment of women helps to boost the economy. The Nigerian media would be said to have failed if they cannot mobilize their citizens to national development.

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