

# Poverty, Media and Gender in Nigeria

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Poverty is a multi-faceted condition. It has many dimensions, among them poor access to public services and infrastructure, unsanitary environmental surroundings, illiteracy and ignorance, poor health, insecurity, voicelessness and social exclusion, as well as low levels of household income and food insecurity. These features, which are part of the social reality of the poor in Nigeria, tend to be mutually reinforcing, trapping the poor in a vicious cycle.<sup>1</sup>

In most countries of the world, women represent more than half the population. It is documented that they perform the lowest paid activities and are concentrated in the low-end jobs and occupations.<sup>2</sup> McClintock [1996] writes that women do two thirds of the world's work, earn 10% of the world's income and own less than 1% of the world's property<sup>3</sup>. In a country like Nigeria, culture and religion help to keep women in the chains of poverty, silencing and excluding them and allowing men to take the lion's share of resources.

The media in Nigeria seem to maintain the status quo through excluding women, giving them little voice, demeaning them through various forms of stereotypes and increasing their vulnerability. In these ways they contribute in trapping women in the vicious cycle of poverty. Yet it is vital that this cycle is broken, for the liberation of women as Roach suggests would imply the liberation of a host of other poor.<sup>4</sup> Referring to communication, Roach argues that adopting and accepting women's values will change our culture of silence.

This culture of silence needs to be addressed in Nigerian media as poverty and its concomitants seem gradually to disappear in media reports, obliterated by stories about the rich, the affluent, top government officials, heads of government and their relations. Ordinary Nigerians, which include the bulk of Nigerian women, are not key players in the media. Issues concerning this majority are simply glossed over.

Nigerian media characteristically contain empty words such as 'Government has been advised to provide rural community with good drinking water to eradicate guinea worms'; 'A former Head of State has called for an improvement in the life for rural dwellers'; 'The Head of the Civil Service has said that structures are being put in place that will generate job opportunities and fight poverty'. These sound hollow because they talk around rather than engage with poverty. Often times, who said what becomes more important than what was said; the maker of the news becomes more important than the news itself.

## **Nigerian women and access to the media**

First hand experience from recent research in Nigeria showed that Nigerian women's access to the media is impeded by a number of factors. In seeking a mere 15 women who read newspapers to participate in a research I conducted, I discovered that to many women living in the area, buying a newspaper was considered a luxury. Affordable access to the media is thus seen as a privilege rather than a right. In the face of concerns for economic gains by the media in various countries, what is the possible position of such women who cannot afford to 'buy' the 'commodity' of the media, within the daily media reports? They may remain on the periphery of the media agenda for the simple but vital reason that they are not deemed to have value as productive players in the economic globalisation.

The weak position of women in the household also means that men control the radio, when it is the only medium available, as is often the case. Even for television, Esan's ethnographic study of Nigerian women's viewing habit notes that a pecking order exists, with women on the lowest rung of the ladder. Men followed by children have priority in making decisions on what to watch.<sup>5</sup>

Women's access to the media is also impeded by cultural and family demands. Nigerian men could go into the pubs or friends' houses to watch television. Such freedom of movement may not be accepted for women especially in northern Nigeria where some of the women are put in purdah.<sup>6</sup> For other women who may not contend with purdah, time constraints resulting from heavy burden of work inside and outside the home affect their access to the media. Women often do feel guilty in their use of the media, because there are other pressing demands on their time.

The above scenario represents a crisis for communication rights as increasingly more women are, by virtue of their poverty and marginality, left out of the stream of things.

## **Nigerian women in the media – an infringement of their communication rights?**

Research about Nigerian women in the media has suggested how key myths and stereotypes are constantly reinforced.<sup>7</sup> Often cited is the absence of women as faces in newspapers.<sup>8</sup> These could be explained at various levels. First is that the ideology of development journalism which thrives in Nigeria reduces the media to government mouthpieces.<sup>9</sup> It legitimises the media's focus on government officials' activities. Since few women have government positions, their exclusion from the media is not surprising.

News values as currently applied in Nigeria thrive on prominence (who is involved). This further marginalises women and the poor. Women who make news do so as appendages of the men in power. The vicarious recognition of these women merely contributes to the glory of the men behind them.

When women make news in their own capacity, they are often portrayed as victims or criminals. Since news reports often lack context and are presented in snatches, they sometimes encourage negative and degrading images of women. This scenario is played out quite strongly in coverage of human trafficking by Nigerian media.

Trafficking in women and children is a transnational organised crime, which seems to have defied the police, immigration authority and the Nigerian government. Women rights watch,<sup>10</sup> a Nigerian non-governmental organisation reports the various tortures that victims (especially girls) go through: from forced sex slavery, insanity to murder. The traffickers further harass the girls' families in Nigeria, conspiracy of fear and silence heightening the difficulty in checking the crime.

But it is the victims rather than the traffickers who are more often penalised by the media. When these girls are deported from their destination country, they are further traumatised through the sensationalisation of the issue in the Nigerian media. They are displayed on national television and in the daily newspapers. The victims become the criminals. In practice, those involved in the trafficking of children and women have rarely been apprehended and successfully prosecuted.<sup>11</sup>

### **Challenging media representation – the role of women groups in Nigeria <sup>12</sup>**

Many women groups have been formed in Nigeria, and mostly concern themselves with challenging media and cultural practices that are inimical to Nigerian women.<sup>13</sup> They insist on a fundamental transformation of gender relations in Nigerian society. To work toward this, they use a multimedia approach to campaign, educate, lobby, and to question the representation of women in the Nigerian society.

Some of these women's groups have sponsored the production and airing of jingles in English and indigenous languages with special focus on successful women in traditionally male-dominated professions. This challenges the dominant images of women's domesticity. Many too have sponsored campaign messages against gender violence. In the celebrated cases of Safiya Hussein and Amina Lawal, the women to have been stoned to death accused of adultery by the Sharia courts in northern Nigeria, women's groups helped make them known in the international arena and instigated a global debate.

Most of the groups have had to content themselves with creating programmes for radio and TV rather than owning the media themselves due to the high financial standards set by the National Broadcasting Cooperation (NBC) to run a broadcast medium. Radio and television are mostly in public hands, but deregulation of broadcasting in 1992, saw the establishment of about nine private stations. In 1997 the NBC approved astronomical new television and radio licences rates of over \$20,000.<sup>14</sup> As usual and not surprisingly women are edged out of participation because of the high cost involved. To date men heavily dominate ownership of private radios and televisions in Nigeria.

### **Enhancing the communication rights of Nigerian women**

We must not fail to observe the interrelatedness of culture and the continued impoverishment (both financial poverty and poor access to resources) of women in Nigeria. There is little way communication rights would be enhanced without a radical transformation of the institutional structures and cultural practices in a society that exclude women. The women's groups earlier mentioned address these issues but it is hardly a task for them alone. Their efforts seem, however, to have inspired more concerned bodies to pursue the task.

In December 2002, the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) organised training for media practitioners and local leaders on poverty eradication in Nigeria. In recognising that poverty in Nigeria is deep, widespread and multifaceted, with women being more affected than men, the workshop called on media practitioners among other things to 'analyse policies and sift gender redistributive policies that recognise the contexts of the beneficiaries'.<sup>15</sup> This suggestion recognises the gender matrix through which women and men negotiate resources.

In the same line I also suggest revisiting the general media code of ethics and practice for journalists in Nigeria to include a stipulation on gender fair reporting. This would inspire conscious efforts by journalists to include not only more and diverse stories on women, but also to report them in a gender sensitive manner. This moves towards breaking the cycle of negative and stereotype images of women in the media. Further, including more women in media representations will imply including more of the poor and giving them greater access to communication.

Closely related to a review of the code of ethics is the need for the redefinition of news values. Prevalent news values privilege who over what. News needs to bring the main 'actors' at the centre – the ordinary people, the real people, the community, rather than concentrating on the top and talking down to the bottom. Nigerian journalists need seminars and retraining to refocus this trend.

Very crucial also is the need to target the intellectual platform on which many gender ideologies are fashioned. Therefore, we need to target the curriculum of universities in Nigeria. Courses on Gender and the Society included in General Studies curricula could go a long way to building much-needed awareness about gender parity. Academic institutions produce knowledge and reproduce the ideological make up of any society. Through educating and training future elites of every society – their intellectual produce has far reaching impacts on the whole society.

Obviously, these suggestions may not be achieved without the Nigerian government playing a key role. At present, the Nigerian government seems to adopt a passive position towards the infringement of women's rights. Nigerian constitution is explicit that there should be no discrimination on account of sex, religion, ethnicity, etc. Yet, gender discriminatory practices are constantly reinforced in Nigerian societies and the government seems incapable of doing anything.

Government needs to make the media accessible to more people. There is the need for the restructuring of ownership patterns of the media especially the broadcast media. Government should evolve and implement programmes and strategies to actually support ownership of media by communities and interested bodies. One way of doing this is to revisit the astronomically high broadcasting fee. Public media should also be strengthened through community and people oriented rather than individually oriented programmes.

One thing is clear: the presence of Nigerian women in the media is inhibited by the major key players – journalists, media owners, governmental bodies – who are still non-gender sensitised. Therefore, lobbying and sensitising them on gender issues must continue. Nigerian media key players should realise that the exclusion of women implies an exclusion of the majority of Nigerians who are trapped in a cycle of poverty. n

## Notes

1 Hodges, A (ed) (2001). Children's and Women's Rights in Nigeria: a wake-up call Situation Assessment and Analysis 2001, Nigeria: National Planning Commission, Abuja and UNICEF, p. 19.

2 See for examples Alan, G. (1994). 'Third World Cities: Poverty, gender roles and environment during the time of restructuring' *Urban Studies*, vol. 31 Issue 4/5, 605 – 634; Ashraf, J. and Ashraf, B. (1993) 'Estimating the gender wage gap in Rawalpindi City', *Journal of Development studies*, 29, 365 – 376.

3 McClintock, A. (1996). 'The angel of progress: pitfalls of the term 'postcolonial', In Barker, F. et al, (eds.) *Colonial Discourse/Postcolonial Theory*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press. p. 253 –266.

4 Roach, C. (1995). 'Women and Communication Technology: what are the issues' In Lee, P. (ed) *The Democratization of Communication*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, p. 140.

5 Esan, O. (1993). *Receiving Television Messages: An Ethnographic study of women watching television in Nigerian context*, PhD Dissertation, University of Glasgow.

6 Also known as Kulle in Hausa, is a religious practice in Islam of secluding women from the sight of men. This is practiced in Nigeria, mostly in the Northern states and is believed to limit women's right to access and participation.

7 See for example Imam, A. (1992). *Ideology, women and the mass media: a case study in Kano, Nigeria*. In: A. Imam et al. (eds) *Women and the mass media in Africa*. Occasional paper series No. 6. Dakar, AFARD-AAWORD. p. 39 – 104.

8 See Chude, C. (2003). *Portrayal of women in Nigeria news magazines*. Unpublished MSc. thesis, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka, Nigeria.

9 Tettey, W.J (2001). 'The Media and Democratization in Africa', *Media, Culture and Society* vol 23, number 1, 5 – 31.

10. See <http://www.rufarm.kabissa.org/pressrelease/yearendreview.htm> [Accessed 2 January 2005]

11 Hodges 2001, p. 212.

12 I use Women groups in this paper to refer to organisations that concern themselves with the

rights of women. It does not necessarily imply that membership is entirely female, or that such an organisation is necessarily a nominal society.

13 For examples Women in Nigeria (WIN), Civil resource and Documentation Center (CIRDDOC), Nigeria; Women's Right Watch Nigeria, Women Farmers Advancement Network, Nigeria (WOFAN), Women's Consortium of Nigeria (WOCON).

14 National Broadcasting Commission (1997) This is NBC, Nigeria: National Broadcasting Commission.

15 See <http://tinyurl.com/9pdcv> [Accessed 10 December 2002].

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