

# **GENDER AND COMMUNICATION IN NIGERIA: IS THIS THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY?**

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## **1. BACKGROUND**

Gender communication is intercultural communication. In every society, there are sufficient differences in the distinct behaviour patterns of men and women to qualify them as belonging to two different cultures/subcultures. As Mulvaney (1994:3) points out, "Literature on intercultural communication often includes discussions of subcultures." Citing Porter and Samovar (1991), she explains a subculture as "a racial, ethnic, regional, economic or social community exhibiting characteristic patterns of behaviour sufficient to distinguish it from others within an embracing culture or society." From all indications, men and women belong to two such different social communities or categories.

In male-dominated societies, women's subordination and men's dominance are so pronounced that their subcultures are literally separated by a world of difference. One such society is Nigeria.

## **2. GENDER RELATIONS IN NIGERIA: AN OVERVIEW**

Gender relations in Nigeria are characterized by a lot of imbalance, to the disadvantage of women. This is the twenty-first century, yet tradition, culture, religion and other factors have continued to widen the disparity between Nigerian men and women, by keeping women in a subordinate position to men. The larger society and the male subculture still see women and their aspirations as subordinate, resulting in a situation in which the marginalization, trivialization and stereotyping of women are glaring aspects of Nigerian life. Ojiakor (1997) effectively captures the master-servant relationship between the sexes when she says, "The Nigerian men have always believed

that Nigeria belongs to them and women are at best the rent-paying tenants. Over the centuries, women have struggled to say no to this misconception.”

The end of this struggle is apparently not in sight, as culture and tradition continue to exert overbearing influences on Nigerian women and deny them their fundamental human rights. A good illustration is the negative effects of *sharia* and customary laws on women. In northern Nigeria where *sharia* is practiced, this Islamic legal code is taking its toll on women. The case of Safiya, a Moslem woman who was convicted of adultery and sentenced to death by stoning, is still very fresh in the memories of Nigerians and, indeed, the rest of the world. In her report of Safiya’s acquittal by an appeal court, Ikokwu (2002:13) draws attention not only to the gross discrimination against women under this legal system but also to the incongruity of such a system operating in a democratic society in the twenty-first century:

It is interesting to note that the man who Safiya claimed was responsible for the pregnancy was set free. According to Islamic pundits, under the Islamic law as practiced in northern Nigeria, pregnancy outside marriage is sufficient evidence to convict a woman. In contrast, four eyewitnesses are required for a man to be found guilty of adultery. The man was therefore set free because she could not come up with four witnesses required as evidence against the man. ... Safiya’s case is such that elicited reactions from Nigerians and various individuals and organisations across the globe. A lot of people were of the view that the punishment passed on her is such a harsh one that should not be allowed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. ... On the international scene, the European parliament described the sentence on Safiya as “inhuman, barbaric and cruel punishment.” ... The parliament also harped on the need for all democracies to respect international human rights. [Emphasis added].

The equivalent of *sharia* in non-Islamic parts of Nigeria is customary law, which also operates to the great disadvantage of women. Writing about the all-embracing influence of customary law on the majority of Nigerians, Nwankwo (2001:4) says, “Customary law governs the life of the majority of the people. Its effect is rooted in the customs, culture and tradition of the various communities from ancient times. Customary law is

conservative and significantly not given to easy change.” The effects of this law are particularly dehumanizing for women.

### **3. THE NIGERIAN WOMAN: A PROFILE**

In spite of being disadvantaged by gender, a number of Nigerian women, particularly from the Igbo and Yoruba ethnic groups, have made their marks in different fields. Nevertheless, the profile of the Nigerian woman shows her continuing disadvantaged position in comparison to her male counterpart. A majority of them are afflicted by **poverty**, the causes of which could be traced to gender discrimination. One major cause of poverty among women is their low access to credit and income-earning opportunities, as well as their marginalization from major economic activities. Referring to this economic disempowerment of Nigerian women, Okoye (2000:209) shows how, in comparison to men, women are worse hit as a result of their very limited involvement in economic activities in relation to their male counterparts.

Women are equally economically disadvantaged and impoverished in terms of ownership of the means of production such as land. In all but a handful of ethnic groups in the country, tradition has decreed that the Nigerian woman cannot own or inherit land. Writing about this unfortunate situation, Nwankwo (2001:1) explains, “Traditionally, women do not own land and therefore cannot inherit land either from their fathers or husbands.”

The Nigerian woman’s economic powerlessness is also reflected in her subordination not only to her husband but also to her own male children. If she outlives her husband, she is debarred by culture and tradition from assuming the headship of the family and has no right to administer the estate of her late husband, especially where there is an *Okpala* or first-born son (among the Igbo). Here, “A woman is not allowed to inherit her husband’s estate. Instead, she is inherited along with the estate by another male in the family. ...Customary law has denied the female sex every right of inheritance, her contribution to the acquisition of the estate notwithstanding” (Nwankwo, 2001:1,4).

Most Nigerian women are also afflicted with **illiteracy**, as poverty and illiteracy often go together. Globally, most illiterate women are poor rural dwellers and millions of such women are living in abject poverty all over the developing world, most of them in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. The worst hit is Africa where, by the last decade of the twentieth century, two out of three adult rural women were illiterate. The situation has not changed much. As Stromquist (1990) explains, the very high illiteracy rates among rural women in the developing countries is attributable to the very heavy arduous task which women perform to ensure family subsistence – a situation which places poor rural women in inescapable domestic servitude and allows them little or no time to acquire formal education. The fate of such women and even the fate of their daughters are described thus by Stromquist:

The existence of intensive domestic work, coupled with conflictual family dynamics, renders literacy an unattainable dream for a large number of women and even a dream for some of their children, particularly their daughters who early in life tend to be assigned the same domestic roles their mothers perform.

This situation is very much applicable to Nigerian women.

The Nigerian woman is also characterized by **low self-esteem** because the society has continued to regard her as unimportant and inferior to her male counterpart. Right from the beginning of life, society prefers the boy child to the girl child. All through her growing-up years, the girl child is socialized to accept her subordinate position even when it is well known that Liberal Feminist Theory is correct in its argument that boys and girls are born with equivalent potentials that could be fully realized, given the proper and conducive environment. However, cultural practices often deny the girl child this type of environment through child-rearing practices that put her in a disadvantaged position. CIRDDOC (2001:1) makes this point about the role of nurture:

Gender refers to a system of roles and relationships between women and men that are determined not biologically but by the social, political and economic context. Gender can equally be seen as the process by which individuals who are born into biological categories of male and female become the social categories of men and women through the acquisition of locally defined attributes of masculinity and femininity. ... beyond

biological differences, all other differences between men and women are socially constructed and have no logical relationships with their biological compositions.

From this disadvantaged beginning, the Nigerian girl child's journey into adult life becomes one long battle against harmful traditional and cultural practices that threaten her life and put her down generally. In some parts of Nigeria, harmful traditional practices that dehumanize women still include:

- ?? Female genital mutilation to control her sexuality.
- ?? Disproportionate emphasis on marriage as the only acceptable status for a woman. This undue emphasis, particularly in Igbo society, puts enormous psychological pressure on women. From an early age, a woman begins to worry about 'finding a husband', a 'task' she is constantly told is a do-or-die affair because 'men are scarce'. Consequently, not being married becomes a stigma which most women become desperate to escape from as they get older. Indeed, so constraining is society's emphasis on marriage for the female gender, that an unmarried mother, a divorcee or spinster is a monstrosity (Ojiakor, 1997:219).
- ?? Child marriage – a reflection of society's emphasis on the 'virtue' of virginity for women at marriage – in which little girls are married off to men who most times are old enough to be their fathers. The disparity in age ensures that the wife has little or no power of decision-making in the marriage.
- ?? Polygamy which subjects women to harrowing psychological trauma and often brings out the worst in their character, in the face of the vicious competition that characterizes most polygamous households.
- ?? All manner of violence comprising battery and assault of women by husbands and other male partners; sexual violence including rape even by husbands. Wife beating is accepted by Nigerian culture as a legitimate instrument of authority by a husband over his wife. Citing Chukukere (1992), Ojiakor situates this dehumanization of women within the overall power relationships in marriage:

Indeed, no matter the level of education or enlightenment, relation (sic) between husband and wife is a power-based one, where the woman expects orders and gives in return total obedience. The man's prerogative to command his wife include (sic) beating her physically and denying her sexual rights.

?? Dehumanizing widowhood practices in the event of a woman outliving her husband. "These include the physical and emotional torture which a woman is subjected to, ranging from the violent shaving of her hair to making her drink the water used to bathe the corpse of her husband [to prove she has no hand in his death]" (CIRDDOC, 2002:8).

5. In the area of **politics**, the plight of Nigerian women is equally pathetic. Although women make up at least half the electorate in Nigeria, their presence in policy/decision-making positions is very low. Again, a number of factors militate against their effective participation in democratic politics. These factors, many of which have their roots in women's subordinate position in society, include: illiteracy, poverty, low self-esteem, ignorance, lack of confidence in other women, violent and non-conducive political environment (money politics, intimidation and violence), cultural stereotypes, religious barriers, high registration fees (which most women cannot afford), harmful traditional practices etc. Above all, the chauvinistic tendencies of the male rulers of the land have over the years denied women any meaningful participation in politics. For instance, all through the years when Nigeria was under military rule and people in positions of political power were appointed rather than elected, not a single woman was appointed as governor of the many states in the country or a member of the highest policy-making body (the Armed Forces Ruling Council). What Mba (1982:304) said several years ago about the political marginalization of Nigerian women, is still very much applicable:

Nigerian women must come to recognize that politics determines the allocation of all resources in the society, and that their alienation from politics means that their special interest will continue to be neglected.

#### **4. GENDER AND COMMUNICATION IN NIGERIA**

Intercultural communication takes place "whenever a message produced in one culture must be processed in another" (Porter and Samovar, 1991). In Nigeria, men produce an

overwhelming majority of the messages in the mass media. At the turn of the century, a staggering 95% of the journalists reporting the news in the country's radio, television and newspapers were male (GMMP 2000). However, men's dominance in news reporting is not peculiar to Nigeria. Consider the data from the Global Media Monitoring Project 2000 for all regions of the world (Table 1). GMMP 2000 took place in on February 1, 2000 in 71 countries in all regions of the world.

Table 1: Gender of TV, Radio and Newspaper Reporters by Region

Region	% Female	% Male	Total No. Of Reporters
Africa	24	76	733
Asia	31	69	2019
Caribbean	39	61	184
Europe	34	66	1361
Latin America	27	73	834
Middle East	34	66	256
North America	36	64	733
Oceania	43	57	108
Total	31	69	6,229

#### 4.1 Women's Continuing Invisibility in Nigeria's News Media

Data from the monitoring of Nigeria's print media in Year 2002 show that this situation has hardly changed. An analysis of the news content of five national newspapers and four newsmagazines indicates that women are still very invisible in the country's news media (Chude, Okonkwo, and Okunna, 2002).\* The Nigerian print media industry is a vibrant one. The independent press, in particular, has flourished as the advent of democracy has eliminated many of the restraints that afflicted the press under successive military governments in the country. National newspapers and newsmagazines have therefore become a force to be reckoned with.

*Newswatch*, *TELL*, *The News* and *The Week* are authoritative Nigerian newsmagazines. Four issues of each magazine published in January and February 2002 were content-analyzed, using the GMMP 2000 media monitoring format. A purposeful decision was made to limit the study to the lead stories as featured on the cover of the magazines. A

total of 42 cover stories were studied in terms of text and pictures to ascertain women's participation in the news as news subjects and journalists. Similarly, ten weekday issues of each of the following newspapers, published in May 2002, were used for the study: *The Guardian*, *Post Express*, *Champion*, *Vanguard* and *Daily Times*. A total of 566 stories in the major news pages of the newspapers were analyzed over a two-week period.

The findings show that the packaging of news is still 'men's work' in Nigeria. Of the 101 reporters whose bylines appear in the 42 newsmagazine stories, 92 (91%) were male while a very low 9% were female. Nevertheless, as low as this figure is, it represents a slight improvement on the GMMP 2000 figure of 5% participation of women as news reporters in Nigeria's mass media.

In terms of people in the news, women are equally invisible, as the findings show a very low participation of women in news making. The fact that women make up at least 50% of Nigeria's population is not reflected in the number of women who make news in the mass media. In newsmagazines, a disproportionate 86% of people in the news are male, while women accounted for a mere 14%: 675 people appeared in the 42 new stories, 581 of them men. Women's invisibility in the news is also reflected in newspaper coverage. Only 93 (16%) of the 566 news stories involve women, and only 53 of these have women as their central focus.

In addition to not being given prominence in terms of frequency of appearance, women are also denied prominence in being quoted and seen in photographs. A total of 61 photographs appear on the covers of the newsmagazines used in this study; a mere 10% or 6 photographs are of women. Similarly, out of the 263 photos which accompany the full news reports, only 30 (11%) are photos of women. The situation is the same in newspapers where women are hardly quoted and their photographs are rarely used in news stories.

## **4.2 Women in Advertising**

Not only are women under-represented in the news media, their images in media content leave much to be desired. In advertising, women are still portrayed in traditional roles that reinforce gender stereotypes; their photographs are also used as mere decorations in advertisements. In the 5 newspapers under study, out of the 93 product advertisements that used photos of women, 33 (35%) showed women in domestic settings while 31 (33%) used women's photos in the background for mere decoration.

## **4.3 Women in Home Video Films**

The home video industry in Nigeria is another institution that has continued to put women down. The growth of the Nigerian video film industry is astounding: new films are released into the market at a very rapid rate and the films reach a very large audience of adults, youths and children.

As the twentieth century ended, research evidence showed that Nigerian home video films were filled with negative and stereotyped images of women (Okunna, 2000). Women were portrayed as wayward & of low morality, easily lured by material things, subservient to men, causes of family problems, fit for domestic rather than professional & career roles, lazy & dependent on men, etc. As video films showed women as scheming, vicious, morally-depraved creatures, Nigerian women became dismayed by the havoc being caused by video films through their reinforcement of the damaging negative images of women that were already prevalent in the wider society (Ezeigbo, 1996).

These misgivings were justified. Research evidence indicated that the negative images of women in video films were having cultivation effects on young people, particularly girls, some of whom said that the films made them feel ashamed that they were female and made them lose confidence in themselves and in fellow women (Okunna, 2000; 1996).

A look at Nigerian video films in Year 2002 shows that it is apparently 'business as usual' as far as their representation of women is concerned. Their preoccupation is still

to focus on such themes as women's quest for husbands, childlessness, polygamy, materialism etc to bring out the worst in women who are portrayed in extremely negative ways in the exploration of these traditional themes. A quick look at three very recent video films (2002) will illustrate this problem.

1. *"Confidence"*: In this film, the central female character is under intense pressure from her family to 'find a husband'. Her continued spinsterhood unleashes a vicious hatred against her by her own mother. Eventually, all ends well when the curse of spinsterhood (placed on her by her uncle) is broken; she gets married and the family is reunited again.

2. *"Gone Forever"*: Explores the theme of childlessness. Hated and vilified by her husband's family for her 'failure' to bear a child, the major female character encourages her husband to take a second wife, thus providing the filmmaker with the opportunity to portray women as vicious competitors in the dehumanizing environment which polygamy could create.

3. *"Tears and Sorrows"*: A wealthy man's wife desires an adulterous relationship with her husband's young nephew who is living with her household. The young man's rejection of her advances unleashes her murderous hatred towards him. With poison procured from a 'native doctor', she eventually murders him, just as he is about to receive a large inheritance from her husband whom he has served faithfully for many years in the family business.

### **Teaching Children About Women - Formally**

Gender bias is also a problem in teaching texts for Nigerian children. As the twentieth century ended, there was research evidence to show that Nigerian children were being taught from an early age to see women as unimportant and inferior to men: primary school textbooks for teaching core subjects like Mathematics and English Language were characterized by sexism/stereotyped portrayal of women. Okoye (1994) content-analyzed English Language textbooks published by four reputable academic publishers in Nigeria (Longman, Heinemann, Macmillan and University Press), and found that sexism manifested in the following ways:

- ?? Omission – mentioning boys more than girls in texts, and using more boys than girls in illustrations.
- ?? Stereotyped activities and family roles.
- ?? Non-representation ‘of women in important and tough occupations’ which can only be done by the ‘strong, brave and intelligent’ = men!

Several years after this study, in the twenty-first century, not much has changed in what textbooks teach Nigerian children about women. Just one illustration will do. A 31-page pamphlet published in Year 2001 and titled *Career Guidance for Children: Different Trades & Professions* lists 31 trades and professions [here reproduced verbatim], fully illustrated with sketches: “Accountant, Architect, Armed Forces, Artist, Barber, Carpenter, Dentist, Doctor, Driver, Engineer, Farmer, Footballing, Geologist, Journalist, Lawyer, Mechanic, Mason, Musician, Nurse, Painter, Pharmacist, Photographer, Police, Priest, Printer, Publisher, Surveyor, Tailor, Teacher, Trader, Vulcaniser.” Only 2 of these occupations have sketches of women – nurse and teacher!!

### **CONCLUSION: WHAT IS TO BE DONE?**

An examination of gender and communication in Nigeria generates a lot of misgivings and despondency about the possibility of effecting meaningful change in media representation of women, as the media continue their ‘symbolic annihilation’ of women. Looking at what has been achieved in other countries, there is a tendency to despair at the slow pace of change in Nigeria. While other countries have passed the stage of “monolithic stereotyping of the type described in content studies of the 1970s and 1980s ... [and] the period of ‘total blacking out’ of women” (Gallagher, 2001: 5), Nigeria appears not to have progressed much beyond this stage. Similarly, while other societies are increasingly accepting that women’s rights are human rights, the Nigerian society is still largely content with retaining cultural and religious practices that dehumanize women and deny them their fundamental human rights. And this is where the problem lies.

Although there is an urgent need to improve the representation of women in the media by increasing their visibility as journalists and people in the news, as well as by eliminating sexism in media content, the problem is more deep-rooted than this. From

every indication, the solution to the problem of gender and communication in Nigeria lies with adopting more 'radical' strategies in addition to the provision of quantitative data to show women's unequal representation in the media. Two of such up-and-coming strategies are briefly looked at here.

1. As Gallagher (2001:8) has convincingly argued,

What it actually requires is a wide-scale social and political transformation, in which women's rights – and women's right to communicate – are truly understood, respected and implemented both in society at large and by the media.

The Nigerian society is indeed in dire need of such wide-scale social transformation. Nigerian women are gradually beginning to recognize this need. They are also recognizing that the battle to free themselves from the negative traditional and cultural practices that subjugate them should not be left to policy intervention by the rulers of the land, who are predominantly male. Consequently, a good number of women-inspired NGOs are springing up in different parts of the country to crusade for women's rights. For instance, in the eastern part of the country where tradition and culture have continued to subordinate the Igbo woman, one active NGO based in Enugu is Civil Resource Development and Documentation Centre (CIRDDOC) which has as its vision: "A society where equality of rights and opportunities exist. A world where all women enjoy their human rights."

The work of such NGOs is very crucial. Because there are a number of them, there is a need for them to pull in the same direction – and this is why networking should form an integral part of their activities. There could be the tendency to work at cross purposes in the competition for scarce funding from donor agencies.

2. Efforts are also being made to target Nigerian journalism schools for changes in curriculum to include gender studies aimed at producing gender-sensitive journalists. One such course on "Gender Issues in Mass Communication" has been commenced at the postgraduate level at Nnamdi Azikiwe University in Awka. Media monitoring is a very strong component of this course. So far, a majority of the students taking this

Masters level course are male. Their views and interpretations of gender relations in society and the media have generated lively debates during lectures and provided fresh insights into the problem. Most of the students are also working journalists whose acquisition of a higher degree would quicken their entry into policy-making positions in the media. If such people could become more gender-sensitive through education/re-training, it would enhance the chances of their media organizations improving the representation of women in their media.

The Nigerian woman requires all the help she can get to free her from the forces that subjugate her in the wider society and in the media of mass communication, which are powerful instruments for creating and reinforcing images of reality. Any groups or individuals who are concerned enough to fight for improvement of the lot of women, should themselves be encouraged nationally and internationally.

#### **NOTE**

\* The data on Nigerian newsmagazines and newspapers, as used in this paper, were gathered by Cynthia Chude and Beatrice Okonkwo (M.Sc students of Mass Communication at Nnamdi Azikiwe University) under my supervision.

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