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The Image of Women and the Role of the Media in a New Political Culture in Nigeria*

by Molara Ogundipe-Leslie**

Abstract

This article surveys how the mass media in Nigeria portray women and treat issues affecting them. It begins by looking at the number and status of women in Nigerian media institutions which, it argues, reflects 'the structural oppression of women' and their 'subordination in society'. It proceeds to argue that the mass media portray women and issues affecting them in a manner that is predominately negative and 'special' as though women were not part of 'normal' society. This has constituted overt or covert mental oppression of women. It calls on women in the media to spearhead the struggle for change away from the stereotype treatment of women by the mass media, and on the media themselves to consciously eliminate such stereotype images of women in the light of the new political and social culture in Nigeria.

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L'Image de la Femme et le Rôle des Médias dans la Nouvelle Culture Politique au Nigéria.

Résumé

Cet article passe en revue la façon dont les masses médias au Nigéria traitent les femmes et toutes les questions qui les concernent. Il commence par considérer le nombre et le statut des femmes dans les institutions des médias nigériens, qui, d'après l'article reflète l'oppression structurelle des femmes et leur subordination dans la société. L'article poursuit en faisant remarquer que les masses médias décrivent les femmes et les problèmes qui les affectent d'une manière principalement négative et "spéciale", comme si les femmes ne faisaient pas partie normale de la société. Ceci constitue une oppression mentale des femmes à la fois évidente et déguisée.

L'article en appelle aux femmes dans les médias de mener la lutte pour le changement du traitement des femmes dans les masses médias, et défie les médias eux-mêmes de consciencieusement éclipser de telles images stéréotypées à la lumière de la nouvelle culture sociale et politique du Nigéria.

Introduction

As this is a period of using popular music and thinking for mass mobilization by MAMSER, it is most apropos to use a thought kernel from the great Bob Marley — a thought which has great political (even social and personal) significance if we care to ruminate on it — 'telling the children the truth'. We know that 'the children' in Rasta language means 'the people, the masses, the wretched of the earth'. Tell them the truth — the truth of their political realities, how they came to be so poor, what made them so poor and how they came to be 'suffering and smiling' to quote our great Fela.

This is what all of us, citizens and lovers of Nigeria want the press to do. Tell us the truth; tell the people the truth without the masks and taints of personal or corporate prejudice and interests. The need to tell the truth is nowhere keener than in the reporting of women's conditions, experiences and interests.

The State of the Media and Women

The media in Nigeria has not given women the space they need either structurally within media administration or psychologically in the representation of women's images. Despite the early presence of women like Theresa Ogunbiyi, Lara Morel, etc. in the history of Nigerian media, despite their courage, their sophistication and intelligence, such women still found themselves shunted on to women's pages.

Therese Nweke (1989), says that a look at the statistics in the media shows that there is no woman in the approximately 100 chief executives of broadcasting stations which constitute the top management. There were only three female editors and one acting editor among the 300 journalists of the *Daily Times*, a quarter of whom are women. There are only 8 out of 127 of (the News Agency of Nigeria, NAN) journalists, none of whom occupies a senior management position after four years of the inception of NAN. Only one woman sits on the ten-member board of directors of the agency. In the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN), despite women being 35 per cent of the total workforce, of the six assistant directors in the senior management cadre, only one is a woman.

In the print media, the story is not much different though we now have two or three very visible women in top management positions. Still, what is their proportion, thinking statistically? Women are usually not seen as news editors, chief sub-editors or editors. Only the very rare management will consider women to these posts and more likely in positions of assistantship. Yet it is the position of news editor, chief sub-editor and editor which can help and succeed in the reflection and projection of

women's media, very importantly because news stories must pass through these officers to get to the masses, the people, 'the children'. A sexist news editor has the power to simply throw away the report, slant or suppress the news.

The structural oppression of women is one of the root causes of women's subordination in society. Women are constantly excluded from any, or effective, participation because they are absent from senior management positions and policy-making bodies. Conceiving of women in supportive and service roles only breeds structural asymmetry which then affects the art or science of government of the country, i.e. the policies of the society.

It is in recognition of the basic urgency of correcting structural discriminations that the U.N. General Assembly adopted, in 1979, a resolution approving the draft convention on discrimination against women. The articles of the draft include measures to be taken by member-nations to eliminate discrimination in various areas including political and public life; special attention was given to the rights of rural women and the elimination of stereotypes about women.

In 'The Forward-Looking Strategies' for the integration of women compiled at the Nairobi U.N. Women's Decade Conference of 1985, a special section is devoted to the role of communications in the struggle for the upliftment of women world-wide. Needless to say, the power of the media to make and unmake the image of women, to hasten or retard the progress of women in society cannot be denied or underestimated.

Mental Oppression

The power of the media over minds argues that the media needs to act responsibly in reporting women's issues, particularly now in the transition programme period when there is an undeniable national movement of women's awareness and a political period to commence soon in the second quarter.

At the moment, the press has created an atmosphere about women which is not exactly positive. The press seems to be reluctant to lend support to any attempt (superficial though they may be) to enhance the status of women (Sobowale 1989; Owens and Hunt 1985). The press will only be positive when glamorous and powerful women are involved and change has only been recent. The basic attitude to the women's movement is still disapproving.

The press pays much attention to negative issues about women. It is as if the news for women were 'the ugly, the unusual, the odd, the negative, the conflictual' and the disastrous.

The extent to which cases of apprehended female criminals are reported and sensationalized are unprecedented in the history of media activity (WIN 1985). More sympathetic media would want to get to the

bottom of issues: how do the women get involved? What is the nature of their structural oppression here? Are they their own persons or agents? How can we protect such abused and misled women? Needless to say, our fearless press does not write on or expose either the root causes or the barons of the crime world in Nigeria.

The psychology behind such dehumanization of women through sensationalism, in my view, is that media practitioners decide from their own love of their mothers that women are saints, holy and perfect. The mother is, after all, the only female type (not the wife) who is respected and divinized in African culture. Once a woman falls from this grace of 'the mother as the perfect woman', the journalists go at her with virulence for disappointing them and shattering their self-created icon. They make a straw woman and proceed to battle it. The truth of the matter is that women are neither saints nor devils; they are just human, capable of both good and evil. The question is: how does society contribute to their nature and behaviour?

Emphasis on the conflict among women characterizes reportage on women and their activities. An example is the election crisis of the NCWS in 1988. It is as if election crises are not politically or humanly permissible and expectable in a human through women's organization. It is as if the mace was not broken in 1965 in the Western House of Assembly; as if Constituent Assembly 'wise men' were not fighting like cats and dogs in 1979 and only recently at Abuja; as if women like any other group are not going to have disagreements and conflicts.

Any objective analysis would show the political and human issues which produced those crises while the tactics of the women at the meeting were no different from the tactics of the men of the first and second republics. Nigerian women are also, after all, Nigerians, influenced by the life around them, hence characterized by the behaviour patterns and values of their community. Who, in any case, created the image that women are saints anyway? Women may commit less embezzlement in offices, but they also disagree among themselves. Yet the reportage on women by media is hardly given a historical, sociological or scientific analysis. The reportage is often simply a cover for derision.

The volume of positive coverage accorded their achievements is not only smaller but limited to only prominent women particularly in Southern media. Our Fourth Estate which constantly accuses women's organizations of being elitist itself covers only elite women. One can, in fact, list the four or five women who are written about and interviewed *ad nauseam* in the Nigerian media. Is this laziness on the part of the media or a class attitude which makes the media interest themselves only in what the elite and the government are doing. What is the rural person (man or woman) doing? Why is the rural person never covered, talked about or with, interviewed and brought into our national life? Why are their opinions on national issues never reflected? Why does the press reflect the

poor (Bob Marley's 'children') as criminals, fools, and psychotics in the tradition of the class-ridden British press which was the mother (or father?) of the Nigerian press?

Abounding in Nigeria are stereotypes of women who are promoted by the media. Contrary to women's contributions to production like farming, fishing, construction work and commerce; despite their proven mental abilities in school, women are still generally considered weak, irrational, passive and inferior and therefore not to be trusted in positions of authority. If Bola Ige and Richard Akinjide were women leaders who lost their tempers on TV as these gentlemen did in 1979, they would have been used to discredit women. If a woman leader wept as freely as Sam Mbakwe, she would certainly be out of office. Stereotypes of women are beginning to affect the consideration of women in the politics of the coming political phase.

Women in Politics

A new political culture must be created which must see women's participation as normal, or just modern, since women's participation is in consonance with our traditional cultures and village organizations where the dual stratification of roles (political and social) was quite frequent (Okonjo 1988). Most village communities cannot think of organizing without consulting or including the women, while in our modern and Westernized planning and nation-building, we can.

The stereotypes which are beginning to affect the conception of women as political leaders and activists include the false assumptions that women cannot stand the rigours of politics, campaigns, the machinations and physical violence. Women who traditionally and still are facing the rigours of agricultural production, the hurly-burly of the market place, and the customs posts and borders including the hardships of poverty, are believed to be incapable of facing the rigours of politics. Can this be honest? Such a disqualifying assumption is being made when women tour and participate in the violence of campaigns as entertainers, as entourage members of the women's wings of the parties, or as loyal wives of male candidates. Why can they not be candidates themselves? The issue is for Nigerians to be conscientized to accept that women, having great endurance and managerial abilities, can face the rigours of politics while their physical safety as that of everyone else in politics, should be legally guaranteed. Women should be encouraged and supported to become executives of parties, get into the decision-making bodies of community organizations and go for candidacies. Women should not only be mobilizers for others and party entertainers.

Another question frequently asked is whether a woman can be president. This question is an unnecessary sensationalism at this point because having a woman president is not the most important

factor in the integration of women into the political life of the nation. The creation of a broad network of conscious and active women in politics is infinitely more important and primary. A woman president could then emerge from this broad context after the politicizing and educative involvement of the woman president herself through party work and community organization. The media, however, constantly ask this diversionary and irrelevant question, perhaps, to reduce the issue of women in politics to absurdity as usual.

This is not to say that it is absurd for a woman to be president, but being president is not necessarily the first and most necessary political step for women. If, however, we are asking if women have the administrative, intellectual and authoritative ability to be a president, the answer is 'yes' for there are many women who can do as well, if not better, than some of our men who have been presidents and prime ministers.

Conclusion

The press must be fair and objective in reporting issues which affect women. They must therefore engage in interpretive journalism. More basically, they must report women in the first place because I have noticed a politics of exclusion and media black-out in the handling of events. Women's presence, speeches and photographs are often ignored or man-handled in reporting public events. What women say or think is not considered material for news or consideration while men are quoted copiously. The press must do better in the new political culture.

Women in the media themselves must contribute to the creation of new roles for the media in the new political culture. Some print media women are in the forefront of the struggle for the positive recreation of the woman's image in our society. Still, we must change a situation where approximately 60 per cent of women's articles and programmes are about women in the context of love and marriage (WIN 1985). Women readers consume much of the pulp and gossip literature and soft media programmes — *Vanguard*, *Prime People*, *Top News*, *Climax* and 'Behind the Clouds'. Women in the media must help educate the taste of women. Media women must find attractive ways of introducing women to social and political issues.

It was in recognition of the power of the media to eliminate stereotype images of women and provide women with easier access to information that paragraph 206 of the 'Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women' called for 'the participation of women at all levels of communication policy and decision-making, in programmes design, implementation and monitoring'. We pray that the Nigerian media should help in realizing these nationally necessary objectives in their performance in the new political period to come.

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