Media (Mis) Representation of the Nigerian Woman as a Product of the Society

Endong, Floribert Patrick C.[1] & Obonganwan, Edim Ekpenyong[2]

Abstract

Hinging principally on secondary data and observations, this paper attempts to show how forces that are external to the media (notably culture, religion, the law, education and the like) influence the media, determine/control their output and consequently shape media representation of women in the Nigerian society. It argues that the misrepresentation of women in the Nigerian mass media is more a product of gender-relation among other dynamics in the Nigerian society. Media contents are most often fine-tuned according to societal beliefs and realities so as to appear realistic/believable, appealing to audiences' emotions and ultimately to win audiences' consensus. The paper argues and concludes that a more promising approach to the eradication of women stereotyping and misrepresentations in the Nigerian media should therefore not only consider media's andocentric configurations and predispositions, but start from revolutionary social changes in favor of women emancipation in the other ideological state apparatuses (family, education, religion, law among others) which, to a great extent, seriously control the media of mass communication and determine their output.

Keywords: Women Emancipation, Media Representation, Femininity, Religious and Cultural Beliefs

1. Introduction

In all societies, the media are considered potent forces that are very active in shaping popular beliefs and perceptions. They have spectacular potentials of influencing social attitudes positively or negatively. Arguing from this premise, the mass media constitute one of the cardinal ideology and repressive state apparatuses (together with religious, educational institutions and the law). They enjoy immeasurable powers of socialization, mass mobilization and advocacy. One way in which they shape audience perception and attitude is through the institution of representation. According to O'Sulivan (1996:199), representation is the process of putting into concrete forms (that is different signifiers) an abstract ideological concept. Representation is therefore construed to be "the social process of making sense within all available signifying systems: speech, writing, print, video, film, tape and so on". The representation of an ideology is most often organized and regulated across the different media of mass communication and within different discourses. The representation of womanhood or femininity for instance may be done in both official and authoritative discourses (legislation and educational practices for instance) and non authoritative ones such as pornography, advertising, literature, cinema among others. The media are therefore constructed as powerful agents of representation in the society. However, representation is a product of multiform social processes of representing realities or ideological concepts. Through representation, the existing signs of a community are made to stand for their (specific) meanings. Given the fact that the process is associated with the ruling ideology and the fact that there is always a counter ideology, representations are hardly generally endorsed. They are highly dynamic, with respect to time and form. This instability of representations often gives rise to such phenomena as misrepresentations and re-representation (Endong 2012; Dominick 2011, Branston and Stafford 2006).

---

[1] Department of Theatre and Media Studies, University of Calabar, Calabar-Nigeria. Email: floribertendong@yahoo.com

[2] Department of Mass Communication, Cross River University of Technology, Calabar-Nigeria. Email: elmina02@yahoo.com

O'Sulivan (1996:199) corroborates this view with respect to the construction of sex when he contends that: "what is represented as sexual differs from form to form, from time to time; and representations themselves also change. Hence, the concept of representation allows full force to the notion of re-representation; the reworking and bringing into view of signifiers for the same signified". It is in line with this that we very often have conflicting, challenged or countered media representations of femininity and as a result, re-representation of womanhood or femininity in most societies, Nigeria being a suitable case study. This paper aims at showing how the society – in this case, the Nigerian society – affects media contents. It precisely seeks to show how social forces – that are external to the Nkigerian media – affect media (mis)representation of the Nigerian women.

2. Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on three theories of media and cultural studies namely cultivation, ideology and hegemony framewoks. The cultivation theory considers the media as molders of the society. According to this theory, persistent exposure to mass media messages leads audiences to adopt their content (the ideologies embedded within them) as consensual view of society (McQuail and Windahls 1993:283). In line with this assertion, Nwunekli et al in Okuna (2012) concede that "perception of social reality will correspond closely to the mass media 'realities' because the images of the world portrayed in the media will be internalized and accepted as accurate representations of reality by media audiences". A good number of studies have given credence to the cultivation theory and some others have heighted possible adverse effects of media misrepresentation of such marginalized social classes as women, children, disabled among others. This paper also hinges on Louis Althuser's theory of ideology and Gramsi's concept of hegemony. As a theoretical concept, ideology is inspired from Marxism. It is advanced by culture and communication scholars to describe the practice of reproducing social relationship of inequality within the spheres of signification and discourse. In this wise, ideology is construed as a means by which the dominant classes generalize, extend and naturalize their supremacy across a whole range of social activities. As applied in mass communication studies, the theory of ideology insists that there is no natural meaning inherent in an event or object; and that, meanings into which events or objects are constructed are always socially-oriented, that is, they are shaped according to class, gender, race or the interests (Watson 2003; Brandston and Stafford 2006; Dominick 2011). Ideology either works on the changing circumstances of social activities with the objective of reproducing familiar and regulated senses or struggle to resist established or naturalized senses that is, it seeks to transform the means of sense-making into new, alternative or counter forms which will generate meanings aligned to different social interests (O'Sulivan 1996; Dominick 2011; Endong 2013).

The theory of hegemony on the other hand refers to the ability by the dominant classes, to exercise cultural and social leadership (power) over subordinate classes in the political, economic and cultural spheres, not by direct coercion but with the consent of the "inferior" classes been sought. An important aspect of this theory is that, hegemony operates without the use of force (forcing the subordinate classes to concede power against their will). Rather, it describes a situation in which the consent of the inferior classes is actively sought, to concede power to the already powerful classes. This indicates that hegemony works in the realm of consciousness and representations. As O'Sullivan (1996:103) succinctly puts it, "Hegemony naturalizes what is historically a class ideology and renders it into a form of common sense". Its effective success depends largely on the apt mobilization of the totality of ideological state apparatuses (ISAs). The ideological state apparatuses are the various social institutions that perform regulatory functions and reproduce ideology on behave of the state, and indirectly to the advantage of the dominant classes. The ISAs –which include the media, the law, religion and the like - reproduce the submission of the subordinate group to the relations of the production, by representing class interest as both neutral and natural. Hegemony is never complete and eternal and so, it has to be sustained with the help of the ideological state apparatuses (Endong 2013; Dominick 2011; Watson 2003).

3. Nigerian Media Misrepresentation of Women

The misrepresentation of women in the media has attracted the attention of many scholars. An extensive literature is available on the issue. The media world in Nigeria seems particularly to be one of the areas in which relatively little is achieved so far, as concerns women empowerment and gender-equality. The Nigerian media is guilty of misrepresenting the woman folk. Most critics view them as agents working for the consolidation of women stereotyping and their marginalization in the society. This is so as their contents utterly trivialize or relegate women to secondary and inferior positions in the society.

Corroborating this point, Chika (2012:144) opines that, one of the altars where the image of the African woman is sacrificed is that of media, especially the fecund and prolific Nollywood. The media representation tends to depersonalize women and re-enforce traditional prejudices. More so, most of the media images do not reflect changing attitudes (presently observable in the Nigerian society) but promote unfounded stereotypes. By their negative portrayal of Nigerian women (as passive, dependent and subservient for instance), the Nigerian mass media re-enforce the stereotyping of women in the society. Abu cited by Chika (2012:145-146) further exemplifies some of these stereotypes. She asserts that the Nigerian media are noted for selling a negative image of women where "the old and wrinkled women becomes the image of a wizard, the gorgeous lady becomes the prostitute and the loving and caring wife becomes daft and unintelligent". These stereotypes may be viewed as arguable in many respects. It is undoubtedly perceived that such portrayals of the women in the Nigerian media automatically shape audiences' perception of the women folk and intensifies other stereotypes that are already held. This is so as media theoretically have "a powerful effect on people who subconsciously adopt and internalize attitudes, beliefs and values presented graphically or textually" (Ikuomola and Akanji 2001:32). In a study based on the portrayal of women in some Igbo movies, Okunna (2012) concludes, with reference to the results of a focus group discussion she had with some female discussants that these negative images are often times considered by audiences as unrealistic. Nevertheless, they affect audiences' perception about women negatively. Most critics who explore gender stereotyping in the media tend to concentrate more on media's influence on societal attitudes and hardly on the reverse – that is the influence of the society on media misrepresentation of women. Meanwhile, the mass media generally constitute a product of the society and their contents are, in many respects, a reflection of the society in which they are based (Idowu, 1999: 161, Endong, 2013).

4. Media (Mis)representation of Women as a Product of Society

It is often believed that the mass media have their own 'realities' which may differ from the reality in the society. Like many other feminist scholars, Okunna (2012:32-33) has, in numerous of her publications, argued that the images of women portrayed in the Nigerian media are unrealistic and stereotypical. It may be interesting to know the psychological phenomenon responsible for the acceptance/adoption by audiences of these images as a consensual view of the women world, despite their apparent unrealistic nature. Disciples of the cultivation theory will associate such an adoption with the persistent exposure of audiences to the mass media messages. However, logic will guide toward thinking about some other reasons. One of these is that mass media messages most often reflect society. Mass media representation are conceived and fine-tuned in a relatively realistic manner and that may very much explain why it appeals to the emotion of the audience in a way as to win their endorsement of the ideologies embedded in the contents. Highly fictional movies – for instance – entertain and use to make 'invented' claims which are unproven in real life. Audiences enjoy the contents of such films but hardly nay, never believe them as being true for the simple fact that they have a pre-knowledge of the purely fictional nature of the media.

The media – often negative – portrayal of women can, in this respect, be partly attributed to the symbiotic relationship existing between media reality and the society reality. It has often been argued that through their content and structure, the media are a reflection of the society in which they function. One of the deductible implications of this fact is that society directly or indirectly provides the "raw material" (notably technical knowhow (human resources and ideology) for the construction and fine-tuning of media text. They partake, complement or complete a socialization process often (already) commenced by other ideological state apparatuses (religion, education, the law, religion among others). The liberal Pluralist theory for instance presents the media as cultural flora reproducing the collective debate of society. Curran (2000:10) notes many more perspectives explicating the media-society symbiotic relationship thus: The main tradition in cultural studies and also, in such theoretically oriented media studies, sees the media primarily as cultural products. Their principal (and indeed often only) source of evidence is the content of media. Thus the media are viewed as an index of shared values in the 'cultural-indicator' approach […]; as a conduit of dominant ideologies, in the traditional Marxist perspective […] and as an extension of power structure, in the radical-structuralist tradition […] There is also an anthropological tradition which sees the media as expressing the mythic forms, archetypes and symbolic system of society. To these numerous perspectives, many more can be added. With reference to the Nigerian media, Idowu (1999:97) goes beyond the content analysis of media text to mention human resources (in the media) as a configuration that is likely to shape media content in a way that it will reflect society.

He concedes that The Nigerian media have often been accused of publishing falsehood, sensational, speculative and fabricated stories. The Nigerian media could be guilty of such accusations, but the problem cannot be separated from that which is created by the country's socio-political set-up. In effect, it has often been argued that the Nigerian society is hypocritical and corrupt. Should this be true, however, the media, no matter how saintly they try to be would fall victim and then cannot but reflect the vices of the larger society. The media thus reflect the color of the society. Given the fact that society provides raw material for media content, the negative portrayal of women in media text (though questionable) is but logical and may not absolutely be viewed as falsehood, or unrealistic. Though relatively true, such practices as selective attention by media gate-keepers and naturalization tend to manipulate media text in a way as to downplay on the progressive, positive and considerable role of women in the Nigerian society. Though by so doing, the media indirectly advocate for the marginalization and relegation of women to inferior status in the society, it should be noted that the ingredients used in the construction of such a gender biased texts often have a degree of truism. It is this degree of truism which often, partly contributes to its plausible nature. In a study conducted on the portrayal of women in Nigerian video films, Okunna (2012:31) raises the paradox of the believability of purported unrealistic media text which is chauvinistic in nature. In her discussion, she however corroborates that, though stereotypical in nature, the negative women portrayals often have a measure of realism. She observes that, nevertheless, as indicated, "[…] there must be Nigerian women who are as depraved and deplorable as the women in the films, thus [a logical tendency of] investing the films with a measure of realism. But the evil women like negative news in the mass media generally are over reported in these films".

It can therefore be argued that the belief by audience of such a portrayal of women in media text is not exclusively thanks to heavy viewing (exposure) as the cultivation theory stimulates but are equally thanks to the relative degree of realism the media texts are invested with. Events depicted in media text often rhyme with audiences' experiences in real life. This triggers believability. As Watson (2003:70) succinctly puts it, "we respond [to media text] according to our differences- cultural, social, educational, professional; according to our age, gender, race and according to our tastes and values". In the same light, Blumer and Hauser (1996:12) insightfully argue with respect to motion pictures that it seems quite clear that the variety of influences which motion pictures may exercise arises from the wide range of themes and patterns of conduct which are shown and the different backgrounds of experience of the observers. Because of their differences in experience, gained mainly from the groups in which they live, persons acquire attitudes which sensitize or immunize them to certain motion picture influence. In line with the above mentioned assertion, we may suggest that audiences tend to believe women portrayals that are in accordance with their experience in real life. A viewer who for instance has witnessed a particular pattern of feminine conduct in real life –be it socially deviant or normal – will tend to believe it when shown or reported in the media. The situation is even more accentuated when he or she is under the double influence of his personal experience and other socializing forces as culture, education, religion among others. Therefore, the influence of negative media portrayals of women on audiences has part of its roots in the relative realism invested with the media text.

A number of researchers have prescribed the emergence of an alternative female-dominated media that would counter and correct this negative portrayal (Akiboye 2004;, Nwamuo, 2012; Chika 2012; Eya 2005). Okunna (2012:35) opines that "this might well be the best strategy, if not the only one at this state of our development in the Nigerian society to empower women through the media of communication – by getting them to tell their own story from their own perspective". It may however appear non-strategic to blame the media and present them as cardinal causes of this stereotypical representation of women. Rather, it would be more appropriate to turn primordially to society which, as earlier argued, is visibly at the root of the phenomenon. Far from rejecting the responsibility of the media in perpetrating the stereotyping of women and far from doubting the potentials of media to act as a catalyst of women emancipation and positive social changes in the Nigerian society, we advocate for an approach that primordially stresses on the revalorization of women and the amelioration of their status in influential social institutions which though external to the media institutions, do control the media and affect media output. Corroborating this view, Curran (2000:11) insightfully argues that there is a "tacit assumption that control of the media lies outside the media, in forces and agencies external to it". This gives the impression that "the media are little more than panes of glass through which it is possible to discern the structure of society, its values and innermost tensions, in ways that are wholly unaffected by institutional mediation". Taking journalism as a case study or example, and drawing inspiration from Shlesinger's view of the media-society relationship, Currant (2000:11) adds that "the sociology of journalism is unduly media-centered, and should pay more attention to 'externalist' influence (that is to those outside media organizations)". Mass media representations exploit and hinge on sensitive and serious social realities to ensure the believability by the audience.

This may explain why Ikuomola and Akanji (2001:229) highlight media men usage or the capitalization on popular perceptions as measurement for shaping their content. They assert that "it has been noted that news is not a reporter's view of an event but social, consensual product modeled by a variety of considerations. Thus, it might be possible that the journalist internalize popular perceptions and social stereotypes into their consensual definitions of what is news". Based on this, it may further be argued that so long as the image of the woman continues to be negative in the society and with the media being the reflection of society, their portrayal risks continually to fall victim of stereotyping the female folk. An alternative media text that will be corrective of the chauvinistic one (produced by the male-dominated media) is well to be praised but how realistic and plausible will it be? It appears clear that the chauvinistic text enjoys a relatively considerable degree of acceptability in the Nigerian society. With this, the feminist text may hardly or never secure general consensus if external social institutions (the other ideological state apparatuses) are not made to push women affirmative action. As a form of counter hegemony, the feminist media text runs the risk of being questioned and challenged. The idea of an alternative feminist media texts may seldom reinforce the conception of media as "contested spaces reflecting the struggle for ascendancy" and reflection of both normative competition and achieved agreement" (Curran 2000:10). In this wise, they hardly stand a chance of being guarantee of the eradication of women stereotyping. Just like hegemonies, counter-hegemonies need the active support not only of the media, but of all the other ideological state apparatuses to be effective. Watson (2003:18) notes that counter-hegemonies operate best when all the state apparatuses (education, religion, the arts and the media) "are speaking in harmony with one another". This suggests that the advocates of the theory of women affirmative action should consider concentrating on overthrowing patriarchy or anti-feminist/feminine tendencies in other social institutions which to a great extent determine or control media output.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This paper has attempted to show that most critics have analyzed the misrepresentation and trivialization of women in the mass media from the angle of the media configuration and predisposition and not from the standpoint of the society. It argued that the media constitute a product of the society in which they operate. Their content is a reflection of society in many respects. Forces external to the media (notably culture, religion, education and the like) influence the media, determine/control media output and consequently shape media representation of women. The paper also argued that the media misrepresentation of women is more a product of gender-relation among other dynamics in the Nigerian society. Media content is more often fine-tuned according to societal beliefs and realities so as to appear realistic, appealing to audiences' emotions and win their consensus. A more promising approach to the eradication of women stereotyping and misrepresentation in the media content should therefore not only consider media's andocentric configurations and predispositions, but start from revolutionary social changes in favor of women emancipation in the other ideological state apparatuses which to a great extent control the media and determine their output.

Bibliography

Abu, Eugenia (1997). Women in Broadcasting: An African Perspective in Deregulation of Broadcasting in Africa. Lagos: National Broadcasting Commission.

Adebayo, Fayoyin (2011). Promoting Children's right Through the New Media: The Nigerian Experience. Journal of Communication; 2, 2, 57-65.

Agu, Stela (2007). Gender Equality, Education and Women Empowerment: The Nigerian Challenge. Multidisciplinary Journal of Research Development, 8, 2, :1-7

Akinboye, S.(2004). Paradox of Gender Equality in Nigerian Politics. Lagos Concept Publication Limited.

Alade, Ibiwumi A. (2012). Gender Stereotyping and Empowerment in Nigeria Society: Implication for Women Repositioning in Curriculum Delivery. AFREVLALIGENS: An International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender Studies, 1, 1, 30-43.

Anorue, L. I. and Onyebuchi, C. A. (2012). The Mass Media, Gender Balance and Politics in Nigeria: An Assessment. AFREV LALIGENS: An International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender Studies. 1,3, 14-35.

Babatunde, O. I., Daramola R. and Ishola, L. (2013). Media, Gender and Conflict: The Problem of Eradicating Stereotyping of Women in Nigeria. Singaporean Journal of Business Economics and Management Studies, 2, 1, 27-39.

Bohan, J.S. (2002). Sex Differences and/ in the Self: Classic Themes, Feminist Variations, of Modern Challenges. Psychology of women quarterly, 26, 74-88.

Blumber, P. and Husa, A. (1996). Representing Reality in Films in Jarice, & Maxcy (Eds), Sources: Notable Selections in Mass Media. (pp.88-109), Guilford: Dusking Publishing Group/Brown & Brenchmark Publishers.

Branston, G. and Stafford, R. (2006). The Media Student's Book. New york: Routledge.

British Council Nigeria (2012). Gender in Nigeria Report 2012: Improving the Lives of Girls and Women in Nigeria, Issues, Policies, Action. Abuja: British Council Nigeria.

Bryan, E. and Varat, J. (2010). Strategies for Promoting Gender Equality in Developing Countries: Lessons, Challenges and Opportunities. Washington: Woodrow Wilson International Scholars.

Chika, Euphemia A. (2012). "Women Empowerment for a Holistic Development in Nigeria" Review of European Studies, 4,2,138-147.

Curan, J (2000). 'Introduction' in Curan J. Ed. Media in the Society. (pp. 1-35) London: Oxford Uniersity Press.

Dominick, J. R..(2011). The Dynamics of Mass Communication. New York: McGraw-hill Series. 2011.

Eagly, A.H. Wood and Johannesen –Schmidt (2004). Social Role Theory of Sex Differences and Similarities: Implication for the Partner Preferences of Women and men. In A.H Eagly, A.E Beall, & R.J Sternberg (Eds), The Psychology of Gender. (pp. 269-295) New York: Guilford.

Endong, Floribert P.C.(2012). Femininity Versus Femminism in Feminine Christian Communication: A Case Study of The Christian Woman Morror. CAJOLIS: Calabar Journal of Liberal Studies, 16(1), 15 – 34.

Eya, Regina. (2005) "Gender and Culture: What Needs to Change in The Society and In the Church", in Gender Equality from a Christian Perspectives, Enugu: Ifendu publications (Chapter 8).

Haralambos & Holborn (2008). Sociology: Themes and Perspective (Seventh Edition). London: Collins Pushers Limited.

Idowu, Samuel O. (1999) Media in Nigeria's Security and Developmental Vision. Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited.

Ifemeje, S. and Ikpeze, O. (2012). Global Trend Toward Gender Equality: Nigeria's Experience in Focus in Kuwait Chapter of Arabian Journal of Business and Management Review, 2,.3, 51-63.

Ikuomola, A. D. and Okuomola, R. A. (2001). Womanhood and the Media: Nigeria and the Arab World. The Journal of Social Sciences. 6,3, 227- 233.

International Labour Office. World labour report. Geneva:ILO, 1996.

Makama, Godiya A. (2013) Patriarchy and Gender Inequality in Nigeria: The Way Forward. European Scientific Journal, 9, 17,115-144.

McQuail, D. & Windahls, S. (1993). Communication Models for the Study of Mass communication. Edinburgh: Pearson Education Limited. 1993.

Nnamani, Amuluche. "Gender Equality in The Church and in The Society: Our Obligation towards Change", in Gender Equality from a Christian Perspectives, Enugu: Ifendu publications, 2005.

Nwankwo, Obiageli (2001). Inheritance Rights of Women in Africa. CIRDDOC Series No. 4. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 2001.

O'Sullivan Tim (1996). Key Concepts in Mass Communication. London: Methuen &Co, Ltd.

Ogege, Samuel O. (2011). "Gender Role Differentiation and Social Mobility of Women" in Journal of Social Sciences, 27, 1, 67-73.

Okafor, Amuche C. (2010). Gender Inequality in Nigeria. OASIS Journal. 1,1, 104-113.

Okafor, E.and Abdulazeez, Y. (2007). Gender-Sensitive Projects for Sustainable Development in Nigeria: A Critical Assessment. Journal of Sociology and Social Science,. 23, 3, 235-248.

Okunna, Chinyere (1992). Female Faculty in Journalism in Nigeria: Implications for the Status of Women in the Society. Africa Media Review, 6,1, 47- 56

Okunna, Chinyere (2012). Portrayal of Women in Nigerian Home Video Films: Empowerment or Subjugation? Africa Media Review, 35,3, 12-35

Olateru-Olagbegi, B. Akiyode and Afolabi Akiyode. Actual Women Situation in Nigerian. [On line] Available:http://www.widaf-ao.org/spip.php 23 April. 2012: April 12, 2013

Omolara Folunsho. The role of women in trade Unions and Nation building. [On line] Available www.pengassan.org. November 11, 2013.

Stuart, Sara (1989). Access to Media: Placing Video in the Hands of the People. Media Development, XXVI, 1989: 8-26

Watson, James (2003). Media Communication: an Introduction to Theory and Process. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.