

## Representation of Women in the Nigerian Press during Covid-19 Third Wave

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DOI: [10.56201/rjmcit.v10.no1.2024.pg69.79](https://doi.org/10.56201/rjmcit.v10.no1.2024.pg69.79)

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### Abstract

*Women have been said to be less engaged and marginalised in the media representation across the world than their male counterparts. This research assessed the coverage and representation of women in news stories about Covid-19 Third Wave in three national dailies in Nigeria – The Punch, Leadership, and The Nation. Using content analysis research method, the three newspapers were analysed from August 1 to 31, 2021. The census sample technique was used to arrive at the sample size of 93 issues (n=93) of the three selected newspapers. Results showed that women were underrepresented as there were few female reporters as well as lesser female expert sources in Covid-19 third wave news stories. Government officials/agencies ranked higher as sources for news contents and their representatives were dominantly men with few women. The Punch newspaper was far more active than the other newspapers in reporting the Covid-19 third wave, while poor representation of women's perspectives in Covid-19 third wave news coverage means that women have limited influence over the framing of the crisis in the news and consequently, limited influence over policymaking directions. There is need to break this male dominance by giving women more voice.*

**Keywords:** Women, Newspaper, Experts, Covid-19, News, Patriarchy, Marginalisation, Third Wave

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### Introduction

The pandemic in 2020 meant that all hands were to be on deck to help limit the spread of Covid-19 virus, including the mass media that has a social responsibility role towards the citizens of Nigeria. To ensure the safety of humans, the media worldwide swung into actions actively covering stories, writing reports, visiting quarantine and isolation centres to ensure that people are safe and have the best information needed to remain safe. The third wave of Covid-19, with the Delta variant as its arrow head, raged around the world in the third quarter of 2021. More than 10 states in Nigeria and the Federal Capital Territory saw over 100 per cent increase in the number of new Covid-19 cases in a four-week period. This, experts said, signified a rapid community transmission as the Delta variant of the coronavirus ravaged over 90 countries of the world, including Nigeria (The Punch, August 1, 2021). The National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) continued to intensify efforts with emphasis on public awareness to ensure

Nigerians take necessary preventive steps to protect themselves. Based on fundamental human rights, it should be a commonplace for female journalists to be in the field covering Covid-19 stories in all areas possible. But can that be truly said of female journalists and reporters in Nigeria? Also, were women given voice in the news content about Covid-19 in Nigerian Media?

Over the decades, the media across the world have been accused of marginalising women in their news reports. In 1995, the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing, China, to address women's marginalisation, and the media was identified as one of the 12 important areas of concern in that summit. Section J of the Beijing Platform for Action cited a lack of "gender sensitivity" and a failure to abolish gender-based stereotyping in local, national and international media organisations. They called for women to be given more opportunities to express themselves and participate in decision-making within and through the media, as well as the encouragement of a balanced and non-stereotypical representation of women in the media (Beijing Platform for Action, Section J, Women and Media, 1995, cited in Jonah & Nnanyelugo, 2020).

Traditional African society has clearly assigned different roles for men and women, and both sexes grow up knowing precisely what society expects of them, and the media has been accused of reinforcing these roles. In the Nigeria media, the issue of women representation, stereotype and inequality has been of major concern over the years. Women contribute a lot to the development of the society but not all their activities are represented in the media (Oyesomi, 2011; Aladi & Okoro, 2021). The media are usually considered as powerful forces that are very active in shaping popular beliefs and perceptions of the audience by influencing social attitudes either positively or negatively. One way through which the media do this is through representation. In Nigeria, women are marginalised in the news content of newspapers (Ette, 2017; Bappayo & Kirfi, 2019). When they are given identity, it is usually done in a negative light (Jonah and Nnanyelugo, 2020). The manner in which women are represented in the media is of critical concern to media research because of the power of the media in shaping public views through its representation mechanisms.

Researchers (Allan, 2004; Burke & Mazarella, 2008) agree that the quality of news media representations influences public opinions of the world, as well as gender perceptions. Gadzekpo (2011) noted that interest in how gender is portrayed in African media had been renewed after the continent's political transformations in the 1990s brought about the liberalisation of the media.

According to Irele (2022), women in Nigeria faced underrepresentation in the traditional media during the Covid-19 pandemic. The women voices were marginalised and played down by the media during that period (Luba, 2020). Men were quoted several times more than women, both as sources and as protagonists (Luba, 2020, p. 40). This shows the extent of the gap between male and the female voices in the media during critical issues/times. In the midst of these challenges faced by women reporters and women in general during world events like the pandemic, this study aims to highlight the representation of women by Nigerian Newspapers that appeared in news stories during Covid-19 third wave in Nigeria, and also evaluate the occurrences of sources mentioned in these reports by women. This study documents the

contributions and representations of women in Nigerian newspapers' reports about Covid-19 third wave.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Some scholars have examined media representation of women during the pandemic but studies from Nigerian scholars examining print media representation of women in the news during Covid-19 third wave are non-existent. Examining women representation in the news is pivotal because studies have shown that news is the most consumed media genre. This suggests that understanding how women are represented in the news provide fresh perspectives in understanding gender construction in the media, hence the need for this study. Moreso, current studies are always required to ascertain if there are changes in the manner in which women are represented. Therefore, a study of newspaper representation of women in the news is worth investigating so as to provide empirical evidence regarding trends on the representation of women so as to fuel discussions on the need for positive representation of women in the news as reported in newspapers.

The general objective of this study was to determine the representation of women during the Covid-19 third wave in selected Nigerian Newspapers. Specifically, the study sought to achieve the following:

1. To determine the level of coverage of Covid-19 third wave stories by *Punch, Leadership and TheNation* newspapers.
2. To identify gender representation of reporters of Covid-19 third wave stories in the selected Nigerian newspapers.
3. To ascertain Covid-19 Third wave news stories that had women as expert sources by the selected Nigerian Newspapers.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Women in Nigerian Newspapers**

Several studies have looked at the coverage and representation of women in the Nigeria mass media. The earliest of such studies found that women were not adequately covered in the media compared to their male counterparts. Particularly, the media did not adequately cover women's participation in the Nigeria's 2007 general elections, despite that period being the first time in the country's post-independence history where there was a large turnout of women participating in elections (Oyesomi, 2011, p. 179). The stories were not given prominence, both in terms of the news genre adopted (like news, features, editorials or cartoons) and the page placement: news was the dominant news genre employed, suggesting that the Nigerian newspapers did not give in-depth coverage to women's participation in the 2007 elections (p.179). Almost all the stories about women during that period were placed inside the pages – 89.3 per cent of the stories (Oyesomi, 2011). A positive, however, was that most of the news reports about the women were favorable (p. 178).

Still on election coverage, an analysis of the coverage of female politicians by Nigerian newspapers in the 2015 elections showed that the women were marginalized and received

limited space in the newspaper pages (Ette, 2017; Bappayo & Kirfi, 2019, p. 75). Ette (2017) argued that the extent to which women were included in the political news perpetuated stereotypes that “only men do politics” and that women are “outsiders and undeserving of visibility” (p. 19). According to Ette (2017), the female politicians’ limited visibility in the Nigerian newspapers reduced the women’s chances of winning the elections and placed them in a spot of powerlessness.

Far from the research on Nigerian elections’ reportage, studies show similar findings in the representation of women in Nigerian mass media. Jonah and Nnanyelugo (2020) posited that the Nigerian press mostly used episodic themes when reporting issues concerning women, meaning that the issues were not deeply investigated. The news value of oddity was more preferred by the Nigerian press (than other news values like human interest or timeliness) when it comes to reporting on issues related to women (Aladi and Okoro, 2021, p. 448). Jonah and Nnanyelugo (2020) also found that entertainment and domestic news about women were the dominant news categories used in reporting women, compared to other serious categories like economy, politics, health, and environment (Jonah and Nnanyelugo, 2020). Their study concluded that the representation of women in the press for the preceding three years were “largely negative.” Interestingly, Jonah and Nnanyelugo (2020) asserted that these representations of women in the Nigerian press have been significantly determined the type of news story:

“When positive stories about women are reported, they are given banner headlines with high prominence and volume. Also, when women appear in important issues, they are represented in a manner that projects them as weak and dependent on men. Also, even issues like economic recession that typically affects both men and women, women are represented as victims of such circumstances.”

Speaking of the portrayal of women in the Nigeria media, studies have established that Nigerian press are focused on entrenching patriarchal norms and traditional gender-roles – stereotypes – instead of challenging them (Aladi & Okoro, 2021; Tijani-Adenle, 2016). Tijani-Adenle (2016) complained that women leaders and managers, during their interactions with the press, were not emphasizing their skills and contributions to the society, but were instead “tilting towards the media’s approach of highlighting their roles as wives and mothers” (p. 406), rather than as managers and leaders (that they actually were) in their various industries. This has serious societal consequences:

“The press subliminally discourage women’s acceptability as leaders by reiterating that the industry is not their place. This can dissuade women from exerting their knowledge and skills in industry, thereby leading to the loss of a quantum amount of development, innovations, and improvements that can be propelled by women who make up a significant segment of the population. (Tijani-Adenle, 2016, p. 406)”

Similarly, in an analysis of the metaphors used to describe women in Nigerian newspapers, Ahmed (2018) revealed that the underlying reasoning of some Nigerian female opinion article writers suggest that they consent to patriarchal hegemony. In fact, even when it was evident

the female author's purpose was to challenge or deny particular stereotypes against the feminine gender, their articles ending up evoking stereotypes, "perhaps unconsciously" (Ahmed, 2018, p. 98). This shows that the female authors sometimes cannot help it: manifesting societal stereotypes of women in their newspaper articles. This shows that women are equally guilty of stereotyping their own gender in the media, that the issue is not basically a men-against-women fight.

Apart from the use of metaphors, political cartoons in Nigerian newspapers were also found to misrepresent women using established stereotypes (Felicia, 2019). Felicia (2019) revealed that "semiotic resources, such as pronominal choices, speech acts, labelling, visual metaphorization, information value, salience/emphasis and framing, are used by cartoon producers to portray power relations among female actors in Nigeria."

Furthermore, Aladi and Okoro (2021) confirmed that stories related to women received poor volume of coverage and prominence. Even the few positive stories relating to women were usually molded in a negative tone (p. 449). Meanwhile, an earlier study found that male roles in agricultural news reports enjoyed more prominence and "strategic placement" compared to female roles, although the differences were not significant (Fawole & Olajide, 2012). Nwabueze (2012) asserted that the under-presentation of women in the Nigerian media space was "largely because there were more male news-makers in the society." This assertion cannot be denied.

Aside the portrayal of women in Nigeria media, women are also poorly represented in the editorial and reportorial positions of the media. According to Nwabueze (2012), factors responsible for the low number of women practicing journalism in Nigeria are: the rigorous demands of journalism and its accompanying pressures; corruption in the media; cultural factors; and because some women naturally do not want publicity. Though, in contrast, female journalists still admitted that there were more women in the broadcast media (which has higher visibility tendency), than the print media (p. 234).

The editorial positions in the media industry are by far dominated by men, despite the high number of females that have studied (or studying) mass communication/journalism in the country (Enwefah, 2016). Women journalists also witness various inequalities in the Nigerian news industry, in terms of beats assigned (female journalists are placed in soft beats more than hard beats) and salaries (Tijani-Adenle, 2019). Sadly, the Nigeria media industry do not have policies set to address the issue of sexual harassment and sexism which are prevalent in Nigerian news organisations (Tijani-Adenle, 2019). Tijani-Adenle (2019) further asserted that marriage and motherhood are the dominant factors impeding the growth and progress of women journalists in the Nigerian news industry.

### **Women Voices in Nigeria Media During Covid-19**

Although African women were much involved in the fight against Covid-19 pandemic, they were still played down in the media during the pandemic (Dadzic, Ebron & Kipenda, 2021, p. 12; Luba, 2020). In the coverage of Covid-19 by the Nigerian media, the problem of the underrepresentation of women did not change. During the pandemic, the traditional media outlets "were foreclosed" on women while online newspapers "did not have women in terms of the conversations on the pandemic" (Irele, 2022). Nigerian newspapers also failed to give

prominence nor adequate coverage to the violence against women within the lockdown period, even as domestic violence was on the rise during the pandemic lockdown (Ekweonu, 2020). In an intensive research carried out by Luba (2020), it was found that men were quoted approximately five times more frequently than women (81% and 17% respectively) in the Nigeria's media reportage of Covid-19. The study also revealed that men protagonists were mentioned 5.5 times more than women protagonists in Nigerian media Covid-19 news stories (p. 40). This shows that women's voices were drowned by the Nigerian media in their reportage of the Covid-19 pandemic.

What's more? For the few times the women sources were used by the Nigerian media in Covid-19 stories, they were used much more as sources sharing subjective views than as experts sharing authoritative expertise on the issues (Luba, 2020, p. 12). This buttresses the level of marginalization women faced in the Nigerian media during the Covid-19 pandemic. Women's voices, simply put, did not matter much to the Nigerian media during the coronavirus period.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on social role theory. Social role theory – a theory in social psychology – was formed by Alice H. Eagly in the 1980s. The theory contends that behavioural disparities between the male and female genders are a reflection of gender role beliefs, which in turn reflect how people view the social roles that men and women play in the society (Eagly & Wood, 2012, p. 459). According to Eagly and Wood (2012), gender role beliefs arise because people observe the behaviours of both men and women and come to the conclusion that both sexes possess corresponding dispositions or traits. Men and women are therefore believed to have characteristics that prepare them for roles associated with gender (p. 459). The social role theory will help us understand how gender role stereotype was visible in the representation of female reporters and female experts' sources (compared to male reporters and experts respectively) in Covid-19 third wave stories by the three selected newspapers.

### **Methodology**

This study adopted content analysis method. In the words of Berelson (1952), cited in Asemah et al (2012), content analysis is the objective, systematic and qualitative description of the manifest content of communication. The purposive sampling technique was employed in choosing three Nigerian newspapers: *The Punch*, *The Nation* and *Leadership* newspapers. The online editions of these newspapers from August 1 to 31, 2021 were analysed. The census sample technique was used to arrive at the sample size of 93 issues (n=93) of the three selected newspapers.

Code sheet was the instrument used in collecting data, while the unit of analysis were straight news, features, editorials, letters-to-the-editor and opinion articles on the COVID-19 third wave. Twenty percent of stories from *Punch*, *The Nation* and *Leadership* newspapers was selected for the inter-coder reliability test. According to Neuendorf (2002) as cited in Wimmer and Dominick (2011, p. 175), inter-coder reliability coefficients of .80 or greater are acceptable in most situations. This study recorded an intercoder reliability of 0.86, and therefore was deemed acceptable for this research.

## Results

### Level of Coverage

Out of the studied 93 editions (n=93), 222 news stories were found on the three selected newspapers concerning the Covid-19 third wave during the studied period.

**Table 1: Level of coverage of the selected Newspapers by Women**

News Website	Frequency	Percentages%
Punch	117	52.7%
Leadership	48	21.6%
The Nation	57	25.7%
<b>Total</b>	222	100%

Results from Table 1 show that The Punch recorded the highest reportages on Covid-19 third wave. The Punch had a total of 117 stories (52.7%), followed by The Nation newspaper which had 57 stories (25.7%) and the least, Leadership, which had 48 stories (21.6%). The Punch averaged 3.7 stories a day on Covid-19 third wave, while The Nation averaged 1.8 stories, and Leadership, 1.5 stories.

### Gender Representation of Reporters on Covid-19 Third Wave Stories:

**Table 2: Distribution of the Sources (News Gathering) used in Covid-19 Third Wave Stories**

Sources (News Gathering)	Frequency	Percentages %
Female reporter	35	15.8
Male reporter	97	43.7
News agency	47	21.2
Private individuals (Male)	5	2.3
Private individuals (Female)	1	0.5
Both male and female reporter	5	2.3
Unknown source	8	3.6
Others	24	10.8
<b>Total</b>	222	100

The results above show that in the reportages of Covid-19 third wave events, male reporters were the dominant sources across the three selected newspapers (43.7%). New agency sources came a distant second (21.2%), followed by female reporters (15.8%). The results show that female reporters in the Covid-19 Third Wave reports were barely up to a third of their male counterparts.

### Story Sources:

**Table 3: Distribution of sources used in the selected newspapers**

Sources (News Content)	Frequency	Percentages %
Female expert	34	12.4
Male expert	42	15.3
Female victim	4	1.5
Male victim	2	0.7
Government officials/agencies	137	50
Groups/organisations	41	14.9
Others	14	5.1
Total	274	100

From Table 3, the results show that government officials/agencies dominated in terms of sources used in Covid-19 third wave reports across the selected newspapers, with half (50%) of the news sources coming from government officials/agencies. Male expert sources formed 15.3% of the sources used, closely followed by groups/organisations (14.9%), and then female experts (12.4%).

### Discussion of Findings

This study aimed to examine the portrayal of women in the Nigerian press coverage of the Covid-19 third wave, particularly in terms of the sources used in the area of newsgathering and news contents (voices heard). Findings showed that female reporters were underrepresented across the three selected newspapers. Table 2 shows that the number of bylines owned by female reporters for Covid-19 third wave stories were barely up to a third of their male counterparts. This re-echoes Enwefah's assertion (2016) that editorial positions are "far dominated" by men despite the high population of women in journalism schools. The reason for the low percentage of female reporters in Covid-19 third wave stories could be that the Covid-19 beat was considered a man's beat by the editors. Remember, Tijani-Adenle (2019) stated that female journalists were usually assigned to report on soft beats.

In terms of sources used (news content), female experts also received less attention than male experts. Furthermore, there were more female victims used as news sources than male



victims. Government officials/agencies dominated in terms of the sources used in the news contents, and majority of the officials were men. These all confirm that the Nigerian press continue to marginalise women in their reportage, by using lesser women as expert sources, and more women as victims which not only portray women in an unfavorable (Jonah and Nnanyelugo, 2020), but also furthers the societal stereotype of women being the weaker part of the society. These results also support Luba's (2020) that female voices were drowned in Covid-19 news stories.

This study equally assessed the frequency of Covid-19 third wave coverage by three selected newspapers, namely: *The Punch*, *Leadership*, and *The Nation*. Interestingly, *The Punch*'s stories (52.7%) on Covid-19 third wave was more than the total of *Leadership* (21.6%) and *The Nation* (25.7%) stories combined. This shows that *The Punch* newspaper was far more active than the other newspapers in reporting the Covid-19 third wave. A case as serious as Covid-19 third wave needed constant coverage and updates and *The Punch* did that, commendably.

### **Conclusion**

This study found that women were underrepresented as there were few female reporters as well as female experts in the reportage of Covid-19 third wave in Nigeria. The women who were given a platform in the stories were portrayed less as authoritative experts and more as victims, compared to men. Furthermore, government officials/agencies ranked higher as sources for news content and their representatives are dominantly men, with few women. Like results in this study show, the number of females enrolled to study journalism in Nigerian journalism schools and universities again, did not reflect during the coverage of Covid-19 third wave as male reporters dominated the bylines overwhelmingly in during Covid-19 third wave.

The absence of women's perspectives in Covid-19- related news coverage means that women have limited influence over the framing of the crisis in the news and consequently, limited influence over policymaking directions. As a result, women are at ever greater risk of being further marginalised within different societies during global health crisis of our lifetimes. There is need to break this male dominance by giving women more voice. Women were the hardest hit by the pandemic but were also the backbone of recovery in communities. It is only logical that their voices be amplified and this will go a long way in achieving goal 5 (Gender Equality) of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Accordingly, the media should give voice to women protagonists and experts who are highly trusted by many: doctors, scientists and paramedics, who typically tend to be men, as well as nurses and schoolteachers, who tend to be women. Journalists on the other hand should be encouraged to track the gender of the experts they quote within a COVID-19 news and across all their pieces. If a piece is about a man/men dying of COVID19, include an angle about the impact this would have on the women in their lives (e.g. wives/partners, daughters, mothers). They should also consider publishing more images of women experts to accompany their expert views, thus challenging gender stereotypes and visually rebalancing the strong male bias in news coverage

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