Womanhood and the Media: Nigeria and the Arab World

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Abstract: The concept of womanhood and mass media continues to undergo tremendous transformation, especially in Africa and particular in Nigeria. Some of the most influential factors responsible for this change among other things include economic, socio-cultural and political dynamics. This study, examines woman and the media with examples from Nigeria and the Arab world; some facts and figures about women, media and the inherent implications. The researcher conclude that in the coming years, the number of women in media in Nigeria and Africa will undoubtedly grow, just as more men will become interested in writing on softer issues, presently associated with women alongside the stereotype.

Key words: Women, implication, stereotype, Arab world, Africa, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Communication is the powerful means of bringing about social changes. The revolution in the media of communication has helped to accelerate the pace of social change during these few decades. Radio, television, newspapers and other mass media have not only made this world shrunk but also have revolutionized the values, attitudes, interests and social milieu (Dare, 2000; Joshi *et al.*, 2006). Media have a powerful effect on people who subconsciously adopt and internalize attitudes, beliefs and values presented graphically or textually. People are unaware of how much they are manipulated by the glamorous or subtle messages conveyed through a variety of media.

Television, movies, magazines, newspapers and radio advertisements are trying to sell people various products and people also buy into-perhaps without fully realizing it-beliefs and attitudes that govern their lives as well as their way of thinking. Newspapers, television and radio carry a variety of messages and views on issues that affect women and their portrayal as common with the Nigerian home video. According to the Nigerian feminist Molara ogundipe-leslie, 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 (Molara, 1990).

Some facts and figures about women and the media: The media promotes and reflects the current mainstream culture's standards for body shape or size and importance of beauty. The media reflects the images of thinnest and link this image to other symbols of prestige, happiness, love and success for women (www.aboutface.org).

Women are not a significant part of the media workforce. In Asia, women are 21% of the total media workforce. In Latin America, they are 25%. In Southern Africa, they are about 27%. In Western Europe and the United State, they are 35%. World wide, they are 79% of all part-time workers in the news media.

According to the Gallagher report in Japan, women are only 8% of media employees in India and Malawi, they are 12% and in Argentina and Mozambique, women are 16% of the media workforce. In Africa, women are 8% of broadcasting managers and 14% of managers in the print media. In Latin America, the figures are 21% for broadcasting and 16% for print.

A majority of the women journalist from around the world, who responded to the 1997 IWMF survey said that not even one out of ten decision makers in their companies were women. The figure was even higher (79%) for respondents from Asia.

JOURNALISM, MASS MEDIA, WOMEN AND CULTURE IN NIGERIA

In every society, public attitudes regarding the role of women in society are major factors in deciding the status of women. In shaping these attitudes, the media exert a strong influence (MacBride, 1981). The images of women in mass media content-news, entertainment, advertising, etc. is thus seen by media experts as a crucially important topic because this image will undoubtably be reflected in the attitudes of the society towards women in the long run (Sandman *et al.*, 1976). Given the trend in journalism education in Nigeria, there is a strong possibility that as students graduate, the sum total of the learning acquired from the male-dominated

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teaching in the nation's schools of mass communication will predispose them to selecting and reporting events and issues to reflect a male ordering of priorities even when some of the reporters are themselves women. This type of androcentric view in the media content is a major factor in deciding the status of women in the society, particularly through a reinforcement of androcentric attitudes already prevalent in the Nigeria society.

In Nigeria, both the larger society and the male sub-culture see women and women's aspirations as unquestionably subordinate and the marginalization, trivialization and stereotyping of women are incontrovertible aspects of Nigerian life. It is in a society, like this that a male porter could tell a woman, who has paid him to carry her shopping to her car that no matter what she is, she is inferior to him because she is just a woman. In Nigeria, the male members of the society are effectively socialized into the norms of their social category and those of the society as a whole.

This socialization begins very early in life and is so effective that male chauvinistic attitudes towards women appear inborn and are often displayed unconsciously, irrespective of the educational background of men. It is here that policy makers limit the number of children a woman can have to four when a man can marry as many as four wives and keep as many concubines and mistresses as his ego dictates each of them a potential mother of four children. Okunna (1992) noted that:

> Notwithstanding, the societies where lecturers or media practitioners might have acquired their degrees, mass communication lecturers in Nigeria are probably victims of bias against women. This bias, largely unwitting, apparently filters into the lecturers' relationships with their students in both formal and informal interactions and covertly influences the knowledge and skills imparted to students of journalism/future journalist

MASS MEDIA AND WOMEN STEREOTYPE

Over the years, research has shown that the prevalence of women stereotypes in the mass media can be damaging to the status of women in the society (King and Stott, 1977; Gallagher, 1981). By 1978, Tuchman and others had called the mass media portrayal of women, a symbolic annihilation of women which could be brought about by trivialization or the absence of women in media content. Thus if the mass media in a society trivialize or marginalize women and their issues, this portrayal of women could well have its roots in the formal

education/training given to the media practitioners. It has been noted with regard to communicating the status of women that in terms of content, it is not simply what the media say or how they say it that bolsters stereotypes and limited or skewed perceptions of women. Equally important is what they do not say (Gallagher, 1985).

The stereotyping of women which the mass media are guilty of can also have its origin in a mass communication department dominated by androcentric tendencies. Okunna (1992) observed a situation where a head of department in a routine task which constitutes supervision of an editorial board for one of the many training newspapers or magazines published by departments of mass communication in Nigerian tertiary institutions. The HOD sets up a sixteen member editorial board, all male except the token one or two female students who are appointed as either society page editor and her assistant or as entertainment editor and her assistant. In the department under consideration, the ratio of male to female students is not anywhere as wide as the 8: 1 in the editorial board.

As a matter of fact, enrolment figures show that roughly equal numbers of male and female students are admitted into the country's mass communication schools (Emenyeonu, 1991; Okunna, 1992). From this simple action of the HOD, performing his normal duties, the stereotyping of women journalists as being only fit for the soft and featury aspects of mass media work is already being inculcated in the student journalists.

The veiled admonition here is that men play the strong and important roles, women the weak and unimportant ones. When the students join the workforce, women journalists both as reporters and editors are more likely to handle feature stories while hard news is made the exclusive province of their male counterparts. The inferiority complex which this kind of division of labour breeds in media women could condition them to regard themselves as incapable of making any significant contributions to mass communication, thus causing those among them who are not very determined to give up any effort to make an impact in their jobs.

In the face of this kind of division of labour, it appears inevitable that the packaging of media content will be done to reflect a male perspective, thus giving rise to problems of sexism and gender bias in mass communication. In this type of situation, one guess is as good as another what type of women will become newsmakers and what type of news will they make? In explaining gender bias, it has been noted that news is not one reporter's view of an event but a social, consensual product molded by a variety of consideration. Thus, it might be possible that journalists internalize popular

perceptions and social stereotypes into their consensual definitions of what is news (Turk, 1987). As these perceptions and stereotypes are perpetuated in Nigeria, it becomes doubtful that sexism and stereotyped presentations of women will soon disappear from the country's mass media content.

WOMEN AND MASS MEDIA IN THE ARAB WORLD

Observing the reality of the Arab Woman in the mass media, Mahmoud (1996) draws attention to two important facts. First, women symbolize a number of roles to men: mother, wife, daughter, aunt and colleague. Women are considered to be half of society, making it quite difficult for all of society to develop should females be left behind. Second, women are considered to be an integral part of the development of the Arab world politically, economically, socially and culturally. The position of women in the region is influenced by any change in these aspects, whether positively or negatively.

There are many obstacles that affect Arab women's status in society such as the high percentage of illiteracy, lower socioeconomic standing and the grip of customs and traditions which cause financial strain such as high dowries and costly weddings. Regrettably, however Arab media have tended to portray women in a manner that arguably has done more to compound than to alleviate these problems. The Middle East Institute Policy briefly examines the prevalence of negative images in the Arab media's depictions of women.

POSITIVE MODELS AND MOVEMENTS

Stereotypical images of women as weak, docile and subservient persist throughout the Arab world. The Arab media have tended to validate these misrepresentations in various ways and therefore have helped to perpetuate them. These false images are all the more disturbing given the statistical evidence about the roles and status of women in the region today. The data show that women comprise one-third of the world's labour force and perform two-thirds of the total working hours. The data also show that women earn just 10% of the income and own just 1% of the world's possessions (Mahmoud, 1996).

Women's work and participation in production and development is not adequately recognized moreover, it is not sufficiently compensated to enable their economic independence. The persistent gender gap stems from a variety of historical and other factors including if not because of the misunderstanding and misapplication of Islam. Many women now-a-days play a role in assuring this negative image by passively following customs and traditions that devalue females relative to their male counterparts.

The life of Aisha, the Prophet's wife is proof that a woman can have more knowledge than men and that she can be the teacher of scholars and experts. Aisha also proved that a woman can exert influence over both men and women, thereby providing inspiration and leadership. Her life is also proof that a woman can be both a source of knowledge and of pleasure, joy and comfort to her husband. Aisha's utterances are studied in faculties of literature, her legal pronouncements are analyzed in colleges of law and her life and works are studied and researched by students and teachers of Muslim history (Jamal, 1971).

But one need not turn all the way back to the Islamic period and the case of Aisha for evidence of what women are capable of achieving. The Arab world today is replete with examples of the awakening and the mobilization of women. Clear evidence of this can be seen in the proliferation of organizations that encourage women's participation and promote their social, economic and political roles. Bahraini women's organizations for example have established the Bahrain Women's Union (BWU) which was a crucial and influential step to set up a strategy for women's participation in the social, political and economic decision-making process in the country. Indeed in 2006, 18 women ran for seats in Parliament and Lateefa al-Gaoud was elected to the Council of representatives.

In Iraq, the US State Department has begun implementing a $10 million grant program in which several non-profit organizations are assisting thousands Iraqi women in performing various functions in democratic life by training them in political leadership, advocacy, entrepreneurship and organization. In Jordan, Princess Basma Bint Talal initiated the establishment of the Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW) in 1992. The following year, the commission which is the highest policy-making forum in Jordan for women's issues and rights, formulated the National strategy for women which covers the political, legislative, economic, social, educational and health sectors.

Kuwait participated in a US sponsored regional program to train women activists working to develop an efficient plan for obtaining women's political rights. Women's rights activists hope to draw attention to the ways in which women are economically and legally disadvantaged in order to gain more support for political reform. In Lebanon, the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) is

striving to eliminate laws, traditions and customs that are intended to or otherwise result in gender-based discrimination.

In Morocco, there are ongoing efforts to improve the status of women through wide-reaching legislative reforms. The Women's Learning Partnership (WLP) proposed a national plan to integrate women into the country's economic development, the Plan d'action National pour l'integration de la Femme au Development (PANDIF) (unfortunately, PANDIF faces opposition because of specific reforms dealing with the Moudawwana, Morocco's civil status code that encompasses the family code governing women's status in society). For a final example, we can turn to Saudi Arabia where the Nahda Charitable society for women seeks the empowerment of women within the framework of Islamic law.

THE PREVALENCE OF NEGATIVE STEREOTYPING

According to the Arab Women Development Report, the literature on the portrayal of women in the Arab media is quite limited. Yet, the 23 studies conducted to measure the image of women portrayed in the Arab media have yielded startling results. Most of the studies, especially those conducted on the broadcast sector, focused only on analyzing the content of the drama such as movies and TV series or focused on the image of women in advertisements and video clips, neglecting other important programs such as newscasts, political talk shows, social programs and documentaries. The studies found that 78.68% of the images of women were negative. Research on the Arab media's depiction of women has focused mainly on the mental and psychological aspects of their portrayal.

The usage of women's bodies as sexual commodities or a vehicle of sexual arousal was found to be the main negative image used in the Arab media followed by an image of women who are in some way immoral. Other negative images included the portrayal of women as being illiterate of limited intellectual capability, inexperienced, materialistic, opportunistic, weak or dependent.

THE EGYPTIAN PRINT MEDIA

Although, Egyptian print media outlets vary between national, oppositional and other political parties, most portray women in a traditional, cultivated role. Several studies (Amira, 1992; Awatef, 1994) were conducted on Egyptian women's magazines to assess their approaches to covering women's issues. The studies showed that the magazines have generally focused on the traditional preoccupations of women such as fashion, cooking, cosmetics and home affairs. Although, one of the magazines, *Nesf El Donia* (half of the world) has political sections and *Hawaa* or (*Eve*) magazine focused more on the social development of Egyptian women, the others focus on fashion, decoration and cosmetics.

The issues of family bonds and problems such as parents relationships and methods of child-rearing, were given more space than issues related to women's social development. No closer look is given to the social reality of women and the expression of her duties and responsibilities in a more authentic form (A'liaa, 1985). These studies showed that little attention is given to rural women (Nahed, 1977) and that women's social development is regarded as important for the family and not for the woman's attainment of independence.

However, two independent newspapers at their launch in 2005, *Al-Masry al-Youm* (*The Egyptian Today*) and *Nahdat-Misr* (*The Egyptian Renaissance*) are considered an exception both publications have consistently depicted women outside of their conventional societal roles. These new newspapers reflect a different kind of reporting, one that goes hand in hand with the transitional Egyptian media system which is moving in a libertarian direction. Refreshingly, these two newspapers tend to convey a positive image of women and give quite a bit of attention to social, legislative, economic, cultural and political discrimination against women.

Nahdat Misr and *Al-Masry Al-Youm* pioneered what might be called the intervention text, that is, coverage of discrimination against women, sexual abuse in the work place and the harm caused by stereotypical perceptions of gender roles. Both studys have given attention to laws and practices related to discrimination against women by tackling issues of gender equality such as sexual harassment and abuse as well as criminal and other legal provisions that confer more power on men than on women.

These newspapers also discussed the discrimination of women in the field of journalism, stating that women should have a larger presence in the Press Syndicate. The coverage explored the obstacles to establishing new newspapers that give female reporters job opportunities and the need to eliminate these impediments. Discrimination against women in courts was discussed as well. Both newspapers have given ample attention to women's political rights, highlighting the efforts undertaken by women's organizations whether governmental or non-governmenta, to ensure that women are aware of their political rights. Both newspapers

criticized the Saudi government's policy of prohibiting women from participating in the parliamentary election. The newspapers discussed political issues such as fixing a quota for women in the Parliament. To their credit they portray educated women significantly more often than illiterate women.

Although, the two newspapers reflect a positive image of women, they lack coverage of women's participation in the economic field, neglecting issues such as women's low wages, economic rights, poor working conditions and exclusion from the economic decision-making process. Other weak points still exist such as the rare portrayal of lower class women. Yet, it is noteworthy that these newspapers have portrayed upper class women in progressive roles. Examples include Morocco's Queen Salma opening a social organization to help widows; the choice of a woman as Oman's Minister for National Development and Safaa Al Baz, head of the health and housing committee of the National council for Women, delivering lectures on increasing women's roles and political, economical and social participation.

The over-reporting of women in criminal news is another dimension of the negative portrayal of women in the Egyptian media. They are typically characterized as passive and treated as sexual objects instead of autonomous, thinking individuals. In addition, most of the women in criminal news are from the lower class which is considered a bias in news reporting and which in turn perpetuates a negative stereotype about the lower class. There are other important issues that the media still marginalize such as women's sports and health issues as well as the emotional, educational and developmental issues of female teenagers. Still, it is important to mention that both newspapers adequately represent mature adult women, the stage at which women are likely at the pinnacle of their professional achievement.

THE EGYPTIAN BROADCAST MEDIA

According to George Gerbner, father of Cultivation Theory, the mass media propagates attitudes and values in a given culture through the repetition of the same messages. The repetition of the traditional and negative representations of women cultivates these stereotypes and acts as a main obstacle to their achievement. In the study, conducted by Samia (1988), on the image of women in the Egyptian radio, results showed that positive images of women were displayed 22 times whereas the negative images were displayed 41 times. The positive points were discussed in five main themes, represented as follows: the ability of women to overcome difficulties to be independent and make decisions to offer help to friends

and relatives and to control and counteract their husband's greed. Yet, the negative points were discussed in twelve main themes, all of which reflect the passivity of a woman who is unable to feel secure, think independently and cope without a man by her side. It is noteworthy that a high percentage of the population depends on radio due to the high rate of illiteracy and the greater affordability of radios compared to television sets.

The high rate of listenership makes changing the negative portrayal of women on radio, all the more urgent. Research has found that almost all Egyptian television soap operas depict the family as the smallest social unit in society. One would naturally expect that the roles and relationships depicted in these programs would correspond roughly to the changes taking place in the broader economic, political and educational landscape. And clearly, profound changes have taken place in society at large, including with respect to the status of women. For example, women have gained greater access to education have entered the work force, occupy higher posts and have started to become economically independent.

These changes, instituting greater parity between men and women in the public sphere have in turn altered the relationships between male and female family members. However, the programs still exhibit men struggling with the developing status of women from her traditional role between serving him rather than sharing life with him.

THE EGYPTIAN MOVIE INDUSTRY

Another study (Aly, 2000) monitored the main characteristics of women in Egyptian movies. It was shown that 50% of movies focused on people living in cities while the other half gave attention to other sectors of Egyptian society. Other studies in the 1990s indicated that rural women were represented in no >5.4% of movies. Also, 57.4% of the characters represented in the movies were males while 42.6% were females. Indeed although, the percentage of females is lower than that of males, this percentage is considered a development in representing women characters in the 1990s.

In addition, Egyptian movies have tended to place women in an uncompetitive level educationally and have denigrated the divorced woman. Most of the Egyptian movies studied showed women enjoying a comfortable economic situation, a situation which does not reflect reality for most Egyptian women. These results confirm the findings of another study where it was found that television dramas are directed towards the middle-upper and the upper classes alone. This skewed image is

distorted even more by the fact that Egyptian movies mainly portray these relatively well-off women as housewives or university students and only a small fraction of them as professionals.

In a study on the impact of media in the formation of cultures, Khatib (2006) noted that Egyptian movies portray women as sexual objects. In addition, the movies tend to reinforce the idea that although women bear many social difficulties they cannot take leading positions. The results showed that a lack of concern for women's level of education appeared in 72% of the characters. All of the movies tended to place women in an uncompetitive level educationally such representations surely discourage women's advancement in higher education and participation in political life. The positive images portrayed kind and affectionate images of a mother, a religious woman and a woman punctual in her work.

Yet, the negative images emphasized her body and a preference for money over morals. In 9.7% of the representations, women used sexual acts and behaviour to curry favour from men. The movies also showed that women used illegal methods to gain money and suggested that women are indifferent towards their marital lives.

POVERTY, GENDER AND THE MEDIA WORLD IN NIGERIA

Poverty is a multi-faceted condition in most countries of the world; women represent more than half this population. It is documented that they perform the lowest paid activities and are concentrated in the low-end jobs and occupations. MacClintock writes that women do two thirds of the world's work, earn 10% of the world's income and own <1% of the world's property. In a country like Nigeria, culture and religion help to keep women in the chains of poverty, silencing and excluding them and allowing men to take the larger share of resources.

The media world over and Nigeria in particular seem to maintain the status quo through excluding women, giving them little voice, demeaning them through various forms behaviours and increasing their vulnerability. Yet, it is vital that this cycle is broken for the liberation of women as Roach suggests would imply the liberation of a host of other poor. The culture of silence need to be addressed in Nigerian media as poverty seem gradually to disappear in media reports, obliterated by stories about the rich, top government officials, heads of government and their relations. Ordinary Nigerians which include the Nigerian women are not key players in the media (this can

be observed in Nigeria where media houses/business are dominated men single media house). Issues concerning the majority are simply avoided. The Nigerian media like her counterpart in other developing countries have been criticise for its empty content in emphasising news and reports such as a former head of state has called for an improvement in the life for rural dwellers; the head of the civil service has said that structures are being put in place that will generate job opportunities and fight poverty. Oftentimes, who said what becomes more pronounced than what was said, i.e., what was said becomes less bearing than the actual news. One thing is clear, the presence of Nigerian women in the media is inhibited by governmental bodies, media owners, even among journalists who are still not gender sensitised.

CONCLUSION

The media is becoming more powerful and complex therefore, it is essential to re-establish a balance in order to secure respect for women's human rights and dignity. In order to impose restraints on sex stereotypes and sexist image in the different media and in the world of publicity, measures, mechanisms and bodies to regulate the content of media productions are essential.

The media has an enormous and far reaching impact on women's empowerment. A growing number of organisations are being created to strengthen women's voices in the news media. It is easy to overlook the profound impact the media has on the view of the world. Whether we get the information from a local radio station in the country or from international stations the media provides a filter that shapes the notions of what is important. The media tells us what events warrant the attention, how to perceive those events, who has the expertise to interpret the events and what they mean for the lives.

Even in the most objective of news organisations, the process of deciding what is news and how that news is presented is influenced by the life experiences and perceptions of media decision makers.

In nearly every country in the world and particularly in developing countries, the vast majority of decision makers are men for this reason, the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF) founded the African Women's Media Centre (AWMC) based in Senegal to help women gain access to these decision making roles to promote news coverage of issues affecting women and society by supporting women in media leadership roles and providing access to education, skills training and resources.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Women in media are to make sure that woman as subjects of analysis are not presented as the subordinate sex. It need not continue to be defended on grounds that media simply reflects reality of women's legal, political, economic and social powerlessness. The images of women emerging form the print media would reflect distribution of power and mechanisms of control in a vivid way. When the framework of media expands to admit women in their development stories, it would reflect this expansion. This way, the ideological control on women's self perceptions will gradually vanish and women will speak in their own voice.

Media has to perform a special role of opinion creation and may be an in-house cultivation of alternate culture. It is clear that the stereotypes which exist in the media's portrayal of women do not generally originate with media. They arise from beliefs widespread in society as whole. Therefore, media must create transformation of women's images by presenting more positive aspects of these with an express view of modifying them. There should be occasional workshops organized to bring together women media personnel in touch with women activists and other professionals.

National communication policy should provide tough media norms. Self-restrained is a must, particularly on women's issues. The child-bearing responsibility of women should be the concern of everybody and all facilities, concessions, etc., in allowing her to fulfil the related responsibilities should be a matter of right and not a reason for discrimination.

Lastly, it is pertinent to say here that gone are the days when the media was considered to be no place for a woman, times have changed to more and more women joining the fourth estate. However, just as women in the larger society have broken many traditional barriers on politics, economics and social areas while their male counterparts have undergone less of an attitudinal change, women journalists too have to cope with similar biases within the profession. In the coming years, the number of women covering hard beats will undoubtedly grow, just as more men will become interested in writing on softer issues but whether this will also be accompanied with a change in perceptions is the moot point.

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