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**POWER, GENDER AND HARMFUL EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN
JOURNALISTS REPORTING BOKO HARAM
INSURGENCY IN NIGERIA**

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SECTION 3:
MEDIA, POWER AND
GENDER PRESENTATIONS



POWER, GENDER AND HARMFUL EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN JOURNALISTS REPORTING BOKO HARAM INSURGENCY IN NIGERIA

Lauratu Umar ABDUSALAM



Introduction

Unequalities between men and women are one of the most enduring trends in the allocation of power. From the private domain of the home to the highest levels of political decision-making, the collection of roles, behaviours, and attitudes that cultures designate as suitable for women and men (referred to as "gender") can be the source, consequence, and mechanism of power relations. By supporting and relying on gender norms, larger organizations and structures can also influence how power is distributed. This power dynamic often plays out in the media sector. Journalism has been regarded as a male-dominated profession. Steiner (2017) opines that when American colleges established journalism schools in the early 20th century, they did not disallow women since they did not foresee that they would apply.

Until the 1980s, U.K. journalists received their training on the job through an apprenticeship system. Hence, the greatest obstacle for U.K. women was getting accepted as an apprentice. Journalism textbooks and teaching materials often

discouraged women from considering journalism as a serious career because they treat men's writing as the exception rather than the rule wherever it was taught. These included materials authored by women themselves (Steiner, 1992). The majority of journalism textbooks and curricula now seek to neglect gender concerns by "naturalizing" male-invented and occasionally advantageous professional norms and standards (Steiner, 2017). Journalism training in Nigeria follows the US model. There was no segregation between men and women in terms of training and enrollment of students for mass communication and journalism courses. But when it comes to practice, the margin between women in the newsroom and the top echelon of the media industry is still very wide compared to males. Courses such as media and gender have been mainstreamed into mass communication curricula in Nigeria (Pate *et al.*, 2017).

Although not enough is being done, a little and, conscious effort is being made to address the structural flaws in the power dynamics between the two sexes in the media industry. However, the reality in the field differs. The biggest allegations concerning gender disparities in reporting are made in the areas of war and conflict (Steiner, 2017). Women are allegedly more likely to cover collateral damage, sexual assault as a technique, and the wider effects and human cost of warfare, while males place more emphasis on military strategy (Elwood-Akers, 1988). However, some, particularly female combat reporters, maintained that women do not write differently, although editors occasionally assign writers based on their gender. Women journalists frequently talk about being asked to cover a conflict from the "women's perspective." They often reluctantly accepted these assignments because it was their only opportunity to cover a war, or occasionally because they wanted to be featured at the top of the newscast or on the front page (Bartimus *et al.*, 2002). Contrary to common Western misconceptions, another research indicated that Arab males react emotionally to this type of news whereas Arab women prefer a distant, unemotional tone when reporting on pain and suffering (Mellor, 2012).

Explicating the gender perspective of dangerous beat coverage is critical to put to rest the argument of power dynamics in the media sector concerning the functionality of both sexes. Those leaning towards the patriarchal angle of the divide would argue that, with all things being equal, women would probably choose to cover soft news while men are likely to choose hard beat over soft beat (Byerly, 2014). The issue of vertical segregation in the news media, where women are disproportionately underrepresented in important editorial decision-making jobs, has long been highlighted by research throughout the world. However, horizontal segregation where there are gendered divides of reporting-related tasks remains a problem. The majority of female reporters are still tasked with covering the majority of the soft news topics like features, the arts, education, and health, even though it appears that more of them are covering hard news rounds like politics and business. Most people believe that female reporters are still pigeonholed in these traditionally female story areas (North, 2016).

However, Steiner (2017) argues that the most likely demography to believe that gender matters or that it ought to matter more is female activists and academics. Women journalists, according to informal surveys by an advocacy group, think they provide a unique, more human angle viewpoint to the news, despite some women's claims that "news is news" and ethics are ethics. Similar to how many members of one women's advocacy group claimed to sympathize with women and place an emphasis on personal and emotional aspects. But because so many journalists agreed that female supervisors

and editors are even more macho than their male counterparts, experts have charged the respondents with being ignorant of gender issues and having normalized male-identified concerns of a male profession (Ross, 2001).

Statement of the Problem

The threat and safety threats experienced by journalists covering the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria's northeast area have been documented by a series of studies (Pate & Idris, 2017; Abdulsalam 2021; Poopola, 2012). However, the isolated cases of women journalists and the dynamics of gender-specific threats have not been exhaustively investigated. Other studies have explored the gender perspective of safety in Nigeria (Unaegbu, 2017), yet there is a paucity of literature on the experience of the female journalists that reported the Boko Haram insurgency at the peak of the war. The study's goal is to look into the risks and dangers that female journalists experience when reporting Boko Haram's activities, as well as their understanding of safety threats and the safety and security management strategies that journalists and their media organizations practised when covering the insurgency. In the coverage of the Boko Haram insurgency, despite being a war that targets women specifically in terms of the insurgents' disdain for women, women journalists still cover the war without fear. The war also reveals the often-argued line in power dynamics in the media sector.

Research Objectives

- i. To examine the power dynamics within the context of reporting the Boko Haram insurgency and understand how these dynamics influence the experiences of women journalists.
- ii. To investigate the gendered challenges faced by women journalists reporting on the Boko Haram insurgency.
- iii. To explore the harmful experiences and psychological effects endured by women journalists reporting on the Boko Haram insurgency and identify potential strategies to mitigate these negative impacts.

Gender, Power and Safety of Women Journalists

There is a strong link between power and gender. The interlink is at the centre of the debate on the safety of women journalists. Culturally, gender shapes power, from the 'private' relationships of the household to the highest levels of newsroom decision-making. Being a "lady" is frequently associated with being helpless (quiet, obedient, accommodating). In contrast, a 'real man' is strong (outspoken, in charge, and able to enforce his will), especially when it comes to women. The power disparities that these gender roles are built on continue unabated. For instance, a significant obstacle to women's access to decision-making is the belief held by many men and women that it is not "natural" for women to speak up in public (Melki & Mallat, 2019;). Power equals masculinity also contributes to the explanation of why powerful people frequently exhibit gendered domination. *According to a report by the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) (2021), "all things remaining equal, it will take at least a further 67 years to close the average gender equality gap in traditional news media" (p. 4). This shows that the power disparity between men and women in the media is still persistent despite the recent progress.*

Women's involvement in the media in terms of women being the subject on one hand and being sources on the other hand has increased. The survey by the Global Media Monitoring Project (2021) found that "at the global average level, mainstream news media

are currently at the midway point to gender parity in subjects and sources” (p.4). The percentage of female subjects and sources increased by one point to 25% between 2015 and 2020. The broadcast news media had the best visibility for the single-point improvement, which is the first since 2010.

World over, there has been a drastic improvement in the involvement of women in the news. North American news media continue to be the finest in the world despite a three-point fall in the percentage of female topics and sources since 2015. Since 1995, European news media have advanced on this metric more than Pacific area media have during the previous five years. Except for Africa, all other areas' media have improved over the past quarter century by three to twelve points. The Covid-19 story, which is expected to be the big news item of 2020, dominated the science and health headlines. A decline in women's voice and visibility in the tales has coincided with the pandemic's stratospheric rise in the news value of this important subject. While the percentage of science/health stories in the news increased greatly in 2020 compared to previous times (from 10% in 2005 to 17%), the representation of women in these stories decreased by five points after rising steadily between 2000 and 2015 (GMMP, 2021).

In both digital and traditional media, the proportion of women in the news in North America and the Pacific has crossed the crucial 30% mark. Concerning print and broadcast news, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East all perform below the worldwide norms. In North American digital social and legal journalism, gender parity in themes and sources has been achieved for the sole region and topic (GMMP, 2021).

Age is also another important factor in working against women in the media. The GMMP first looked into how persons who are 80 years of age and older were portrayed in the press in 2020, a year marked by the global Covid-19 epidemic when being elderly was seen as a risk factor. The report showed that the oldest age group had little coverage in the news: barely 3% of newspaper readers were over 80, and less than 1% of television news viewers were over 80. Even more so than the men in that age bracket, women 80 and older were invisible. Overall, males who are 50 years of age or older are quite likely to be in the news in print media; 42% of all news subjects fall into this age category. Men's visibility peaks from 50 to 64 years old, whereas women's biggest age group, is 35 to 49. Women over 50 have grown less prominent over time in publications and on television. Compared to 15% of males, only 3% of all women in the news are between the ages of 65 and 79 (GMMP, 2021).

According to the Global Media Monitoring Project (2021), the reporter gender gap is the same in Asia, Europe, and Latin America. Pacific media have progressed slower than the rest of the world, but they are currently the second-best performers after their Caribbean counterparts. Women reporters are more likely than males to resort to female topics and sources. The gender source selection disparity appeared to be closing according to the 2015 findings, but in the 2020 wave, the difference more than doubled to reach 7 points. Currently, women make up 31% of subjects and sources in conventional news articles, compared to men's 24% for the same subjects and sources. In terms of the propensity to directly challenge gender stereotypes, to bring up gender inequality issues, and to make reference to laws or policies that support gender equality or human rights, stories produced by women journalists tend to be of a marginally higher quality from a gender perspective.

Remuneration and payment also create some sort of power in the media space. Looking at the gap in terms of pay and remuneration between the two genders, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) (2012) opines that there is wanton inequality in the remuneration of both women and men in the media sector. Male remuneration, benefits and incentives are more than their female counterpart in the sixteen countries studied. There has also been evidence of gender-based pay differences in the news media industry globally (Ross & Padovani, 2016). Ibrahim, Abba-Aji, Adamu and Thi (2022) argued that in Nigeria, the story is the same. They observed that “factors like negotiation, nepotism and unstructured promotions sometimes create an uneven wage situation (which is open to both genders) but usually favourable to more male journalists” (pp. 324-325).

Theoretical Framework

The research was based on the New Institutional Theory, which claims that institutions operate as a buffer between macro-level influences and micro-level activity. As a result, outcomes are determined by the interaction of institutional and non-institutional macro-variables over time. The focus of the new institutional theory on how institutions shape organizational practices makes it pertinent for research connections between journalism, power and gender dynamic of security threats, in the media industry (Lowrey, 2012; Jamil, 2017).

In reaction to the worry that political or societal situations could not be adequately described as the rational conclusion of the combination of individual or organizational behaviour, new institutionalism emerged from sociology, political science, and other social science fields (March & Olsen, 1983). Instead, institutions themselves are actors that have an impact on how economic resources and political power are distributed, which in turn has an impact on institutions themselves (March & Olsen, 1983). Institutions enforce order in a potentially emergent environment in this way (March & Olsen, 1983).

The profession of journalism is revered and regarded as an institution itself. It has three qualities that define it as an institution: As formal frameworks, they "allow as well as limit" (Cook, 2005, p. 67) or establish the guidelines for personal decisions and socially acceptable behaviour (i.e., NUJ, NPC, NBC, etc). They reach over distance and persist across time (Cook, 2005). Finally, "institutions are intended to preside over a sociological and/or political sector" (Cook, 2005, p. 70). Each of these three criteria is met by journalism (Cook, 2005).

The institution of journalism spans the fields of politics, business, culture, and society (Cook, 2006; Sparrow, 2006). Because of this, journalism is reliant on "vast cultural, social, political, and economic organizations" (Lowrey & Gade, 2011). Thus, institutional rules serve as the guiding principle for journalists' work practices (Cook, 2005; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014).

Methodology

This study utilized both primary and secondary data. The primary data were sourced through interviews with five women journalists who are members of the Nigeria Association of Women Journalists (NAWOJ) in the northeast which comprises Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Taraba, and Yobe states. The reason is to get their opinion about their experiences while covering the Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast region of Nigeria. While the secondary data relied on relevant documents and literature related to the topic

being investigated. Most respondents are first-degree or second-degree holders in mass communication who occupy middle management and senior executive positions in their firms ranging from 10 to 30 years. They are all members of the Nigeria Association of Women Journalists and have a lot of expertise and experience. All newspapers were privately owned, although broadcast media reflected both private and state ownership. The study used narrative analysis in presenting its data.

Findings and Discussion

The Power Dynamics Of Women's Experience Reporting The Boko Haram Insurgency

The Boko Haram situation in Maiduguri in 2009 was Nigerian journalists' first exposure to covering extremism, terrorism, or significant domestic upheavals. Reporters watched the conflicts as they took place. They attentively watched the audible noises of heavy weapons, bomb blasts, military progress, and the arrival of reinforcements. They also witnessed the deaths and wreckage of the populace and their property; the defiance of the terrorists and the overrun of their enclave; and the arrest and extrajudicial execution of Muhammad Yusuf, the head of Boko Haram. Many of the journalists were startled by the events, however, despite being afraid, threatened, and pursued, they continued to report the story as it happened. Covering the terror war that wreaked havoc on North East required a combination of expertise, daring, and devotion.

Despite all that, women journalists did not run away from the challenge. They covered the carnage as it unfolded and exposed themselves to both physical and emotional attacks. A female journalist, FJ1, was confronted by military troops while reporting the April 2011 attack on the INEC office (Vanguard, 2011). They brandished pistols at her and demanded what she was searching for outside at that hour of the night as a lady. She was also threatened by the rebels not to reveal her face while covering them. According to FJ1 testimony, the militants sent her husband a message saying, "Tell your wife never to expose her face on TV when she goes covering our case". One other female journalist working with British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) FJ2 had to relocate from the epicentre of the war after it became glaring that the insurgents were after her life.

War reporting is largely thought of as a male domain since it is the highest profile, most perilous, and most competitive beat in journalism. However, a small number of women have always pushed for such positions, and they are increasingly succeeding. As they did during the First and Second World Wars and in Korea, the U.S. and U.K. military and news organizations can no longer use the justification that the front lacks restrooms for women to bar women from receiving war postings. The first major conflict that women (the vast majority of whom are from the United States) covered was the Vietnam War, but frequently as independent contractors. Women make up about half of the American press corps in Iraq. In Nigeria, the story is slightly different. Men dominated the journalism scene, especially in a conservative northern environment. As a result, only strong women are free to practice journalism without fear of intimidation or being slut-shamed as 'yar iska'.

The Harmful Experiences and Potential Survival Strategies

The study discovered that the local media outlets covering the insurgency at the time neither did environmental risk assessments nor realized the risks associated with covering Boko Haram before covering the conflict. As a result of the insurgency, some media

organizations did send reporters to the northeast region, although they were able to perform assessments before doing so, whilst other media organizations chose to do so after suffering casualties. Despite the assessment, the level of preparation and equipment for journalists demonstrates that media companies did not fully grasp the scope of the risk and hazards their correspondents would face at the front lines. The investigation discovered that editors and bureau heads simply instruct the reporters in the area to produce articles while sitting in their comfort zones, paying little attention to the risk or the difficulty of the terrain.

Findings indicate that media firms failed to give their women reporters a safety handbook and incident reporting instructions before they entered dangerous areas. Others only provide oral guidelines. Reporting guideline is crucial since the way the conflict was covered has put several reporters at risk from the insurgents. In truth, several media outlets do not offer any safety advice or internal reporting requirements. The lack of safety training, reporting manuals and similar other prerequisites of dangerous beat coverage put women journalists in severe danger. As a result of the lack of incident reporting guidelines, the study found that the majority of the women journalists resort to reporting the insurgency in a way that will not displease the insurgents and the military. Despite that, they were not shielded from attacks.

There are several justifications for the recent surge of female war correspondents. At least in part, it is economic. Because overseas offices had been reduced, particularly after 9/11, many news organizations suddenly required reporters in conflict areas, but some men were reluctant to take risks for career advancement especially considering that war correspondents are constantly the target of assaults. Smart television producers realized that lovely features soften the look of body bags and that spectators would even find it enjoyable to see women acting in traditionally masculine ways (Cohen, 2001). Most women journalists that covered the insurgency were already located in the region before the war started. So, it was easier for them to adjust to the new reality with their male counterpart even though some male journalists fled the scene at the instance of the first blast. International media organizations also employ the services of some of them as freelancers. This is logical and more economical than sending in their staff who do not understand the terrain or the complexity of the war.

The Gendered Challenges Faced By Women Journalists

There is also the tendency of women to use their sexuality as a weapon to cultivate sources. Under normal circumstances, some sources are more open to female journalists than male journalists. In the northeast, women journalists were able to interact with family members of the insurgents and cultivated sources amongst them. Steiner (2017) argues that while this may incite animosity among competitors, editors may be more eager than ever to allow women to use their sexuality. Many women who have covered conflicts in the past talked about taking advantage of their feminine privilege: their visibility let them stand out at press conferences and have their questions answered first; troops who were hungry for female interaction assisted them in several crucial ways. Arab women journalists have recently claimed that they can pass checkpoints more easily than males can. Women's very subordinate status helps them get away with subterfuges (Playdon, 2002). Similarly, women journalists sometimes find it easy to navigate military checkpoints. In another instance, they are subject to selective attack by both the security agents and the insurgents.

The dual nature of sexuality as a weapon means it can be positive and negative. Women journalists covering wars are now faced with a case of sexual violence and harassment in the northeast. Steiner (2017) buttresses that public critics and even journalists themselves claim that the trend is now focused on violence, particularly sexual assault, against women in conflict areas. There is a significant danger of rape and sexual assault for female combat correspondents. More than half of the 29 female reporters who participated in the study who were on assignment reported experiencing sexual harassment (Matloff, 2007). In the northeast, because the majority of the women journalists are married and divulging information on rape or sexual assault can have grievous consequences. The majority of them would rather not share such information with anyone. Feinstein and Sinyor (2009) also attest that reporters who have been sexually assaulted often in battle zones rarely come out, whether out of humiliation, a need to stay in the macho club, or most likely a fear of having their assignments cancelled. Men and women both have significant rates of post-traumatic stress disorder and alcohol use as self-medication due to the pressures of kidnapping, major injury, and death.

The study is anchored on the new institution theory. Institutions are shaped by gender, and this has an impact on how power is distributed. The majority of political and economic institutions, which have historically been dominated by males, were created with (elite) men in mind. They depend on men's dominance over women and idealize "masculine" patterns of behaviour. The authority of males over women and the power of the most "masculine" men over everyone else is therefore "locked in" by these institutions (media industry). Consider the political parties. Their male-dominated cultures frequently render them inaccessible to women, although they are important gatekeepers for women's political involvement. For instance, female politicians in Nigeria have complained that crucial party decisions are frequently made in bars, which are typically off-limits to them (Abdulsalam, 2022).

Similarly, the secretariats of the Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), which serve as a melting point for journalists in Nigeria are highly limited in engaging women. Within the context of this study, the Chapel created by the journalists covering the Boko Haram insurgency had limited women (FJ3). Not because the women were not interested but because the way the institution was structured does not allow for the free involvement of women. Therefore, the new institution will protect and balance power between men and women covering the dangerous beat. As Ryfe (2006) argues, "Institutional orders will reproduce in the absence of a shock to the system" (p. 137). If women journalists continue to operate inside an institutional structure that has not addressed issues like threats and assaults, safety training and procedure, proper welfare and compensation, etc., power disparity in the media will persist. The Boko Haram insurgency, which was a shock to the system, has opened up options for new paths, giving women journalists the needed leverage to renegotiate power in the media industry.

Conclusion

This study has discussed, albeit, not conclusively, the issue of power and gender in the media industry as it relates to the experience of women journalists that covered the Boko Haram insurgency. If anything, the findings will put to rest, the argument that women can hardly survive covering dangerous terrain. That line of argument is borne out of male power domineering tendency and effort to make war reporting a masculine beat. It has highlighted how power dynamics in the media sector affect both sexes' performance. The

majority of the women journalists that covered the insurgency went through the same turmoil as their male counterparts with some additional threats due to their gender.

Steiner (2017) opines that the women's movement and the increased prominence of women themselves have transformed (and challenged) the media industry in addition to changing economic limitations, technology, audiences, and professional conventions. Journalists still disagree on whether gender matters in modern war coverage, yet many women consider themselves professionals before they consider themselves journalists. Women who work in the most strongly gendered fields sports and war reporting must establish their credentials by fitting in with the boys. Other than that, women have much fewer restrictive options when it comes to gender performance. Women are no longer limited to a women's neighbourhood or derided as unfeminine if they work in the newsroom. Even women who experience significant sexism on their own or in groups do not always become gender aware, much less adopt methods to work that are specifically tailored to women.

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