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Where are the women? Evaluating visibility of Nigerian female politicians in news media space

Abstract

This study examines the spatial representation of Nigerian women politicians in the news media of Africa's most populous country. Through a content analysis of newspaper coverage of four high-profile women politicians during the 2015 electoral cycle, the study investigates the visibility of the women in three national newspapers. The analysis shows that women do not only occupy limited space in the news media but are also marginalised in political news despite decades of advocacy for gender equality. Although women have become more active politically since the end of military dictatorship in 1999, their participation and engagement in politics is not reflected in media coverage. The study argues that the degree of visibility of women in political news entrenches marginalisation and reinforces assumptions that 'only men do politics.' From this standpoint, the study illustrates how newspapers reinforce patriarchal understanding of politics and consequently highlights the manifest and latent obstacles that women encounter in the political arena. It comes to the conclusion that the relative absence of women in media spaces is emblematic of public perception of their political status.

Keywords

Women politicians, gendered mediation, Nigerian politics, Elections, Journalism, Newspapers

Introduction

In the years since 1999, Nigerian female politicians have become more active in the political sphere following an end to military dictatorship. The return of the country to civilian rule has expanded the democratic space and more women are participating in party politics at a level that was unimaginable under military rule. However, women's increasing interest in politics has not enhanced their visibility in Nigerian news media. Women's limited visibility is not only in terms of simple mention in editorial content but also in the nature of coverage that they receive. Not only are

women politicians marginalised as subjects of news but also as sources of news. This limited visibility is normatively problematic because it reinforces patriarchal understanding of politics and women's political participation. Although women have achieved significant political progress they are still contending with obstacles in time and space because they are traditionally located outside competitive politics. This is evident in the way they are often represented in the media as powerless and lacking agency. As powerful agents of social change, the news media exercise considerable influence in the construction of public understanding of political issues through their power to mediate societal discourses. As Tresch (2009:67) argues, 'the media are the key intermediary between political actors and citizens.' The news media have the power to disseminate information necessary to inform audiences about politics and 'media coverage of politics allows voters to know the important political contexts within which they are making their voting decision, and the competing policies of candidates of major and minor parties' (Washbourne 2010: 6). The media also provide the space for the electorate to engage in politics and set the agenda for public discourse. Although the media do not have a monopoly over political communication, they have the power to influence political agenda. Against this backdrop, an examination of the visibility of female politicians in media space can provide insight into the nature of media representation of women in politics.

To explore the way in which Nigerian newspapers represent female politicians, this study focuses on the visibility of women in political news. Visibility in this context goes beyond the degree of media attention; it also extends to the nature of the framing of the coverage. While the quantity of coverage can be a simple 'measure indicator because it deals with the number of mentions, interpreting the quality of coverage – the lens through which a woman is seen – is a much more complex task because it is subject to subtler gendered constraints' (Campus, 2013, 39). At this point it is necessary to clarify the concept of visibility as used in this study. In the case being examined here, visibility refers to having media presence which expedites publicity. The term is also used to refer to simple media presence in terms of frequency of appearance in political news. It is worth noting that the visibility of Nigerian female politicians in media space is textured by the intersection of social, cultural, economic and religious factors that undergirds women's experiences in Nigeria. A key issue that also influences women's political experience is their gender

identity, which often clashes with their other identities in ways that limit and curtail their freedom to participate in political activities. The relative absence of women in media space consequently entrenches their marginalisation, reinforces assumptions that 'only men do politics' and underrates women's political participation. As Hall et al noted, the media tend to 'reproduce symbolically the existing structure of power in society's institutional order' (2013, 61). This is evident in the way the news media privilege the powerful in society. Women's invisibility in media space can also be attributed to the common understanding of their place in society. As Lorraine Dowler, a feminist geographer, argues: 'the confinement of women's identities to the domestic/private arena has promoted the development of gender tropes whereby women appear frail, vulnerable and become the protectors 'only' of their immediate private spaces of the home' (Dowler, 1988:163). The construction of the political space as a public arena consequently mobilises gender identities and alienates women as they are traditionally confined to private spaces. Dowler and Sharpe (2001:173) argue that 'private spaces have been associated with the home and designated as feminine, whereas public spaces (or spaces outside the home) have been determined as masculine.' The political arena counts as public space and political space is used in this study to refer to 'multiple locations of power contestation' (Tripp, 1988:92) and how those locations are represented in media coverage of politics.

Media, politics and women politicians

Studies, especially those from a feminist perspective, have shown that coverage of politics often manifests gender bias, with women 'having a harder time to make the news than their male counterparts' (Tresch, 2009:74). In addition, the representation of women politicians in the media is routinely gendered (Carter et al, 1998, Ross & Sreberny-Mohammadi, 2000, Gidengil and Everitt, 1999, O'Neill and Savigny, 2014). Elizabeth Gidengil and Joanna Everitt, for example, examined news frames in the coverage of party leaders in Canadian elections and noted that the speech of 'women leaders was subject to more interpretation by the media and was reported in more negative and aggressive language.' Their study concluded that 'gendered mediation may hinder women's chances of electoral success' (2003, 209). A more recent study of coverage of female politicians in the British press also highlighted a gender bias against women. Deirdre O'Neill and Heather Savigny (2014) argue that

the way in which women are reported (or ignored) could have consequences for the democratic process. These views resonate with Liesbert van Zoonen's argument about the way in which the 'media reflect society's dominant social values and symbolically denigrate women, either by not showing them at all, or by depicting them in stereotypical roles' (1994, 17). In sum, 'by and large, media content still reflects a masculine vision of the world' (Galagher 2002, 18) and as a result reinforces political life that thrives on gender differences. Karen Ross and Margie Comrie's study of gender, politics and news illustrates clear bias against a female candidate in favour of a male challenger. Their study focused on reportage about two party leaders in New Zealand. The present study builds on these foundations by exploring the spatial representation of Nigerian female politicians in news media space during an electoral cycle to illustrate the extent of gender bias in media coverage of politics.

Empirical evidence generated by decades of research illustrates the power of the news media to shape and influence public perception (McQuail, 1977; Cohen, 1963; McCombs & Estrada, 1997). As agenda-setters, the press exercises a discretionary power to structure political realities through the salience it gives to events and issues. The news media, through their agenda-setting power, attract and direct 'attention to problems, solutions or people in ways which can favour those with power and correlatively divert attention from rival individuals or groups....The media can confer status or confirm legitimacy' (McQuail, 1977, 90). Bernard Cohen (1963) puts this in perspective in his oft quoted comment about the press being successful in directing people to think about particular issues. The reverse is also possible — diversion of public attention from certain issues is equally significant — because the media have a capacity to ignore. As a result, issues and events that are ignored by the media might not register in public consciousness. McCombs and Estrada explain that 'elements prominent in the media picture become prominent in the audience's picture...[and] over time, elements emphasised on the media agenda come to be regarded as important on the public agenda' (1997, 237). In other words, elements not selected for prominence are ignored by the public.

The implication here is that the news selection process has important outcomes for the agenda-setting role of the press. As Negrine has pointed out, 'the news values and news judgements [of journalists] which determine the content of the media not

only direct our thinking to specific areas which the media define as 'important' but, conversely, direct our thinking away from other 'unimportant' areas' (Negrine, 1996, 4). This is not to suggest that the audience automatically acknowledges an issue is important simply because the media say so, but coverage does convey a suggestion of importance and, as Lazarsfeld and Merton noted, 'recognition by the press or radio or magazine or newsreels testifies that one has arrived, that one is important enough to have been singled out from the large anonymous masses, that one's behaviour and opinions are significant enough to require public notice' (1969:69). Put differently, press coverage of politics influences the way in which people think about issues raised in news reports because the media are essential to democracy, and a democratic election is impossible without the media. 'A free and fair election is not only about the freedom to vote and the knowledge of how to cast a vote, but also about a participatory process where voters engage in public debate and have adequate information about parties, policies, candidates and the election process itself in order to make informed choices' (ACE, 2012:9).

The media's power to shape public discourse on the place of women in society has been acknowledged by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, IPU, an international organisation of Parliaments. In its debates about women in politics, the IPU asserts that

the media can help to instil among the public the idea that women's participation in political life is an essential part of democracy (and) can also take care to avoid giving negative or minimizing images of women and their determination and capacity to participate in politics, stressing the importance of women's role in economic and social life and in the development process in general (ipu.org).

Given that the expansion of women's political participation has critical implication for democracy, the media's role, which has been recognised as being crucial and pivotal in strengthening and extending democratic space, thus becomes a major influence of public perception of women politicians. In Nigeria, as in some other parts of the world, politicians are treated according to their gender and their experiences of politics differ. 'Men are more visible and dominant in both media and elections; and gender stereotypes prevail in both. These differences are mutually reinforcing in the sense that less visibility of women in the media impacts their political success; and fewer women politicians means fewer news stories focusing on women leaders'

(ACE, 2012:16-17). Ross and Comrie suggest that 'if candidates are not put in front of voters, name recognition is hard to mobilise and this is not only a disaster for women involved but damages the wider political process by denying women's talents and experiences' (2011:970). This argument is consistent with findings of Gail Baitinger's study of women's presence in American news media, which was predicated on the understanding that the 'media influence what voters learn about politicians' (2015:580). That study highlighted the far reaching impact of the absence of women in media space and argued that limited visibility translates into fewer opportunities to influence the political agenda. 'Thus, women's relative absence from influential media appearances is likely to have an impact on perceptions of the role of women in today's political arena and foster concerns about democratic legitimacy and inclusivity' (Baitinger, 2015:580).

Nigerian women in politics

Although Nigeria is recognised as one of Africa's most influential countries, it is not in the vanguard of championing gender parity in politics and the level of women's engagement and participation has not improved significantly since the return to civilian rule in 1999. It is notable that only three women out of 109 senators were elected in the 'founding' election of 1999, which signalled a new democratic regime and marked a major milestone in a political history that had been dominated by military rule since the country's political independence from Britain in 1960. In November 2013, the *Economist* reported that Nigeria had only increased its proportion of female representation in parliament from five per cent in the 2007 election to a paltry seven per cent in 2011. Compared to Rwanda, which holds a world record of 64 per cent of women in parliament, in Nigeria, women politicians are still 'far from gaining significant visibility at any level of the political system. Women's underrepresentation in Nigerian politics stands in contra-position to sustained and increasing advocacy campaign seeking to bolster their participation in politics and decision making' (Nelson, 2012, 86). The marginalisation of women in the media reflects the patriarchal system that undergirds the country's socio-cultural and political structures.

Although journalists instinctively claim to be impartially objective, the reality is that they are products of their environment. As Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1956)

noted several decades ago, the role of the press is dependent on the society to which it belongs because ‘the press always takes on the form and coloration of the social or political structures within which it operates. Especially, it reflects the system of social control whereby the relations of individuals and institutions are adjusted.’ (Siebert et al, 1956, 1). To understand how press systems work, Siebert et al made the point that it was necessary to understand the ‘social systems in which the press functions. To see the social systems in their true relationship to the press, one has to look at certain basic beliefs and assumptions which the society holds’ (Siebert et al, 1956, 2). The press reflects dominant beliefs and assumptions prevalent in its environment. In Nigeria, religion, ethnicity and gender are critical factors in politics. The intersection of these factors shapes women’s place in society.

The dominant societal discourses are also reflected in the media and as Ross (2004) argues, the hegemonic worldview that underpins the media business favours male dominance and consequently disadvantages women as evident in media messages about women and their place, life and role in society. Ross traces this enduring trend in news discourses to the culture of newsrooms, which she describes as ‘microcosmic environments that constitute sites of considerable contestation about gender and power’ (Ross, 2004, 63). Braden also makes the point that rather than mirror the whole of society, the media tend to reflect the values of those who assign, report, and produce the news’ (Braden, 1996, 3).

Gender bias in coverage of politics is by no means peculiar to Nigerian newspapers; it is a trend that has been documented in decades of research (Norris and Sanders, 2003, Ross, 2004, Adcock, 2010, Ross and Carter, 2011). These studies focused primarily on the West and consolidated democracies. The present study makes a contribution to the literature on women in political media by exploring the issue from a different perspective and examining the nature and pattern of coverage of female politicians by newspapers in the South. It suggests that the pattern of reportage is emblematic of the position of women in Nigeria’s political system. Not only is the space occupied by women in the Nigerian political landscape unexplored in scholarly debate, it is also under-explored in public discourse. Elsbeth Robson, (1999) in a commentary on a study of women and environmental change in the Nigerian Niger Delta, noted that Nigerian women ‘suffer direct discrimination, in addition to which they are not immune from the burdens patriarchy places on women in terms of their

responsibilities for reproductive tasks... (1999:405). These burdens constitute obstacles to political participation and engagement and reflect the intersection of gender, culture and social structures.

Methodological and conceptual approach

This study primarily examines the visibility of four high-profile female politicians in three Nigerian national newspapers – *The Guardian*, *The Punch* and *The Daily Trust*. The publications were selected on the basis of their political stance and ethno-geopolitical orientation. *The Guardian*, which was founded in February 1983, is one of the most prestigious newspapers in Nigeria. It claims to be the flagship of Nigerian journalism and is recognised as an agenda setter in the construction of political reality. It is also a ‘favourite of the intellectuals’ and ‘respected for its independent, sober views’ (Olukoyun 2004, 75). The paper can be described as a prestige newspaper because of its elitist perspective on national issues. Its contents reflect authoritative opinion and reinforce dominant positions on national issues. *The Punch* was first published in 1971 and today is one of the largest circulating dailies in the country. Its tabloid-like editorial style has earned it a certain level of popularity across the country. *The Daily Trust* is the most widely distributed English language newspaper in northern Nigeria, and a recognised voice for that part of the country. It is perceived to lean more towards an Islamic point of view on national issues. Given the centrality of ethno-religious cleavages in Nigerian politics and public discourse, the *Daily Trust* was selected to provide a nuanced perspective informed by a Muslim point of view. These newspapers all have the discretionary power to influence public agenda, shape the cognitive mind-set of the public, and convey salience through the ranking of issues in the news. They are also capable of playing a critical role during elections by providing the informational resources voters need to determine those who can exercise political power. As a monitoring manual published by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance explains:

In most countries political competition during elections is played out in the media, and the media thus play a key agenda-setting role. ... the media does this by determining issues and individuals they consider newsworthy day after day...whether a candidate is present or absent, and the type of coverage they get when they are present, all condition their chances of getting elected, since

the voters extract the information they need for making their political decisions from the media (as cited in ACE, 2012:18).

This article examines stories that were published on the websites of the newspapers during the electoral period between January and April 2015. The time frame covers the most concentrated period of the electoral cycle starting with the publication of the list of candidates for the election. The intention was to concentrate on a period when coverage of the women should have been at peak. Articles for analysis were selected if they featured the women as candidates and subjects of stories, rather than more general reports of the election. Stories that only made passing references to the women as part of a list were not included. Online sources were chosen since back issues of the newspapers were not accessible and also in recognition of a growing number of internet-savvy readers who primarily access news online. The idea was to identify the nature of information about the four women candidates that was available to readers.

Selected articles were extracted using the names of the four women as search terms. These terms were used in isolation with and without the women's honorific titles. Each article identified as being relevant was taken as a unit of analysis. Headlines, stand-first, and main text of stories were analysed to identify how these female politicians were represented in the newspapers. The analysis was a combination of quantitative and qualitative examination of the presence of the women in media space to delineate how they were represented to voters by the three newspapers. As Charlotte Adcock noted in her study of British press coverage of women in the UK 1997 general elections, this combined approach made it possible to introduce 'systematicity in the mapping of women's representation that a quantitative reading alone would not have delivered' (2010, 141).

The concern here was specifically on the mediated representation of the women politicians. There was no attempt to compare their coverage to that of their male counterparts, especially the front-runners, the incumbent president, Goodluck Jonathan, and the leading opposition leader, General Mohammadu Buhari, as they were positioned to dominate headlines because their privileged status conferred on them the right to media attention. The analysis of the data was driven by a gendered mediation approach, a perspective that made it meaningful to examine the media's

tendency to focus on gender-based perceptions and presumptions irrespective of their relevance and context and the implications of this on women's political participation.

The gender mediation thesis focuses on the unnecessary emphasis that the media tend to place on gender differences. As Åsa Kroon Lundell & Mats Ekström have noted, women are 'more easily associated with domestic issues and the emphasis on physical traits, appearance and relationships is central' in media coverage (2008, 892). This emphasis on gender is central to the concept of gendered mediation, a strategic perspective for the framing of stories about women in androcentric environments (Gidengil and Everitt, 1999, Devere and Graham, 2006, Trimble, et al 2007, Ette 2008). As a journalistic practice, it projects a perspective that presents the male as the normative in certain areas of public life (Sreberny-Mohammadi & Ross 1996, Gidengil and Everitt 2003). The language of news often reflects gendered mediation as journalists routinely emphasise the gender identity of subjects of stories irrespective of their relevance. Sreberny-Mohammadi & Ross describe this as the 'masculinist norms of the news industry' (1996, 114). Gendered mediation is driven by a subtle, taken-for-granted bias that underpins news frames, which are traditionally defined in male terms (Allan 2010, Gidengil and Everitt 2003). It goes beyond simple use of stereotypes but is also projected in approaches that treat politics and some public spheres as being gender-sensitive.

This study focuses on newspaper coverage of four female politicians who contested highly visible electoral offices in 2015. They were Professor Oluremi Sonaiya, Senator Aisha Alhassan, Senator Helen Esuene and Stella Oduah. These women contested for presidential, governorship and parliamentary offices. Professor Oluremi Sonaiya was the first woman to win a political party's nomination to stand as a presidential candidate. As the only female presidential candidate, Sonaiya did not only make political history, she also challenged the view that Nigeria's socio-economic and cultural heritage did not support the idea of a woman as a leader and that the country is 'too big, too important in global politics and its place in the 21st Century is too great for a woman to cope' (*Newswatch*, March 6. 1992). Prior to her success, only one other female politician had campaigned unsuccessfully to win a political party's nomination as a presidential candidate. As Sonaiya, a retired university professor, was the flag-bearer of KOWA, a small and relatively unknown

political party, she needed a great deal of media exposure to be visible to voters, especially as she had no record of holding a political office.

Unlike Sonaiya, Aisha Jummai Alhassan, a governorship candidate of the All Progressive Congress, APC, the main opposition party, was already a political persona prior to the 2015 general elections having been elected a senator in the 2011 general election. According to the *Daily Trust*:

Senator Alhassan joined active politics in October 2010 and went on to contest for Taraba North Senatorial seat during the 2011 elections, which she won. As a senator, she has been able to attract many roads, water, education, and youth and women empowerment projects to her constituents. She emerged as the APC flag bearer in the state after three other aspirants in the contest reportedly boycotted the primaries over alleged irregularities.

Senator Alhassan, popularly known as 'Mama Taraba' among her enthusiasts, is believed to be commanding a large follower-ship especially at the grassroots, given her many youth and women empowerment initiatives across the state. Her ability in terms of grassroots mobilisation is believed to be one of the factors that would work for her at the polls (Sule, *Daily Trust*, 16 January 2015).

Against the backdrop of her popularity as a senator, Alhassan was seen as having a good chance of becoming the first democratically elected female governor in northern Nigeria, a part of the country where Islam, the dominant religion, and cultural practices challenge women's presence in the public space. Alhassan was 'the first female governorship candidate from the entire northern part of the country' and she was said to be 'on the verge of beating her male counterparts in the poll' (Akpeji, *Daily Trust*, April 11, 2015)).

For Helen Esuene, a former senator, the race to become the first female governor of Akwa Ibom, an oil producing state in south-eastern Nigeria, was also an attempt to challenge undemocratic practices following allegations that the outgoing governor had hand-picked his successor, thus contradicting democratic principles. Driven by her disapproval of the nomination process, Esuene decamped from the PDP, the ruling party, and joined another political party, the Labour Party, and was selected as a governorship candidate. She was described by *The Guardian* as having a good chance to make 'significant and visible impact for the governorship race as she is

poised to give the men a run for their money. Senator Esuene, no doubt, has bright chances of emerging as the first female governor in Nigeria' (Akpan, *The Guardian*, April 8, 2015). In addition, she was endorsed by some other governorship aspirants.

Unlike Alhassan and Esuene, Stella Oduah had no previous experience of winning an elected office. However, unlike Sonaiya, another newcomer to competitive politics, she was already a media persona having served as a government minister in charge of aviation from July 2011 until February 2014 when she was removed from office following allegations of corruption. While in office, Oduah was plagued by several controversies, including authorising without following due process the purchase, for her use, of two bullet-proof BMW cars worth about N255millions (about \$1.6 millions). She was quizzed by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission about the controversial procurement of the vehicles.

Each of these women had reasons to attract media attention: Sonaiya had the novelty factor, Alhassan was seeking the highest office in a state in northern Nigeria, where religion, socio-cultural values and political structures tend to promote the subjugation of women; Esuene had emerged as a strong defender of democratic principles, and Oduah had unresolved allegations of corruption and abuse of public office.

Analysis and discussion

A combination of search terms for the four women generated 109 stories in the three newspapers. After eliminating articles that were published outside the time frame of the study and stories that did not focus specifically on the women as candidates, twenty-one stories were identified as being relevant for analysis. This dataset is clearly modest in size but significant because it illustrates the relative absence of the four women in media spaces. The number of relevant stories is indicative of the limited visibility of the four women in media spaces. The *Daily Trust* published the largest number of relevant articles about Alhassan and *The Guardian* had the largest number of stories about Sonaiya. This is significant in terms of geo-ethnic politics and location of the newspapers. Historically, most major Nigerian newspapers identify with particular ethno-geopolitical cleavages and political parties that align with the major ethnic groups – The Hausa-Fulani in the north, the Yoruba in the south and the Igbo in the east. *The Guardian*, however, is owned by a family from a

minority ethnic group and is therefore not a voice for a dominant power bloc. However, as it is based in Lagos, in the south-west, it tends to reflect a southern voice. The *Daily Trust*, similarly, echoes the voice of the north and that could explain why Alhassan, a northerner, was more visible in a paper that is published near her home state.

Quantitatively, the number of relevant stories in which the women were the subject, main actor, voice and source was significantly small. In spite of all the factors that should have earned them visibility, the women did not attract much media coverage. Qualitatively, in the lens through which the politicians were seen, the women were represented primarily as outsiders and generally in the shadows. In Sonaiya's case, the outsider's frame suggested that she lacked critical skills for the job. Although she was the subject of two lengthy interviews in the *Daily Trust* and *The Punch*, she was projected as being unrealistic to aspire to be president. In an interview published in *The Punch* on January 18, 2015, Sonaiya was asked: 'why are you not contesting for governorship or a seat in the National Assembly, at least for a start?' instead of going for the presidency. The reporter even suggested that she only won her party's nomination because there were no strong candidates and pointed out that 'considering the fact that the Nigerian political landscape is male-dominated,' Sonaiya was only 'seeking political relevance.' The reporter questioned her integrity by asking: 'If you are really keen on service to the country, why are you not contesting under a well-known political party?' (*The Punch*, January 18, 2015). In an interview published by the *Daily Trust* (Krishi, January 12, 2015), Sonaiya was told that 'there are misgivings about women's capacity to lead compared to the men', a suggestion that leadership comes naturally to men. A reporter for *The Guardian* also asked Sonaiya: 'Would it not have served you better if you started gunning for a lower position and then build upon your experiences for your current ambition? And are you getting the support of fellow women?' (*The Guardian*, January 23, 2015). Another reporter asked Sonaiya 'what are you looking for in politics, having proven your worth in academia?' (*The Punch*, January 18, 2015). These questions raised a number of gendered issues. First, they suggested that the political arena should be recognised as being male-dominated. Second, women lack leadership capabilities; and third, women's political success is closely linked to political parties support, and, as will be discussed later, party structures do not favour women.

The outsider frame could have been put to a positive use if Sonaiya had been projected as a viable alternative and framed as an agent of change who could revolutionise Nigerian political culture. Rather she was projected as a 'potential loser.' As Campus has noted, 'For a long time, one of the main problems of women candidates has been viability; the media hold preconceptions about women being less likely to win elections' (2013, 50). Despite her historical achievement – being the first female presidential candidate, Sonaiya was relatively invisible in the media as a news subject or source of news. Her press coverage did not even reflect a honeymoon period when she emerged as her party's presidential candidate. In fact, the trajectory of the coverage was flat from the beginning of the race right to the election period. There was no doubt that she was running a hopeless race given the nature of Nigerian political party structure, which traditionally favours men. Being a presidential candidate of a small political party meant that she did not command the attention that candidates of major parties such as the ruling party, the People's Democratic Party, PDP, and the main opposition party, the All Progressives Congress, APC, took for granted.

Sonaiya's poor visibility in the three newspapers suggests that political parties can undermine women's engagement in politics. Although Joni Lovenduski's (2001) was referring to the British political system, the argument that 'political parties continue to be the main agents of political recruitment and they have been a powerful obstacle to women's aspiration for representation in Parliament' (2001, 745) is equally true of Nigeria where women have been routinely relegated to the cheerleading position in major political parties. Sonaiya made this point when she addressed a group of business women. She asserted: 'We have done enough of cheerleading. Women cannot keep on being cheerleaders in this country,' (*The Guardian*, March 18, 2015). Going by the election results, the women were cheerleading for the men as Sonaiya received only 13, 076 votes in the election. The winner of the election, General Buhari, received 15.4 million votes while the runner-up got 12.8 million. Had the majority of women supported and voted for Sonaiya, the result would have been different.

As highlighted earlier, Senator Alhassan was most visible in the *Daily Trust*, with four relevant stories that focused on her as a candidate. The first article was about her endorsement by a community group, the Muri Progressive Forum. In a statement

issued by Alhaji Muhammed Sani Lau, the chairperson of the group, Alhassan was commended:

For her positive contributions to Muri Emirate and Taraba in general' and was endorsed as the forum's 'candidate for governor of Taraba State. This is purely done based on merit considering Senator Aisha's achievements as current senator and previous records as Attorney General and Commissioner for Justice of Taraba State' (*Daily Trust*, January 8, 2015).

However, in another article published on January 16, the *Daily Trust* noted that her gender was a major obstacle and a 'limiting factor to her political ambition because of:

The religious and cultural sentiments held against woman leadership especially in Northern Nigeria. Senator Alhassan's supporters, however, said the issue of gender would not affect her ambition, as they pointed out that she had proved her worth as a senator and would do even more when she becomes governor, (Sule, *Daily Trust*, 16 January 2015)

Despite being acknowledged as 'Mama Taraba' (mother of Taraba, her home state), and projected as a strong contender in the governorship race, press coverage of Alhassan's campaign did not enhance her visibility in the news space. Although the *Daily Trust* had reported that she could win the election because of her record of achievements, it also highlighted the religious and cultural obstacles on her path to victory.

For Senator Esuene, the political party structure was a major obstacle to her ambition to become the first female governor of Akwa Ibom state. When she failed to win the party's nomination due to alleged manipulation of the selection process by the outgoing governor, she changed her allegiance and decamped from the ruling party to join another to enhance her chances of being selected to contest the election. She eventually emerged as the consensus candidate for some other governorship aspirants. However, contesting against candidates of two major parties, the PDP and APC, reduced her chances of electoral success. Had she won the nomination of her first party, she would have had a better chance of winning the election. Thus her chances of success were undermined by the political party structure.

The Guardian and *The Punch* gave Esuene the most exposure during the campaign period. The papers reported her endorsement by 'Akwa Ibom stakeholders' and noted that elders and youths were 'rooting for the first female governor in the state and Nigeria in the person of Esuene' (Akpan, *The Guardian*, April 8, 2015).

Interestingly, one of the reasons given for her endorsement was that as 'wife of a governor, she showed humility, she showed leadership, followed the husband attentively... In many fields she displayed her quality, which stood firm as shining example for women.' Despite the support from the stakeholders, Esuene was not successful in her bid to become the first female governor of her state.

Given the number of controversies that surrounded Oduah while she was in government, it could have been assumed that she would not achieve electoral success in her bid to become a senator but she did. *The Guardian*, however, trivialised her achievement. In a story about her election victory, the paper reduced her reaction to child-like excitement: 'Stella Oduah's whoops of joy:

That former Aviation Minister, Princess Stella Oduah is over the moon at the moment is stating the obvious. A gale of gaiety and mirth is being felt in the household of SPG Oil & Gas boss, Stella Oduah. And she has every reason to thank God and she is no doubt having the best of time as she has just bounced back winning a senatorial seat in her country home in Anambra State. The woman of substance who is believed to be one of President Goodluck Jonathan's close confidants, has won the Senatorial North seat in to represent Anambra Federal constituency in the nation's forthcoming eighth National Assembly. She is now returning to the government after several counter allegations in the Aviation Ministry that denied her the job (Akinwale, *The Guardian*, April 4. 2015).

It is interesting that the paper's reference to the scandal seems to suggest that she had been hounded out of her job (note 'denied her the job') but the publication did not examine the allegations against her during the campaign despite the opposition party's anti-corruption campaign strategy. Paying close attention to the allegations could have resulted in Oduah being more visible in the news. Oduah's limited visibility challenged the perception of media's interest in controversies (Tresch, 2009).

Overall, press coverage of the four women significantly limited their visibility in the news media space and undermined their prospect because there was an assumption

that they were unviable candidates and therefore did not deserve media attention. The stories were generally neutral, straight reporting of facts without nuances that could have boosted their stature and prospect. In interviews the women were treated as if they were 'mates' of the journalists. For example, Professor Sonaiya was often addressed as Remi, an affectionate and familiar variant of Oluremi (her first name) but Dr Goodluck Jonathan, the presidential candidate of the PDP, for example, was never addressed as 'Lucky', the affectionate diminutive of his name neither was the APC candidate General Muhammadu Buhari called 'Moh'. This differential treatment is symptomatic of media coverage of women politicians. Ross et al have noted how 'the trivialisation of women politicians through specific naming strategies can work to constitute a repetitive circuit of disavowal' (2013, 7). The familiarity questioned her authority and competence for the office of president.

The relative absence of the women in media space of the three newspapers unequivocally undermined public perception of the candidates. Although the media's power to influence voting behaviour is debatable, there is no question about the power of the media to shape what audiences consider to be important issues of the day. The media have the power to shape our worldview about issues beyond our personal experiences. Consequently, voters who did not have direct encounter with the women politicians were unlikely to have information about them without the media. As Pippa Norris had noted, the media play a critical role during an election and 'should brief the electorate about the political choices involved ... and so help to constitute elections as defining moments for collective decision about political direction of society' (Norris 2000,104).

The underreporting of the women meant that many voters were unaware of their campaigns and the issues on which they were seeking public support. The women were not only absent from main stories but not even one of them was the subject of an editorial or leader comments. Maria Braden, writing about women politicians and the media in the United States, argues that 'it is better to be portrayed as a novelty than not to be mentioned at all, and the news media play an important role in whether a candidate gets noticed in the first place. One of the worse things that can happen to a politician is to receive little or no media coverage' (Braden, 1996, 3). The novelty of being the first female presidential candidate did not earn Professor Sonaiya more media space. It is instructive that a leader of an advocacy group for

empowerment of women told reporters that she and her organisation 'were not aware of any woman presidential candidate', two weeks before the election. Hephziba Ibeneme, a former government minister, informed journalists that her group had endorsed the candidacy of President Jonathan for the 2015 election but would campaign for a female president in 2019 (*The Punch*, March 12, 2015). It could be argued that Ibeneme's claim of ignorance of Sonaiya's presidential race was a reflection of the politician's limited visibility in the news media. The relative absence of the Sonaiya and the other women in media space suggests that limited press coverage reduced their chances of being noticed by voters and as a result undermined their electoral success. The under-reporting of the women was a likely contributing factor to their performance at the polls as they were not projected as viable contestants.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to make a contribution to the literature on women politicians' media presence from an African perspective. By focusing on Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, the study has addressed the issue from a limited angle but has provided critical insight into the visibility of women politicians in the media. Admittedly, limiting this study to data retrieved from the websites of three newspapers over a relatively short time-frame raises questions about it providing an African perspective. Despite this limitation, this study has shown consistency with studies in other parts of the world (Ross & Comrie, 2011, Tresch, 2009), which also noted the pivotal role of the news media in shaping the political landscape. This study also makes a contribution by focusing on the 2015 general election, which was a real test of democratic consolidation in Nigeria because for the first time in the country's political history, an opposition party was seen as a genuine threat to the ruling party, which had been in power for sixteen years. For women, the election was also significant because a woman was one of the presidential candidates. Given the capacity of the media to convey salience on issues, visibility in media space could have drawn attention to the women who contested the elections and their electoral success could have challenged existing political order. Sonaiya, for example, as the first female presidential candidate, had the novelty factor, which should have earned her significant visibility in the media. However, as this analysis has shown, Sonaiya and the other female candidates were given limited news media space in the three

newspapers. They were almost invisible as subjects of stories and as news sources. It is worth noting that given the opposition party's anti-corruption platform, Oduah who was accused of abusing her position while serving as a government minister was not associated with corruption during the campaign. Had the newspapers made political capital out of the corruption controversies, she would have been given more

This study's conclusion resonates with previous research on mediated representation of women politicians and confirms transnational similarities in the coverage of female politicians, thus underscoring how journalism serves power, which is in male hands. The study also suggests that the Nigerian press is not a cornerstone of democracy in terms of provision of information that can empower voters to make informed choices during election. The newspapers did not demonstrate their normative role as agents of democracy or of social change. Although it could be argued that the women were invisible because they did not meet newsworthiness requirements, it could also be an indication that they were seen as not being viable candidates. This view echoes Ross and Carter's argument that 'women's visibility as autonomous and important actors on the economic, social and political stage is still significantly less than their position in the real world' (2011, 1150). Visibility in the media enhances public perception of politicians and lack of media presence conversely means absence from the political arena because 'absence and silence contribute to the dominance of hegemonic discourses' (Walker, 2005:95). The powerful rhetoric conveyed through coverage of politics suggests that women are outsiders and undeserving of visibility.

There is no doubt that newspaper coverage of the four women marginalised them and questioned their legitimacy in the eyes of the electorate. In terms of substance of coverage, it was clear that the newspapers did not treat the women as serious contenders and thus did not provide information about them that could have helped voters to take notice of them or be knowledgeable about them and their campaign policies and programmes. As Kahn and Goldenberg have argued, 'if female candidates receive more attention in the press, then voters may have an easier time in recognising these candidates (1991,184). Relative absence in media space significantly reduces the chances of women becoming recognisable politicians and candidates. The small number of stories about the four women candidates over a four-month period is indicative of their marginalisation by newspapers. The women's

limited visibility in media space reduced their chances of election victory and located them in a place of powerlessness.

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