

**Nigerian Mass Media Representation of Women in Agriculture
and Agribusiness: A Case of Status Mis-Conferral**

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Abstract

The study set out to examine the extent of the coverage given by the mass media to women in agriculture and agribusiness in view of statistics indicating that women constitute an overwhelming proportion of the people in that sector. Based in Nigeria, the study analysed the content of 282 stories on the agricultural pages of two selected national newspapers, 187 pictures illustrating some of the stories and 48 agricultural broadcasts from two radio stations. The study revealed that though in reality women formed about 80% of the labour force in agriculture, less than 20% of the people featured in mass media content on agriculture were women. In all sections of the agriculture sector, even in trading, women are portrayed as being in the minority. The study concluded that the mass media, in exact opposition to what obtained in reality, conferred on the men the status of the major operators in the agricultural sector and on women the status of the insignificant minority. In other words, the status of active role players rightfully deserved by women was given men and vice-versa, hence the term status mis-conferral. Advancing likely reasons for this, the paper proposes policy adjustments that could be made to correct the situation.

Introduction

The traditional African family was a synchronized economic and socialization unit. The typical family was a working unit with the father, mother(s) and children involved in farming or any other occupation the father might have. The roles of the man, the woman and the child were more or less specified (Johnson, 1921; Akiga, 1965). The passage from the agrarian to the industrial and to the information age has brought,

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among other changes, increased commoditisation in the roles of the family and of its members. One of the direct consequences of commoditisation was fluidity in the once compartmented roles of the different members of the family.

In the agrarian age, the role of women in agriculture was a somewhat subordinate one. They were most relevant in harvest, portorage, processing and marketing (Idowu and Guyer, 1991). All of these were done under the control and financial regulation of the male head. But that has since changed. In Nigeria, as in other developing economies, women now play a dominant role in agricultural production, processing and distribution. In fact, studies show that they make up 60-80 per cent of the agricultural labour force, and they produce two-thirds of the food crops (FAO, 1996; Bogunjoko, 1999; World Bank, 2002).

Women's participation in subsistent and commercial agriculture and agribusiness covers a wide variety of activities, including those hitherto considered men's exclusive preserve. Women are cultivators, employers as well as wage labourers (Mabogunje, 1991). In Tanzania, women predominate in on-shore fisheries (FAO, 1996). In a study of the harvest work of women in a rural Nigerian town, Idowu and Guyer (1991) discover the intricate pattern and variety of involvement of women in agricultural wage labour. While some work to earn calculated amounts for specific work on the farms of their husbands or other male kin, some work on commercial crop farms of neighbours or in large farm enterprises; while some work for wages all year round, some work only at the peak of harvest, and some do all of these and more. And this cuts across different age ranges: from the middle-aged woman who has difficulties providing year-round income to the secondary school girl who needs some immediate cash for fees and books. The thrust of it all is that there is an overwhelming "feminisation of waged and unwaged" activity in agriculture and agribusiness (Mbilinyi, 1988).

Despite these facts, there are indications that the indispensability of women in agriculture and agribusiness has eluded the attention of policy makers for long. As a result, widespread assumptions that men (and not women) are the real farmers continue to prevail. Therefore, agricultural extension services in Nigeria (as in other African countries) are still predominantly focused on men, who only constitute a tiny and shrinking portion of the agricultural labour force, to the neglect of women. Most extension messages targeted at women emphasise only

their domestic roles with topics on childcare and family nutrition (World Bank, 2002).

Theoretical Framework: the Status Conferral Theory and the Prominence Criterion

Lazarsfeld and Merton (1996) identify three functions of the mass media as social machinery: status conferral, enforcement of social norms and the narcotizing dysfunction. These functions have achieved a theoretical status in that they have been used to explain, predict and prescribe various aspects of mass media operation and use. The status conferral theory holds that “if you are in the media, then you matter”. Lazarsfeld and Merton, (1996:15) observe that recognition by the press or radio or magazines or newsreel testifies that one has arrived, that one is important enough to have been singled out from the large anonymous masses, that one’s behavior and opinion are significant enough to require public notice.

In other words, the media enhance the social status of people and bestow prestige on them (Infante, Racer and Womack, 1990; Severin and Tankard Jr., 2001).

Prominence as a criterion for media content selection has two dimensions. One is that media content, especially news, is about events or people that are overwhelming enough to catch the reporter’s attention. Such events or people protrude beyond the usual societal average. The protrusion can be as a result of oddity, negativity or numerical or spatial magnitude (Golding and Elliot, 1996). Another is that, people who are at the frontline of the society, even if they perform an ordinary task, get focused on by the mass media (Mencher, 1989; Boyd, 1997). Once prominence accomplishes its role of attracting the initial media attention, status conferral takes over, and this is a function of continued media patronage.

As earlier observed, statistics show that women’s involvement in agriculture and agribusiness is overwhelming. In other words, they are prominent as a result of numerical magnitude. Logically, the theory predicts, they should attract mass media attention. Such attention, if duly given should confer the right status on them as people who really matter in agriculture and agribusiness. But the question is: does their representation by the mass media reflect their prominence? In other words, is the right status conferred on them? These are the questions that this study aims to answer.

Feminism, Women and the Mass Media

Right from the early twentieth century when feminism as a movement first emerged, it has regarded ideas, language and portrayals as crucial in shaping the lives of women and men (Kuhn, 1996). Secondly, its unconditional insistence on treating gender as the only window for viewing and interpreting these ideas, language and portrayals marks it out from all other movements (Marris and Thornham, 1996). Though feminism, like Marxism, is not a homogenous and finely articulated theory, theoretical gleanings from the two postulations just stated have formed the baseline for innumerable feministic studies, thoughts and appraisals in different fields. In media studies, feminism has formed the basis for film, video and television criticism, content analyses of women and general magazines, newspapers and advertisements. It has also served as the yardstick for the appraisal of the position of women in media organisations among other areas (Clark, 1996; Holland, 1996; Tseayo, 1996; Udegbe, 1996; Winship, 1996).

The portrayal of women by the media is an issue around which is an ever-growing body of literature. Most scholars and commentators on the issue do not have any commendation for the media; instead they have accusations which appear to be levelled at two related points. First, in the words of Kanyoro (2002), “the media does (sic) not always see women”. The mass media are accused of grossly under-representing women. In a study carried out at a global level, Steeves (1993:41) observes that though in most countries the populations of men and women approach parity, “no country with available data reported that more than 20% of their news was about women”. In a related study based in Nigeria, Tseayo (1996) finds that only 16% of *The Guardian*; 17.8% of *The National Concord* and 11.5% of *The New Nigeria* were devoted to women’s stories in a country that is 49.7% female. Awe (1996) and Tseayo (1996) among others, highlight an aspect of this neglect. According to them, even the minute attention given to women by the mass media is given to the elite, city-dwelling women and first ladies; the rural, the illiterate and the poor among women, that is, the majority, are kept in near-absolute obscurity by the media.

Secondly, the media are accused of negatively representing women. In other words, the coverage given women is not only scanty, it is often negative (Soola, 1996). The media, it is said, portray women as not having enough sanitary sense (Awe, 1996); as sexual objects and prostitutes; as incompetent in the political and economic spheres, and as

decorative elements when it comes to advertisements (Nyangoma, 2002). In mass media advertisements, they are portrayed as mothers and wives playing domestic roles or as sex objects, but not as professionals and bosses (Nweke, 1992; Tseayo, 1996; Udegbe, 1996). Even in developed economies, women are “shown at work in only 8% of advertisements, which, like serials, promote certain stereotypes: while women may be successful at work, they have sad personal lives, or, if divorced, have problems with their children” (González, 2002).

It is worth mentioning that these scholars and commentators do not heap the blame on the mass media alone and just stop at that. Many of them blame the situation on the society. “The media reflect and endorse in many cases, the attitudinal problems emanating primarily from the customs and traditions of a male-dominated society where women’s position is often considered inferior” (Awe, 1996:3).

The present study aims at examining the extent and direction of coverage given to women in agriculture by the broadcast and print media in Nigeria. Most available studies either focus on women in agriculture or on women in the media. This study focuses on both of these as it concerns itself with women in agriculture as portrayed by the media. In addition, the present study focuses on both the print and electronic subdivisions.

Methodology

The method of inquiry adopted for this study is content analysis—a method of analysing communication content in a systematic, objective and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variables. The choice of this method is not only because it is systematic, objective and quantitative, but more importantly because of its usefulness in comparing media content to the real world (Wimmer and Dominick, 2000:168). Since this study aims at examining the extent of attention given by the mass media to women in agriculture in comparison with the extent of women’s involvement in agriculture in real life, content analysis is the most appropriate method of inquiry.

Sources of Data

Four mass media outlets: two newspapers and two radio stations representing print and electronic media respectively, served as the sources of data for the study. The agriculture pages of the selected newspapers (*The Guardian* and *The Comet*) and the agricultural programmes of the chosen radio stations (the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria [FRCN],

Ibadan and the Broadcasting Corporation of Oyo State [BCOS], Ibadan) were monitored and analysed.

The Sample

The Guardian's "Agrocare" and *The Comet's* "Agriculture and Veterinary Services" were the pages studied. "Agrocare" features on Sundays and "Agriculture and Veterinary Services" on Fridays. Two radio agricultural programmes; "K'ebi ma Pa'lu" [meaning: *So the town does not go hungry*] (BCOS) and "Agbe Onije Amodun" [meaning: *Farmer whose store of food is annually replenished*] (FRCN) were studied as well. The former was broadcast on Tuesdays from 8:30 to 9 pm while the latter was on Wednesday from 8 to 8:30 pm. These four were studied for a period of six months. A total of 282 (agricultural) stories were found in the selected newspapers and analysed. Of this number, 106 were from *the Guardian* while 176 were from *the Comet*. In addition, 187 photographs (46 from *the Guardian* and 141 from *the Comet*) illustrating the stories on the agric pages of the newspapers were also analysed. On the electronic side, 48 agriculture broadcasts were recorded and analysed—28 from BCOS and 20 from FRCN.

The Instrument

The instrument for data collection was a three-category guide. The categories were: gender, role and direction (negative/positive/neutral) of portrayal of identifiable characters in each stories or programmes. By 'characters' is meant the persons featuring in the stories or programmes. With regard to role, seven roles were identified as relevant in the agric sector: farmers; traders including merchants; political office holders and government officials; researchers; extension workers; agro-allied services, and observers/commentators. With regard to direction, a character was considered positively portrayed when he/she was portrayed as taking active roles and taking initiative. A character was coded as negative when portrayed as idle, lazy, incompetent or dependent. Though extension agents are employed by government, they were treated separately from political office holders and government officials.

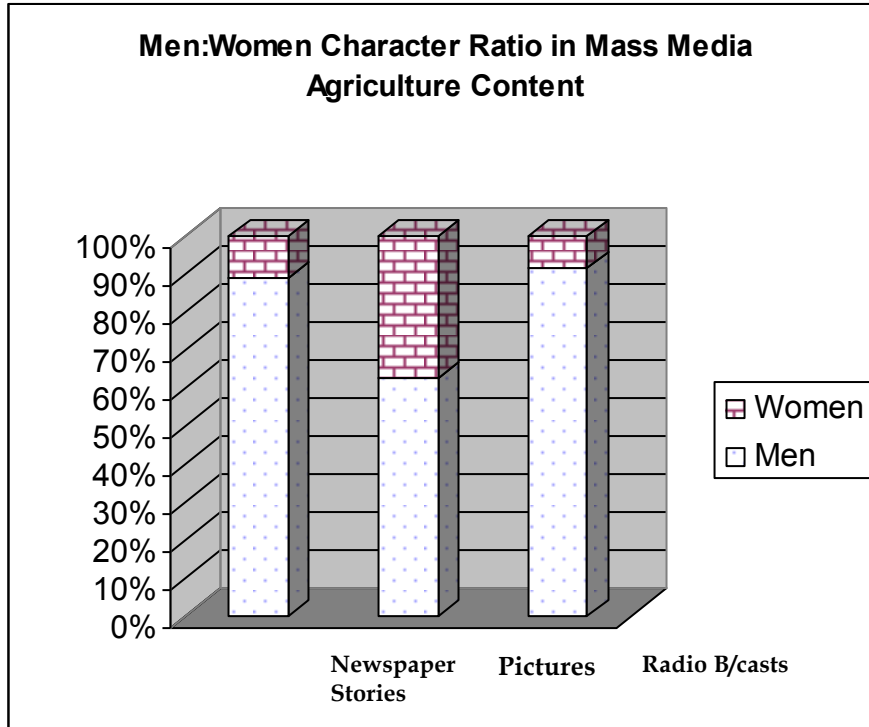
Ole Holsti's inter-coder reliability formula reported by Wimmer and Dominick (2000) was employed to ascertain the level reliability of the instrument. Two graduate students who had no access to the research questions were coached. They then coded up to 25 agricultural newspaper stories and 4 radio broadcasts. The reliability index was 0.7.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data were collected personally from January to June 2004. While the radio programmes were tape-recorded during broadcasts and analysed later, the newspapers were consulted in an archival library as back issues. The radio programmes were broadcast in Yoruba, the researcher's mother tongue, a situation that removed the problem of accessibility. In coding the data, names and pronouns were used to identify the gender of characters in the newspaper stories while names and voices were used for radio. Referents not featured in radio broadcasts but just named were not coded. Characters in newspapers whose sex could not be identified (for instance, characters whose names were unisex, or who were identified by the reporter as "sources", without any sex-indicative pronoun) were left out. The data were analysed using frequency counts and percentages.

Results and Discussion

A total of nine hundred and forty (940) human characters were identified from the selected content of newspaper stories, pictures and radio broadcasts. Of these, 474 were from the newspaper stories, 322 were from newspaper pictures and 144 were from radio broadcasts. Of more relevance to the theme of the research is the distribution of these by gender. And so, rather than veer into inter-media portrayal, the analysis proceeds on inter-gender comparison. The distribution of the characters by gender is shown in the chart below.

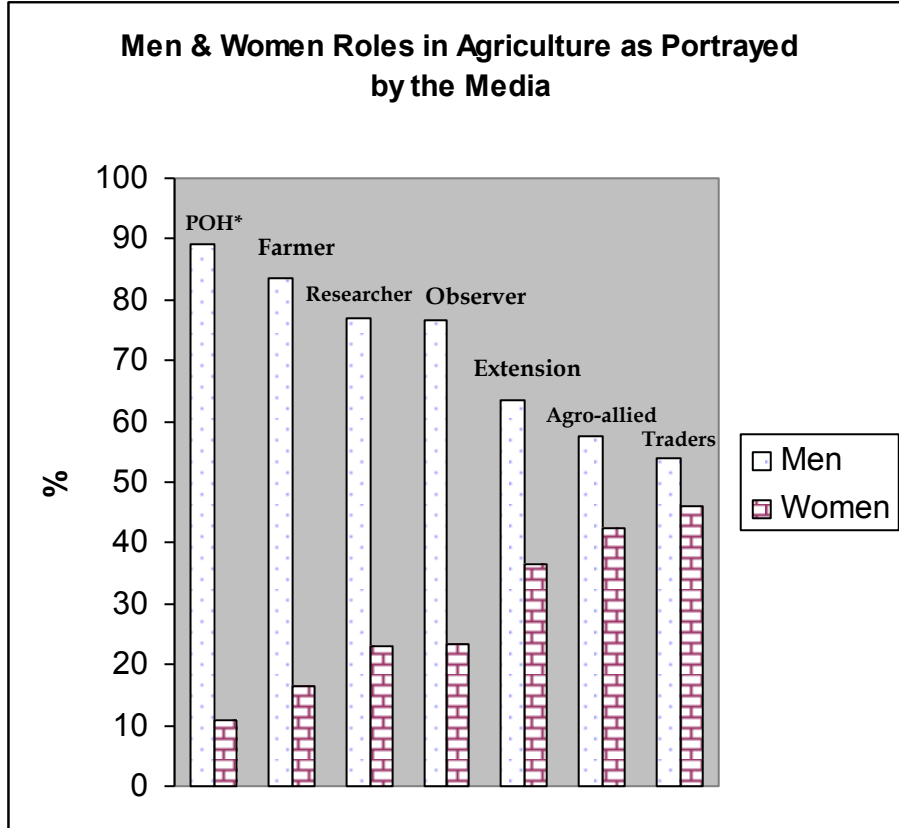


In each of the three sources of data, male actors were predominant. They accounted for 89% of characters coded from the newspaper stories, 62.7% of those found in newspaper pictures and 91.7% of those featuring in agricultural radio broadcasts. Taken together, of the 940 human characters found in the coded contents, 756 (80.4%) were male. Women were 184, making up only 19.6%. This agrees with the findings of Steeves (1993) that no country reported that more than 20% of their news was about women. It appears that as it is with women featuring in news, so it is with women in agricultural stories.

Cross-media analysis shows that women feature a little considerably in newspaper pictures where they constituted 37.3%. This is higher than what they accounted for in newspaper stories (11.0%) or radio broadcasts (8.3%).

Role-based analysis revealed that of the 940 characters identified, 34.2% were political office holders and government officials,

27.9% were farmers, 14.4% were researchers, 11.4% were commentators of observers, 5.5% were those in agro-allied services, 5.5% were traders while 1.2% were extension agents. Based on gender, the analysis showed men again were in the clear lead in all the roles. The chart below summarises this.



(*POH means political office holders and government officials)
Only about 11% of political office holders and government officials were female; only about 16% of farmers were female and just about 23% each of researchers and observers were female. Surprisingly extension agents were 36% female, and in the agro-allied sector women accounted for 42%. It is in agriculture-related trading that women featured most prominently but even there they accounted for only 46%. It is also important to note that the media content focused most on political office holders and government officials.

Viewed from a different angle, when not compared with men, the commonest role played by women in agriculture was farming. About 23% of the 184 women characters were portrayed as farmers. The least frequently played role by women was that of extension agents—2.2%. Only 19% featured as political office holders and government officials; 16.9% featured as researchers. While 13.6% featured as observers, 13.1% appeared as traders and 12% appeared as those rendering agro-allied services.

It is important to point out here that majority 41 (77.4%) of the 53 reporters who reported the agricultural stories in the newspapers were male; only 12 (22.6%) were female. This most probably influenced what they saw and how they perceived and reported them.

With respect to the direction of coverage, in only four instances were characters portrayed negatively. All of these were in newspaper accounts. Interestingly, 3 (75%) of the characters were men; 25% women. Though women feature in a tiny proportion, they do mostly as active, hardworking and initiative-taking characters.

In summary, the findings show that the mass media portray men as the dominant actors in all the sectors of agriculture and agribusiness. According to the portrayal, less than one (1) in every five (5) people in agriculture and agribusiness is a woman. Men lead in farming and in even trading. But this stands in exact opposition to reality. In reality, about 80% of farmers are women and women dominate in some other areas including trading in agricultural produce (FAO, 1996; Bogunjoko, 1999; World Bank, 2002). The allegation of under-representation of women by the media (Steeves, 1993; Tseayo, 1996; Kanyoro, 2002) is thus upheld by the findings of this research. It also reinforces the allegation that the media cannot conceive of women in relation to tasks defined as masculine such as farming (WACC, 2003).

However, the findings do not suggest a misrepresentation of women. They are involved in every section of the sector even if passively. Importantly, the media do not portray women in agriculture and agribusiness negatively more than they portray men.

Conclusion

The status conferral theory says, “if you matter you will be in the media”. Due to their numerical magnitude, women matter a lot in agriculture and agribusiness. Yet, they are not focused on. The status of the *backbone of agriculture* is conferred on men while that of a tiny minority is conferred on women. This is **status misconferral**. The misconferral is, no doubt, a

result of an unbalanced tilt in reporters' definition of prominence. The second aspect of prominence, which focuses on people on the frontline of the society, has been made to overshadow the first, which emphasises numerical magnitude. And so, agricultural reporters focus on the commissioners and ministers of agriculture and elite researchers, not the real farmers. And on the rare occasions that they cover farmers, they look for those on the frontline even among farmers and these are always the men.

There are implications of mis-conferring status on people. The person whose right status is denied has the tendency to be less ambitious, less motivated and so less productive, while the one on whom the status is wrongly conferred basks in vain euphoria. Misconferral will also lead to poor participation of women in public domains, continued subjugation and possibly aggression towards them (Udegbe, 1996:136).

If policy makers rely on the content of agricultural stories and programmes in the media for important policy decisions, they will be misled; they will see and plan for men where there actually are women. There is need for agricultural, educational and communication policy makers to deliberately emphasise the training and deployment of female agricultural reporters and female extension workers. As the study shows, majority of the reporters are men who see the world as men and see men as the world. Also, men probably constitute about 77% of extension agents in Nigeria (Obinne, 1992). All these put women at severe disadvantages. In addition, extension efforts targeted at women should go beyond helping them cope better with domestic and childcare demands. Since they are the farmers, they should be so treated.

There should be ongoing tooling and retooling of male reporters and extension agents especially in the area of gender sensitivity and reporting diversity. The training of reporters should aim at inculcating democratic values and weaning them off the dominant, top-down conception of society and development—a predisposition that makes them define newsworthiness in terms of the elite, the rich and/or the powerful.

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