

PRESS REPORTAGE OF SEXUAL AND GENDER VIOLENCE IN NIGERIAN RURAL COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

This study critically examines the coverage of sexual and gender violence by the Pioneer and Ibom Nation newspapers in rural Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Utilising Cultural Feminist theory as a framework, we conducted a content analysis of 104 newspaper editions from January to December 2023. The findings reveal that both newspapers predominantly feature straightforward news stories (56.4%), yet they afford minimal prominence to issues of sexual and gender violence, with limited front-page coverage. Notably, 55.8% of the content from the Pioneer newspaper was unfavourable towards such violence. The research concludes that these newspapers do not actively support efforts to combat sexual and gender violence, instead aligning with governmental initiatives aimed at addressing this pressing issue. The study recommends that journalists diversify their sources and adopt strategies to enhance the visibility of gender violence stories in media narratives, ensuring equitable representation for all genders as both news subjects and sources.

Keywords: Gender-based violence, Media coverage, Content analysis, Uyo, Akwa Ibom, Cultural feminism.

1.0 Introduction

Gender-based violence is a global issue that transcends all boundaries geographical, cultural, social, economic, ethnic, and otherwise. It is a form of violence that is inflicted based on gender differences. Worldwide, children are faced with challenges of practices such as female genital mutilation, child trafficking, forced marriage, sexual abuse, child labor, bullying, and other forms of deprivation (Badri, 2014).

The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993) offers a critical perspective on the root causes and perpetuation of violence against women. It frames this violence as a symptom of long-standing power imbalances between genders, where men have historically held dominance over women. This inequality has resulted in systemic discrimination and hindered women's progress in society. The declaration suggests that violence serves as a critical mechanism for maintaining women's subordinate status relative to men. This subordination is further entrenched by several interconnected factors such as women's limited access to social and economic resources, traditional gender roles, and the undervaluation of women's contributions to society and the economy (Pickup, Williams, & Sweetman 2011). In many cultures, practices such as child marriage, the expectation for widows to remarry within the deceased husband's family, and male-centric property rights contribute to women's dependence on men (Nartey, Bahar, & Nabunya). These issues are particularly pronounced in areas where women face high unemployment rates and limited access to social services. Such circumstances severely restrict women's options for escaping abusive situations, effectively trapping them in cycles of violence and dependency (Ogunyemi, 2022).

Globally, an estimated 30% of ever-partnered women have experienced physical and or sexual violence, with a higher regional prevalence of approximately 37% in Africa, East Mediterranean, and South East Asia. Also, a prevalence of exposure to violence among ever-partnered women stratified by age has been recorded (29.4%) amongst the age group 15-19 years. This indicated that violence starts early in women's relationships (WHO, 2013). Reports have also shown that 7% of non-partnered women have experienced sexual violence (Decker, Peitzmeier, Olumide, Acharya, & Ojengbede, 2014).

The media has a significant impact on society and people's daily lives. Whether directly or indirectly, the media affects the way people live, interact, or make decisions. Therefore, the media is assumed to have some influence on our lives, and this influence cannot be taken for granted. One of the critical functions of the media is disseminating information that has been gathered ethically, objectively, and fairly.

However, there is a lack of information on accurate estimates of the magnitude of gender and sexual violence, especially against women in Nigeria, mainly due to violence being unreported. Authorities often fail to document many reported incidents even though information is the foundation for human thought and behaviour. Information provides a stimulus for all thoughts and actions of human beings. According to Akarika, Iwok, and Ikon (2019), information entails data, facts, imagination, ideas, opinions, and cultural values in various media, including print, audio-visual materials, and electronic processors. Research by WHO (2013) has highlighted significant challenges faced by sexual abuse victims in Nigeria when seeking justice. According to Amnesty International (2002), victims often struggle to convince law enforcement and prosecutors of their experiences, bearing the burden of proving non-consent or coercion. The cultural stigma surrounding sexual abuse in many Nigerian communities compounds this issue, leading victims to self-blame and fear of social exclusion if they disclose their experiences (IRIN, 2017). Consequently, many survivors choose to suffer silence, potentially resulting in underreported statistics that may not accurately reflect the true prevalence of abuse. It is worth noting that while men can also be victims of violence perpetrated by women, the scale of this issue is generally considered less severe.

The media's role in shaping societal attitudes towards gender-based violence is complex. Studies conducted by women's rights organisations have revealed that mass media often perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes, which can negatively influence perceptions of violence against women. However, media outlets' widespread reach and influence also present an opportunity to effect positive change in combating such violence (Pickup, Williams, & Sweetman, 2011). Notably, the print media hold a crucial position in addressing and challenging gender-based violence due to its significant societal impact.

The picture painted above clearly indicates the perceived power of the press to influence public opinion on burning contemporary issues. The implication is that the press may not have been effective in combating gender-based and sexual abuse. Based on the above, this study seeks to investigate Pioneer and Ibom Nation newspapers' coverage of gender-based and sexual abuse cases in rural areas in Akwa Ibom State.

1.1 Research Objectives

The objectives of the study are to:

- i. examine the extent to which Pioneer and Ibom Nation newspapers have covered gender and sexual abuse in Nigeria.
- ii. investigate the prominence of the reports on gender and sexual abuse by Pioneer and Ibom Nation newspapers.
- iii. identify the dominant direction used by Pioneer and Ibom Nation newspapers on gender-based and sexual abuse in Nigeria.

1.2 Gender-based violence and the media

Gender-based violence is a global socioeconomic issue that affects many women. However, in light of this sad reality, media portrayal of Gender-Based violence, the quality and extent of reportage remains astonishingly mediocre. Mass media are significant agents in informing citizens about relevant issues like Gender Based Violence. As Steeves (1997) states that "news has been examined by many researchers who have discovered that very little news is by or about women, uses female sources, or examines issues of particular salience to women, such as child care, women's health, women's economic status, abortion, or gender violence" (P.7).

To further buttress Steeves' assertion, Gallagher (2001) postulates that gender violence has transformed over the years from extraordinary to ordinary news. Gallagher (2001) further alludes that it is not a first-page news item unless famous people are involved. Gallagher (2001) notes that: "Women and their voices may be considered unworthy of serious consideration even in media content that is destined specifically for them" (p.6). When Gender Based Violence gains media attention, it may not be framed in a fair and balanced manner. Gill (2007) contends that the media give a distorted version of incidents of Gender Based Violence. News reports on Gender-Based Violence

focus disproportionately on attacks by strangers, bizarre assaults, and those perpetrated against young women. The news reports on Gender-Based Violence are also littered with descriptions that bear little relationship to the women's experience of the attack, such as "fondled her breasts" and "took turns, while the other pinned the girl down. Gill (2007) notes that men are never described as hysterical, bubbly, pretty, pert, prudish, vivacious, or flirtatious. However, these are all the words used to describe victims of cases.

A prevalent and misleading representation of perpetrators of gender violence in news media is the portrayal of them as "identifiably sick and depraved strangers" (Gill, 2007). This narrow framing obscures the reality that many offenders are often known to their victims, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and diverting attention from the broader societal issues that contribute to gender-based violence. However, many perpetrators are friends, neighbors, relatives, co-workers, or someone else known to the victim. News media hold a critical position in society regarding the extent of influence on public opinion. Gillespie et al. (2013) argue that the news media can disseminate information more rapidly than any other entity in our society and has the potential to drastically influence public opinion.

From the above assertion, it can be realised that media are a force that cannot be overlooked. Sacco (1995) concurs with the idea that media have a vital role in shaping society's consciousness around issues such as Violence Against Women. Sacco (1995) suggests that the news media are essential in turning people's personal experiences with crime—whether as victims or offenders—into wider societal issues. The way the media collect, organise, and explain crime reports plays a significant role in shaping public awareness about which situations should be considered urgent problems, what these problems entail, and how they might be addressed.

In addition to being an essential institution, the news media industry also acts as an independent, powerful opinion-shaping force. They create the agenda, give information of wide interest, and draw attention to pertinent topics. Thus, the strength of the media is determined by its influence on social reality and environment.

Often, Gender-based violence, whether sexual or otherwise, has become mere media entertainment pieces instead of being treated as severe hard news that carries a significant impact on society. Gender-based violence in the news has many insights into society. It often shapes how people think about the issue and receive survivors and perpetrators. The episodic coverage patterns of Violence Against Women undermine efforts to change opinion and policy. This also atomises victims' quest to be heard and obscures the social root causes of Gender-based violence. The literature also suggests that media coverage of violence can affect public policy. Meyers (2010) argues that News of violence is significant not only because it influences public perceptions of whether this crime is seen as a severe social problem but also because it directly influences governmental policymaking.

The media's portrayal of women as victims in news reports further defines their role within the community. As Ross (2010) states, "men circumscribe women's lives" (p. 95), highlighting how societal narratives often limit women's identities and experiences. This representation not only reflects but also reinforces the boundaries placed on women, shaping public perception and influencing their status in society. However, the media only report violence, but when some women in such violent situations emerge as survivors, the media do not report such victory.

2.0 Theoretical Framework

Cultural Feminist Theory

The theory considered relevant to this work is cultural feminist theory. Cultural feminist theory, primarily articulated by scholars like Carol Gilligan in the 1980s, emphasises the role of gender and power dynamics in understanding domestic violence. This theory posits that domestic violence is a manifestation of patriarchal structures that perpetuate female subordination and male dominance. It highlights how societal norms valorise traditional masculinity, thereby contributing to systemic mistreatment of women across different cultures.

Cultural feminist theory explains domestic violence about gender and power relations in society, including the role of the patriarchy in enacting and perpetuating female domestic abuse. Feminist scholars insist that domestic

violence is sexed, thus a means through which sexed exploitation and inequality are staged, where society emphasizes continual female denigration and inferiority but male superiority (D'cruze & Rao, 2005). Societal norms often valorise traditional masculinity and femininity, with particular emphasis on male power and authority. This system of male dominance and control is rooted in specific sociocultural concepts of what it means to be a "proper" man or woman. The variation in gender construction across cultures contributes to the persistent systemic mistreatment of women.

In many African societies, including Nigeria, gender roles are sharply delineated. Male dominance is upheld through traditional values, beliefs, and customs. Sociocultural expectations shape women's experiences in the domestic realm, emphasising traits like passivity and submission as ideal feminine qualities. Conversely, men are expected to embody aggression and dominance. Traditional norms cast men as household heads and primary income earners, while women are viewed primarily as procreators and homemakers.

The Igbo ethnic group in Nigeria provides a striking example of how marital rituals can reinforce gender hierarchies. Illika (2006) describes a marriage ceremony where a woman demonstrates her acceptance of marriage and complete submission to her husband by kneeling before him and offering a cup of palm wine after taking a sip. Unlike some other Nigerian ethnic groups, such as the Hausa, Igbo marriages are elaborate affairs involving substantial bride prices or dowries, including specified "head drinks" and other items demanded by the bride's family. These marriage rituals serve to communicate male entitlement, power, and superiority in contrast to female submission. Consequently, any deviation from the expected subordinate role of women in marriage can be seen as a transgression, potentially leading to marital abuse. Cultural feminist theory is highly relevant to this study on media coverage of gender-based and sexual abuse in Nigeria. The theory provides a framework for understanding how patriarchal structures and societal norms contribute to the perpetuation of violence against women (D'cruze & Rao, 2005). It helps explain why such violence may be underreported or misrepresented in the media. The theory's emphasis on gender roles and power dynamics aligns with the study's focus on how Nigerian newspapers cover these issues.

Furthermore, it offers insight into the cultural context of gender-based violence in Nigeria, particularly in relation to traditional marriage practices and gender expectations (Illika, 2006). This theoretical lens can inform the analysis of media framing and representation of abuse cases.

3.0 Methodology

The content analysis method was adopted for the study. The manifest content of Pioneer and Ibom Nation newspapers concerning the coverage of gender-based violence in rural communities of Akwa Ibom State from January 2023 to December 2023 were analysed. Pioneer and Ibom Nation newspapers are two of the leading local newspapers in Akwa Ibom State, with wide circulation and readership across all parts of the state. The total population comprises 52 editions each of the Pioneer and Ibom Nation newspapers over a twelve-month period, resulting in a combined total of 104 editions. A systematic sampling method was employed to select a sample size of 30 editions from the Pioneer and Ibom Nation newspapers. This approach was chosen to ensure that all editions were equally represented in the study, thereby enhancing the reliability and validity of the findings.

3.1 The units of analysis

The study's units of analysis were news stories, editorials, features, letters to the editor, opinions, and comments.

3.2 Content categories

The following content categories were employed in the study to help guide the coding of the selected newspaper samples.

Frequency: The frequency would be measured by the number or total number of news stories written about the incident in both newspapers. The magnitude of the press coverage also determines this.

Placement: This involves the position of the stories in the entire newspaper setup. These include;

- a. Front Page: The stories on the front page would be considered the most important;
- b. Inside page: The stories would be considered least important. These

- stories began from the second page to the inside back page;
- c. Back page: The stories on the back page are not.

Direction: This is used to help determine the angle, tone, or language in which the stories were reported, either favourable, unfavourable, or neutral news stories.

4.0 Data Analysis

Table 1: Frequency of reports according to each newspaper

Story Type	<i>Pioneer</i>	<i>Ibom Nation</i>
News stories	53 (55.8%)	49 (57%)
Features	9 (9.5%)	6 (7%)
Editorials	1 (1.1%)	2 (2.3%)
Pictures	22 (23.2%)	18 (21%)
Opinion and Comment	10 (10.5%)	11 (13%)
Total	95 (100%)	86 (100%)

Table 1 shows the percentage and the sum of news contents reported by the two newspapers on the coverage of gender-based violence and sexual abuse in the rural Area of Akwa Ibom State. It also reveals the differences between the news contents reported on Pioneer and Ibom Nation newspapers and their overall coverage of the same period. The analysis shows that Pioneer newspaper had 53 news stories (55.8%), 9 features stories (9.5%), 1 Editorial and Letters-to-the editor (1.1%), 22 Pictures (23.2%) and 10 Opinions and Comments (10.5%) all summed up to 95 (100%) news content. In comparison, Ibom Nation newspaper reported 49 news stories (57%), 6 feature stories (7%), 2 Editorials and Letters to the editor (2.3%), 18 Pictures (21%), and 18 Opinions and Comments (13%) all summed up to 86 (100%) news contents. Hence, the total sum of coverage of news contents by the two newspapers during the gender-based violence and sexual abuse was 181 news Items.

Table 2: The prominence of coverage of gender-based violence and sexual abuse

Placement	<i>Pioneer</i>	<i>Ibom Nation</i>
Front Page	13 (13.7%)	19 (22.1%)
Inside Page	82 (86.3%)	65 (75.6%)
Back Page	-	2 (2.3%)
Total	95 (100%)	86 (100%)

Table 2 shows that in Pioneer newspaper, 13 (13.7%) reports were published on the front page, and 82 (86.3%) were published on the inside page. In comparison, no story was published on the back page, while Ibom Nation newspaper had 19 (22.1%) reports on the front page, 65 (75.6%) on the inside page, and 2 (2.3%) reports published on the back page. This analysis reveals that based on the placement, Ibom Nation newspaper attached more importance to the coverage of gender-based violence and sexual abuse against women in rural communities on the front page. However, the two newspapers did not attach much prominence to the coverage of gender-based violence and sexual abuse against women in rural communities, as they had few reports published on the front page and the back page.

Table 3: The reports according to the direction of coverage of the selected newspapers

Direction	Newspapers	
	<i>Pioneer</i>	<i>Ibom Nation</i>
Favourable	18 (18.9%)	21 (24.4%)
Unfavourable	53 (55.8%)	48 (55.8%)
Neutral	24 (25.3%)	17(19.8%)
Total	95 (100%)	86 (100%)

The data presented in the table and chart above reveals the direction of coverage of gender-based violence and sexual abuse against women in rural communities by Pioneer and Ibom Nation newspapers. This is used to help determine the angle, tone, or language in which the stories were reported, either favourable, unfavourable, or neutral news content. This implies whether the news stories say pleasant, healthy, or supportive things about gender-based violence and sexual abuse against women in rural communities or whether they say unpleasant things about gender-based violence and sexual abuse against women in rural communities or stand neutral on the issue.

The data shows that 18 (18.9%) of the news contents published in Pioneer newspaper were favourable to the gender-based violence and sexual abuse against women in rural communities, 53 (55.8%) of the news content published by the same newspaper were not favourable to gender-based violence and sexual abuse against women in rural communities. In comparison, 24 (25.3%) of the news content was neutral. On the other hand, Ibom Nation newspaper had 21 (24.4%) news contents favourable to the gender-based violence and sexual abuse against women in rural communities, 48 (55.8%) of the news contents published were unfavourable to gender-based violence and sexual abuse against women in rural communities while 17 (19.8%) news contents as neutral news content.

5.0 Discussion of Findings

The analysis indicates that Pioneer newspaper had the highest coverage of sexual abuse against women with 95 news coverage. The finding also indicate that the two newspapers published more straight news stories (56.4%) than other news content. The outcome indicates that the quality of the reportage based on content categories, which determined the coverage format, could have been more desired as the two newspapers concentrated more on news stories, giving inadequate coverage to essential facts behind the news. Opinion articles and editorials that could have given the news, facts, and figures behind the news should have been given more attention. This aligned with the outcome of Boykoff and Ravi (2007), who argued that news is not the best way to report issues. Apart from limiting the analytical power of the journalists, thereby obscuring the basic facts, news also allows issue

skeptics/contrarians to spread their views because journalists believe in balance in straight news. Also, Batta, Ashong, and Abdullahi (2013) discovered that letters to the editor, opinion articles, columns, interviews, and vox pops allow people to participate in media discourses. However, Ochonogor and Hyacinth (2011) state that serious and current events are usually treated with straight news.

The analysis also indicates that Ibom Nation newspapers attached more prominence by publishing more news content on the front page, with 19 (22.1%) reports as against Pioneer's 13 (13.7%) reports. Also, the two newspapers attached less prominence to the coverage of gender and sexual violence against women in rural communities as they had few reports published on the front page and the back page. The back pages were adorned with sports news and soft columns. This result is at variance with the earlier findings of Reisner (1992, p.971), who reported that the front page is the most critical page of a newspaper and suggests what the newspaper considers the day's most important stories. Risner (1992, p.973) discovered that the trend is that "stories are more likely to be chosen for the front page – with little argument if they are part of a recent ongoing story." Ofuoku and Agumagu (2008) stated that the front page presents readers with all the essential, attractive, eye-catching, and significant headlines inside the newspaper.

The outcome of the analysis also shows that 55.8% of the news content published by Pioneer newspaper was not favourable to gender and sexual abuse against women. This analysis shows that Nigerian newspapers do not support gender-based violence and sexual abuse against women in Nigeria; hence, they work in hand with the government to tame the growing cases of gender-based violence and sexual abuse against women in Nigeria.

6.0 Conclusion

The level of importance accorded to the reportage of gender and sexual violence issues by Pioneer and Ibom Nation newspapers cannot help in taming the problem. Therefore, The print media must dedicate ample space for the coverage of gender and sexual violence issues in Nigeria. Some decades ago; gender questions generated limited interest among theorists, researchers, the mass media, and society. However, with the industrial

revolution and the population explosion, gender-related issues have become a reality in human society and have pervaded all areas of human life, so there is a need for more excellent newspaper coverage of gender and sexual violence issues in Nigeria.

7.0 Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are made.

- ✿ There is an urgent need for journalist to diversify their news sources when reporting on Sexual abuse. They should strive to include victims'/survivors' voices in media stories. This gives more credibility to the stories and gives a perspective of the victim's side of the story.
- ✿ The role played by Stakeholders consultations within the journalism industry should be held in order to generate more effective strategies to improve media reporting on violence against women and even men and encourage a collaborative approach. This will give a better understanding of Sexual abuse to reporters, as well as arm them with a new way of reporting.
- ✿ There is an urgent need for stakeholders like the universities that train journalists to establish education and training strategies for journalists on Sexual abuse issues to enhance their reporting. These include targeting university curricula, developing short courses, and on-the-job training. This will ensure that when students graduate, they already have a better way of dealing with Sexual abuse issues and thus get into the employment world better armed.

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