

Gender Based Violence, Sexual Harassment and the Media in Nigeria

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Abstract

Gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual harassment remain pervasive violations of women's rights in Nigeria, yet their representation in the media often shapes how society perceives, understands, and responds to these issues. This study examines how Nigerian media report on GBV and sexual harassment, stressing the extent to which such coverage reflects professionalism, reinforces stereotypes, or contributes to prevention and social change. Guided by feminist media theory, framing theory, and the cultivation theory, the study explores the patterns and implications of media portrayals. A qualitative research design was adopted, drawing on secondary sources such as newspaper reports, NGO publications, and scholarly analyses, and employing thematic analysis to interrogate recurring frames, narratives, and silences. The findings reveal that Nigerian media frequently sensationalize violence, prioritize physical abuse over structural and systemic dimensions, and under-represent survivor voices. However, evidence also suggests that media can act as a powerful tool for advocacy by amplifying marginalized perspectives, shaping public discourse, and holding institutions accountable. This study argues that gender-sensitive and socially responsible reporting is vital to promoting accountability, advancing gender justice, and supporting broader policy and advocacy efforts aimed at preventing GBV and sexual harassment in Nigeria.

Key words: Gender-Based Violence, Sexual Harassment, Media Representation, Gender Justice, Nigeria.

Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual harassment have increasingly gained global attention as critical human rights violations and major impediments to development. The United Nations (2020) defines GBV as harmful acts directed at individuals based on their gender, encompassing physical, sexual, psychological, and economic forms of abuse. Worldwide, an estimated one in three women has experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in her lifetime (World Health Organization, 2021). Such violations cut across geographical, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts, demonstrating that GBV and sexual harassment are

not isolated problems but rather systemic challenges that threaten gender equality and human dignity.

In Nigeria, the incidence of GBV and sexual harassment has reached alarming proportions. The 2018 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) reveals that 31 percent of women aged 15–49 have experienced physical violence, while about 9 percent reported experiencing sexual violence. Early marriage, harmful widowhood practices, female genital mutilation, workplace harassment, and intimate partner violence are common forms of abuse, with significant consequences for the health, education, and economic well-being of women and girls (Obokoh, 2020; Akarika et al., 2019). These experiences are further exacerbated by entrenched patriarchal norms, religious interpretations, and cultural practices that normalize male dominance while silencing victims through stigma, taboo, and shame. The result is a situation in which many cases go unreported, and perpetrators enjoy widespread impunity.

The role of the media in this context is critical. The media serve as a powerful socialization agent, shaping public understanding, influencing attitudes, and framing issues of social concern (Potter, 2001; Gillespie et al., 2013). In Nigeria, the media have historically played significant roles in mobilizing citizens around pressing national issues, such as during the 2012 Occupy Nigeria protests against fuel subsidy removal and the 2020 #EndSARS movement against police brutality (Ayodeji et al., 2019). These examples underscore the potential of the media to serve as catalysts for accountability and reform. However, when it comes to reporting gender-based violence and sexual harassment, evidence suggests that Nigerian media coverage often falls short of this transformative role. Reports tend to be sensationalized, episodic, and trivialized, frequently portraying violence against women as domestic or private matters rather than systemic human rights violations (Meyers, 1997; Stephenson, 2014).

Research has further shown that Nigerian newspapers and broadcast outlets sometimes re-victimize survivors by reproducing patriarchal stereotypes, engaging in victim-blaming, or employing language that delegitimizes women's experiences (Nwabueze & Oduah, 2014). Headlines such as "lover's quarrel ends in tragedy" or "wife provokes husband to death" obscure the structural dynamics of gender inequality while implicitly excusing perpetrators (Albana, 2017). By privileging official sources such as police reports while neglecting the perspectives of survivors and advocates, media representations often reinforce existing power hierarchies instead of challenging them (Gillespie et al., 2013). This pattern raises fundamental questions about the media's role in either reinforcing gender inequalities or contributing to gender justice.

Against this backdrop, this article seeks to interrogate the nexus between media and gender-based violence in Nigeria by focusing on how GBV and sexual harassment are presented in the news. Specifically, the objectives of this study are to examine how Nigerian media report cases of gender-based violence and sexual harassment, analyze the extent to which media representations reinforce or challenge gender stereotypes and patriarchal norms, and assess the role of the media in reducing GBV and promoting accountability in Nigeria. To guide the research, the study poses three key research questions: How does Nigerian media report cases of GBV and sexual harassment? To

what extent does media representation reinforce or challenge gender stereotypes? What role can the media play in reducing GBV and promoting accountability in Nigeria?

The significance of this study lies in its potential to advance gender rights and shape media ethics in Nigeria by demonstrating how ethical and gender-sensitive reporting can transform public discourse on GBV and sexual harassment. By moving beyond sensationalism and reframing such violations as systemic issues, the media can become an active agent in promoting accountability and gender justice. For practitioners, the study offers insights that guide journalists, editors, policymakers, and civil society actors in strengthening advocacy campaigns, amplifying survivors' voices, and ensuring professional responsibility in reporting. Academically, the study contributes to feminist media studies by analyzing how media narratives reinforce or challenge gender inequalities, expands African communication studies through an examination of the framing and agenda-setting roles of Nigerian media, and informs GBV policy research by providing evidence that aligns media practices with international human rights frameworks such as CEDAW and the Maputo Protocol. In situating Nigerian media within both local realities and global debates, the study strengthens the media's dual capacity either to entrench gender inequality or to serve as a transformative force for democracy and gender equality.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative content analysis design to explore how Nigerian media represent gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual harassment. Data were gathered from multiple secondary sources, including nationally circulated newspapers (The Punch, Vanguard, Guardian), leading television networks (Channels TV, AIT, TVC News, Arise News, NTA), social media campaigns (#SayNoToRape, #JusticeForOchanya, #EndSARS), as well as reports from NGOs such as Project Alert, WACOL, and CLEEN Foundation, alongside UN and WHO documents. The study focused on materials produced between 2002 and 2025 to capture both past and recent trends in media reporting. The analysis was conducted in two stages. First, thematic coding was used to identify recurring patterns such as victim-blaming, sensationalist framing, silences on structural drivers of violence, and advocacy-oriented narratives. Second, critical discourse analysis (CDA) was applied to examine how language and framing reproduced or challenged gender hierarchies and power relations. This dual approach allowed the study to move beyond surface description and interrogate the ideological underpinnings of media narratives. To strengthen validity, a triangulated data strategy was employed, drawing from print, broadcast, and digital platforms. This made it possible to compare mainstream and alternative outlets in shaping public discourse on GBV and sexual harassment in Nigeria. However, the study faced some limitations. Because the data were purposively selected, findings cannot be generalized to all Nigerian media. The reliance on English-language sources may have excluded indigenous-language media perspectives. In addition, as with all qualitative research, the interpretive nature of discourse analysis means that researcher subjectivity may have influenced interpretation, although this was mitigated through cross-checking and peer debriefing.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Every scholarly inquiry benefits from a solid theoretical foundation, and this study is no exception. To understand how gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual harassment are represented in the Nigerian media, it is not enough to simply catalogue news stories or analyze headlines; it is essential to anchor the discussion in theories that explain the relationship between media, culture, and power. The media does more than report events, it interprets them, frames them, and, over time, shapes how people come to see social problems such as violence against women. Theoretical perspectives therefore serve as intellectual compasses, helping us to interrogate not just what is reported, but how it is reported and why it matters for public consciousness and gender justice. For this reason, the present study draws upon three interrelated theories: Feminist Media Theory, Framing Theory, and Cultivation Theory.

At the heart of this study lies *Feminist Media Theory*, which provides a powerful lens for interrogating how Nigerian media handles issues of gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual harassment. This perspective reminds us that the media is not a neutral mirror of society but an active participant in constructing meanings that often reinforce patriarchal power (van Zoonen, 1994; Byerly, 2016). In Nigeria, reporting on GBV has frequently leaned toward victim-blaming, presenting women as either silent sufferers or complicit in their abuse (Nwabueze & Oduah, 2014). Such portrayals trivialize violence, normalize harassment, and silence survivor voices. Yet, the same media space can also be reclaimed as a site of resistance. Feminist Media Theory makes this possibility visible, showing how advocacy-driven coverage, like that witnessed during the #ArewaMeToo campaign, can break cultural silences, amplify marginalized voices, and reframe women not as passive victims but as agents of change (Abubakar, 2020). For this study, the theory is vital because it situates media practice within the broader struggle over gender justice in Nigeria.

The *Framing Theory* adds another crucial dimension by explaining how media narratives about GBV are not simply about “facts” but about how those facts are constructed and presented. Frames, as Goffman (1974) and Entman (1993) argue, shape public understanding by selecting certain aspects of reality while sidelining others. Nigerian media often employs frames that sensationalize violence, reduce it to isolated tragedies, or highlight the “shame” associated with victims rather than systemic failures of institutions (Akarika et al., 2019; Obokoh, 2020). For instance, the reporting on Ochanya Ogbanje’s death focused more on the emotional drama than on the institutional negligence that enabled her abuse. Such frames direct public sympathy but also obscure accountability. Framing Theory is therefore indispensable to this study because it reveals how the press, consciously or unconsciously, can reinforce or disrupt gender stereotypes, either silencing structural causes of violence or bringing them to the forefront of public debate.

Whereas Feminist Media Theory and Framing Theory address representation and narrative construction, *Cultivation Theory* speaks to the long-term cultural impact of these portrayals. Gerbner and Gross (1976) emphasized that consistent patterns in media messages accumulate over time, cultivating particular worldviews. Applied to GBV, this suggests that when Nigerian media repeatedly underreports sexual harassment, sensationalizes it, or frames it as exceptional, audiences gradually normalize such

violence as part of everyday life. This normalization discourages survivors from speaking out and fosters societal tolerance for impunity. However, Cultivation Theory also illuminates how sustained, advocacy-oriented reporting can have the opposite effect: shaping intolerance for GBV, mobilizing activism, and pressing for accountability. The #JusticeForUwa case in 2020 exemplifies how continuous coverage across platforms cultivated public outrage, transforming what might have been an isolated tragedy into a national demand for justice. The relevance of Cultivation Theory, therefore, lies in its capacity to explain not just immediate media effects but the deep cultural shaping of attitudes toward women and violence in Nigeria.

Media Reporting of GBV and Sexual Harassment in Nigeria

The reporting of gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual harassment in Nigeria reflects broader questions about the role of media in society: is journalism merely a conveyor of events, or is it an active shaper of cultural meaning and public policy? This question has animated both global and Nigerian scholarship, with studies pointing to the tension between media visibility and the quality of representation. The challenge, therefore, is not simply whether GBV is covered but how narratives are constructed, whose voices are amplified, and whether reportage advances or undermines gender justice. Globally, media coverage of GBV has been shown to oscillate between advocacy and trivialization. Bullock and Cubert (2002) argue that Western media often adopt episodic frames, presenting violence as isolated incidents rather than linking them to structural gender inequality. Similarly, Gillespie et al. (2013) highlight the prevalence of victim-blaming tropes, where survivors are implicitly held responsible for their suffering. These insights resonate strongly in the Nigerian context, where patriarchal norms deeply influence journalistic practice. Nigerian scholars like Ibitoye and Abolarin-Egbebiola (2025) have documented how newspapers tend to reproduce gender stereotypes, foregrounding official sources while marginalizing survivor narratives. Their study complicates assumptions of media neutrality, suggesting instead that journalism is embedded in (and sometimes complicit with) patriarchal cultural logics.

Yet, not all scholars agree that Nigerian media operate exclusively as tools of patriarchy. Some argue that moments of advocacy and reformist reporting emerge, particularly in times of public outrage. For example, during the high-profile case of Ochanya Ogbanje, several media outlets framed the story as a national scandal, calling for accountability within educational and judicial institutions (Independent Newspaper Nigeria, 2018). Similarly, coverage of Vera Uwaila Omozuwa's murder foregrounded the brutality of the act and, for a brief moment, sparked conversations about sexual violence in universities. These examples suggest that the media can indeed function as catalysts for national debate. However, the limitation lies in sustainability: once the initial wave of outrage subsides, coverage often dissipates without sustained structural critique. This episodic pattern raises an important concern: media visibility without continuity risks reducing GBV to spectacle rather than embedding it in policy discourse.

The post-COVID era introduced further complexities. Oko-Epelle (2023) found that GBV coverage increased during the pandemic, partly due to global reports of a "shadow pandemic" of violence against women. However, much of this reporting was reactive, event-driven, and lacking in thematic depth. What this reveals is a paradox:

more coverage does not necessarily mean better coverage. In fact, increased visibility without analytical framing may desensitize audiences, producing what scholars of media effects describe as “compassion fatigue” (Moeller, 1999). Thus, the task is not merely to count how many GBV stories appear, but to interrogate whether such stories challenge or reinforce systemic inequalities.

Case studies from Nigeria’s digital sphere further complicate the debate. The #ArewaMeToo movement, studied by Abubakar (2021) and expanded by Afolabi and Shaffi (2024), demonstrated the capacity of survivors to bypass mainstream gatekeepers and articulate their own narratives through social media. Unlike traditional press coverage, these digital framings were often survivor-centered, political, and unapologetically feminist. Yet, as Chimuanya and Uyah (2025) note, digital activism faced intense backlash, with survivors subjected to online harassment and moral policing. This tension illustrates that while new media create spaces for counter-discourses, they also reproduce societal contestations around gender, morality, and authority. Apparently, digital platforms cannot fully replace traditional journalism, but they provide critical pressure points that force legacy media into new conversations.

Therefore, the Nigerian media are marked by ambivalence: they can simultaneously serve as amplifiers of patriarchal stereotypes and as occasional platforms for advocacy. Second, the framing of GBV is often episodic, sensational, and unsustained, which limits its power to effect structural reform. Third, alternative discourses particularly from digital movements, are reshaping the media landscape, though not without resistance. From a scholarly standpoint, the implication is clear: journalism in Nigeria is not a passive reflection of GBV but an active participant in its cultural politics. To advance gender justice, media must move beyond episodic outrage to survivor-centered, thematic, and reform-oriented reporting. Without this shift, Nigerian journalism risks perpetuating the very inequalities it should be challenging.

Media Narratives, Gender Stereotypes, and the Nigerian Press

The debate about whether media reinforce or challenge gender stereotypes is anchored in the recognition that journalism is never neutral; it is a cultural practice that interprets and frames social reality. Entman’s (1993) theory of framing makes clear that journalistic choices about emphasis and omission shape how audiences interpret events and actors. In the case of gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual harassment, this means that the press can either reproduce patriarchal logics through victim-blaming and stereotype reinforcement, or challenge those logics by situating violence within structural patterns of inequality.

Research all over the world shows that media often relies on episodic and stereotypical framings. Bullock and Cubert (2002), for instance, demonstrate how U.S. newspapers portray domestic violence as isolated incidents, obscuring systemic causes. Gillespie et al. (2013) further reveal how victim-blaming tropes such as focusing on a survivor’s clothing or alcohol consumption recur across contexts. Meyers (1997), in her influential study of North American media, argues that these practices are not accidental but the product of routine news values that privilege official voices over survivors’ perspectives. Nigerian scholarship echoes these findings. Ibitoye and Abolarin-Egbebiola

(2025), for example, show that while Nigerian newspapers sometimes call for reform, they overwhelmingly reproduce gender stereotypes by marginalizing survivor voices and privileging official sources.

Notwithstanding, not all Nigerian media coverage reinforces stereotypes. At critical moments, certain outlets have engaged in advocacy-oriented reporting. The case of Ochanya Ogbanje, a 13-year-old who died after sexual abuse, demonstrates this. For a time, media framed the case as a national crisis, calling for accountability within educational and judicial systems (Independent Newspaper Nigeria, 2018). Similarly, the murder of university student Vera Uwaila Omozuwa ("Uwa") generated headlines that sparked nationwide debate about violence against women. Yet, as Oko-Epelle (2023) notes, such coverage was episodic: once public outrage subsided, sustained critique of institutions disappeared. This raises an important question: can sporadic advocacy balance years of routine stereotype-laden reporting? Indeed, visibility without continuity risks rendering GBV coverage performative, reducing it to fleeting spectacle rather than embedding it in public policy debates.

Advertising and language use in Nigerian media further illustrate this pattern. Studies by Okunna (2002) and more recent corpus analyses by Ezeibe (2017) and Ekhareafa and Ogwezzy (2018) show how women are consistently depicted in domestic or decorative roles, while men are framed as authoritative and competent. In crime reporting, this translates into narratives that subtly redirect responsibility to female victims, reinforcing stereotypes of women as careless or complicit. Cultivation theorists argue that repeated exposure to such representations normalizes violence by cultivating public tolerance (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 2002). This position is plausible: stereotypes in reporting are not simply descriptive but prescriptive but they teach audiences what to expect from women and what to excuse in men.

Digital activism, however, complicates the stereotype-reinforcement narrative. The #ArewaMeToo movement offers an important counterpoint. Abubakar (2021) shows how survivors used Twitter to bypass mainstream gatekeeping and construct counter-discourses that foregrounded women's agency. Afolabi and Shaffi (2024) similarly argue that digital activism pressured mainstream media into covering taboo stories of sexual violence in northern Nigeria. Yet backlash was severe: as Chimuanya and Uyah (2025) observe, survivors who spoke out online were met with harassment, moral policing, and threats. These findings suggest that while digital spaces expand opportunities to challenge stereotypes, they also reflect contested cultural logics that can reinforce patriarchal backlash. Although digital activism is necessary, it is not sufficient: it can ignite debate, but without structural reform in mainstream journalism, counter-frames risk remaining peripheral.

Evidence shows that newsroom interventions can mitigate stereotype reproduction. Gender-sensitive reporting trainings, ethical guidelines, and partnerships with NGOs have yielded modest but significant shifts in how GBV is reported. For instance, journalists who underwent training were less likely to reveal survivors' identities or use stigmatizing language (Ekhareafa & Ogwezzy, 2018). Yet these gains are fragile. Male-dominated editorial boards and commercial pressures for sensational headlines often undermine reforms (Chiluwa, 2021). Thus, the implication is clear: reform cannot be

episodic but must be structural, embedding survivor-centered ethics into the very fabric of Nigerian journalism.

Media as an Agent of Change: Preventing GBV and Promoting Accountability

The media has long been recognized as a powerful institution for shaping public discourse, and its role in the prevention of gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual harassment is increasingly emphasized in both global and Nigerian scholarship. Beyond simply reporting incidents, the media has the capacity to influence how GBV is understood, framed, and addressed by the public and policymakers. Flood and Pease (2009) argue that news media audiences are not passive consumers of information; rather, the decisions about who appears in the news, what stories are highlighted, and how events are framed profoundly shape people's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours. This makes the media a critical actor in either reinforcing patriarchal logics or in advancing cultural transformation and accountability.

In Nigeria, the growing visibility of GBV in news reports underscores the media's potential influence, but the quality of coverage remains uneven. Obokoh (2020) observes that reporting on violence against women has substantially increased in recent years, reflecting heightened awareness, yet warns that the persistence of stereotypes and patriarchal norms in coverage undermines this progress. Rather than dismantling harmful attitudes, many reports reproduce narratives that stigmatize survivors or trivialize their experiences. Nonetheless, as Obokoh notes, the media could pivot toward prevention by rejecting such stereotypes, amplifying survivors' voices, and normalizing rights-based discourse. This position aligns with the broader view that prevention requires not only visibility but also the reframing of violence within structural analyses of gender inequality (Meyers, 1997; Bullock & Cubert, 2002).

At the advocacy level, initiatives such as the Spotlight Initiative have highlighted the constructive role that media can play in promoting accountability. In a webinar organized as part of the 16 Days of Activism, experts urged Nigerian journalists to go beyond surface-level reporting by amplifying the narratives of women and girls, speaking truth to power, and promoting gender justice. They emphasized that media can reach vulnerable communities in their local languages, empower survivors by encouraging help-seeking, and normalize discussions about mental health, an often overlooked dimension of GBV (Obokoh, 2020). Such interventions point to the preventive capacity of media, provided that coverage is intentional, inclusive, and survivor-centered.

Global scholarship further reveals the dangers of sensationalistic or stereotypical reporting. Studies across different contexts show that violence against women is often presented as episodic, isolated incidents rather than as part of systemic gender inequality (Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Gillespie et al., 2013). Nigerian media practice mirrors this pattern. Slobodanka (2017) observes that physical violence dominates journalistic coverage in Nigeria, while other forms such as workplace harassment, psychological abuse, and economic coercion remain underreported. When covered, such stories are often sensationalized, reducing them to spectacle rather than contextualizing them within patterns of structural violence. This sensationalism may provoke outrage but rarely

sustains public empathy or mobilizes systemic reform. Kamala (2005) adds a sharper critique, noting that the same media which should condemn violence often perpetuate it indirectly by objectifying women's bodies to sell products, thereby reinforcing the very inequalities that fuel violence.

Slobodanka (2017) insists that journalists and editors must be intentional in adopting gender-sensitive practices that avoid stereotypes, resist sensationalism, and instead focus on investigative reporting that illuminates causes, consequences, and institutional failures. Nigerian studies lend weight to this recommendation: gender-sensitive training has been shown to improve reporting quality by reducing the use of stigmatizing language and protecting survivors' identities (Ekhareaf & Ogwezzy, 2018). Yet, as Chiluwa (2021) cautions, these gains remain fragile, often undermined by editorial boards dominated by men, entrenched newsroom cultures, and commercial pressures that reward sensational headlines.

In synthesizing this literature, a clear picture emerges: the Nigerian media has the potential to be a powerful preventive actor in the fight against GBV and sexual harassment, but it is currently constrained by structural, cultural, and institutional barriers. On one hand, there are moments of advocacy, as in the coverage of high-profile cases like Ochanya Ogbanje and Uwa Omozuwa where media act as watchdogs and catalysts for public outrage. On the other hand, such coverage is episodic, overshadowed by routine reporting practices that reinforce stereotypes and normalize violence. Therefore, prevention and accountability require a systemic shift in journalistic practice. This means embedding survivor-centered ethics, rejecting objectification, amplifying marginalized voices, and institutionalizing gender-sensitive training. Without these reforms, media coverage of GBV in Nigeria will remain reactive and fragmented. With them, however, the media can transition from being passive chroniclers of violence to active agents of cultural transformation and institutional accountability.

Conclusion

Gender-based violence and sexual harassment constitute serious violations of human rights, and the media's role in reporting them is important for shaping public understanding and responses. In Nigeria, however, coverage is often sensationalized, biased, and framed in ways that trivialize survivors while reinforcing patriarchal stereotypes. Such patterns undermine the media's responsibility to inform, educate, and advocate for justice. Yet, as feminist media theory and framing theory suggest, the press also has the potential to challenge harmful norms by amplifying survivors' voices, promoting accountability, and contextualizing violence within broader socio-economic and cultural inequalities. To be effective, media practice must move beyond mere reportage to adopt gender-sensitive, professional, and advocacy-driven approaches that not only expose abuse but also contribute to prevention and social change.

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