

Social Responsibility and Sexual Violence: Newspaper Coverage of Sexual Assault In Nigeria

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Abstract

The growing cases of sexual assault in Nigeria calls for urgent action. The media is expected to give prominence to such social ills as part of their fundamental societal obligation; with intent to inform the society, as well as advocate against such menace. Research suggests that the manner in which the media report issues such as this does not portray the desired level of advocacy nor urgency it deserves. Adopting a content analysis of 51 purposively sampled stories, this study sought to determine the prominence, and direction of coverage of sexual assault by *The Punch newspaper* in 2015. The findings reveal that rape was the most prominent type of sexual assault reported; there was an unsatisfactory level of prominence in the coverage of sexual assault by *The Punch newspaper* in 2015 as only 17.6% were cover page stories. Also, majority (72.6%) of the stories were straight news reports on cases of sexual assault, while only 7.8% of the stories were directed towards advocacy. The study recommends that more prominence should be given to the coverage of sexual assault, especially in the areas of advocacy, and counsel of assault victims.

Key words: Sexual Assault, Social Responsibility, level of prominence, *The Punch Newspaper*

Introduction

Sexual assault is a criminal act of violence against humanity which like cankerworm slowly but steadily ravages the global society. It is often motivated by the urge to fulfill inappropriate and indecent sexual behavior, while dominating and humiliating the victim. Sexual assault is the practice of sexual abuse where an individual is forcefully harassed to submit to varied forms of sexual activities. The World Health Organization (2012, p.2), defines sexual assault as:

Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic or otherwise directed against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home or work.

The WHO makes it clear from the foregoing that sexual assault is by no means limited to physical participation in sexual activities, but also includes any form of unsolicited verbal sexual advances, and exposure to sexual visuals. Therefore, sexual assault is any form of sexual exploitation including and not limited to verbal abuse, unwanted sexual contact (touching or grabbing), rape, attempted rape, sexual harassment and child molestation. The prevalence of sexual assault in Nigeria has become a major concern. Despite the fact that this barbaric act attracts life imprisonment as punishment if found guilty statistics reveal an alarming increase in reported cases of sexual assault in diverse regions of the

country. Statistics reveal that rape is the most prevalent form of sexual assault in Nigeria. For instance, in 2012, the Lagos State Ministry of Justice recorded about 427 rape cases, while the State Command of the Nigerian Police recorded about 678 incidents of rape within the state between March 2012 and March 2013 (Ogbo, 2013).

Also, no fewer than 80 rape cases were reported between March and October of 2013 in the capital city of Edo State, South South of Nigeria, while about 100 rapes cases were recorded in Kano State North West of the country in 2013 (*The Nation Newspaper*, 2014). An analysis of Obafemi Awolowo University Teaching Hospital, Ile-Ife, Osun state reveals that 76 sexual assault survivors were admitted between January 2007- December 2011. All the 76 survivors were females from ages 4 to 50 years; however majority of the victims were under the age of 16 (Badejoko, Anyabolu, and Adejuyigbe, 2014).

The media as part of its surveillance function plays a vital role in sensitizing the public on social issues such as sexual assault. The Executive Director of Integrated Anti-Human Trafficking and Community Development Initiative (INTACOM- Africa), posits that the increase in sexual assault in Nigeria calls for media advocacy as communication and massive awareness are key avenues in eliminating the scourge (*The Guardian*, 2015). This is an appeal for prominence of the social issue in media coverage and discourse which is a concern with media coverage of sexual assault in Nigeria. This study evaluates newspaper coverage of sexual assault in Nigeria particularly by *The Punch* newspaper in the year 2015. The level of prominence given to the subject, and the direction of the stories constitutes the focal points of the study.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised:

1. What level of prominence was given to the coverage of sexual assault stories by *The Punch Newspaper* in 2015?
2. What was the direction of the coverage of sexual assault by *The Punch Newspaper* in 2015?

Theoretical Framework

The Media is theoretically obliged to be socially responsible to the society through the fulfillment of expected professional obligations of accountability to the society. This accountability should reflect through a professionalism whereby standards of truth, accuracy, and objectivity in information dissemination is upheld by the media. This implies that the media is obligated to convey credible information (without bias) in every area of discourse particularly on issues relevant to human interest. The philosophy of the social responsibility theory from the libertarian theory which advocated for a free and fair press. Social responsibility therefore is the ability of the media to “organize their responsibility to...promote public opinion, consumer action, private rights, and important social interests” (Ravi, 2012 p. 307).

Social Responsibility Theory further suggests that the media is responsible to the public; that the media should help curb whatever might lead to crime and violence in the society and that the media has an obligation to the society to render high standards of performance

and accountability while performing journalistic duties. Media professionals need to educate themselves first on facts and dynamics of sexual assault so that in disseminating information to the public, they are not biased and subjective. The media can also influence attitudes and opinion of people and even encourage the government to take action and promote safety and equality in the society. The mass media (newspaper) is driven by the goal of being the watchdog of the society through the surveillance function; the media helps to determine what is news-worthy. That is, the media can be used to sensitize the public through the prominence and coverage of sexual assault stories. Hence, the exposure of sexual assault issues and how it is reported by the media will influence the attitudes and psychological state of the public. According to Chandra (2015), “when the media make mistakes it does hurt activism and advocacy in terms of what the public thinks about sexual assault”. Chandra (2015) further states that the media can be used a platform where evidence to a victim's story can be reported. Also, the perspective that the media takes on sexual assault issues are the pictures that will remain in the minds of the public as it will influence the public opinions on the consequent reportage and prominence given to the issue.

Literature Review

Sexual assault occurs the world over with high prevalence in developing countries. In majority of cases, offenders who commit sexual assault are generally motivated by a desire to exercise control and power over their victims. The United States Department of Health & Human Services (2009) as cited in Pandora's Project (2009) opines that sexual assault can be “verbal, visual, or anything that forces a person to join in unwanted sexual contact or attention”. A lot of sexual assault cases in Nigeria have been found to occur in tertiary institutions with students, as perpetrators. Geidam, Njoku, and Bako (2010), examined the prevalence and nature of sexual assault among female students in the University of Maiduguri. Adopting a cross-sectional descriptive survey of 400 female students in the University the study found that 205 (51.3%) of them acknowledged to have been sexually assaulted, and in 154 (87.2%) of the cases, the respondents had a close relationship with the assailant. It was also found that these assaults were carried out during parties, in the class rooms especially in the dark.

Forms of Sexual Assault

The most common forms of sexual assault are;

- i. **Rape:** This is the most common form of sexual assault. It is the act of forceful sexual violation against the will of the victim. The Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (2009), classifies rape into: marital or intimate partner rape, and stranger rape. This implies that rape occurs among spouses, and among people who share intimate history and relationship together. There have also been cases of parents raping children, and sibling rape. When rape is perpetuated by a close relation or familiar individual, it does not only ruin the fundamental basis of the relationship but leaves the victim feeling betrayed and/or humiliated.

This form of rape is often not a one-off affair. Most rape that occur within the family circle often reoccur as the victim is assaulted repeatedly, whereas

stranger rape occurs between individuals with no ties. This form of rape is an act of fierceness outside of the victim's normal relationships. It almost always involves a certain degree of physical force or coercion. In such cases, the perpetrator tends to exercise more violence and control over the victim.

- ii. **Child Sexual Abuse:** This is when the victim of sexual assault is a minor (less than eighteen years). Duru, Ederiane and Akinbami (2014, p.354), states that child sexual abuse is the involvement of a child in a sexual activity as he or she does not fully comprehend, is not developmentally prepared for and cannot give consent to, or that violates the laws or social taboos of society. Duru et al (2014) further classifies child sexual abuse into contact abuse: fondling of the genitals, masturbation, oral- genital contact, genital penetration, vaginal and anal intercourse; and non-contact abuse: exhibitionism, voyeurism, and child pornography. Perpetrators of this barbaric act often lure the children through trickery, bribery, coercion, and/or force.

It is alarming that this form of abuse has become rampant in Nigeria despite the existence of the Childs Right Act, and the Sexual Offence Law which was passed by the Nigerian Senate sometimes in June 2015 affirming that; “anybody found guilty of rape, child sex tourism or deliberate passage of HIV/AIDS to innocent citizens, and other sexual offences, will face life imprisonment” (Agbakwuru and Erunke, 2015). Infants have become the target victims, and unfortunately, the perpetrators have been found to be mostly individuals with close family ties to the child.

Studies have shown that most perpetrators of child molestation are known to the child. Dorfman, Meija, Cheyne, and Gonzalez (2011), corroborates this in a content analysis study of about 260 articles on child molestation published in the United States between 2007 and 2009. The key topic addressed in these articles was criminal justice, such as arrests and trials of accused perpetrators. The study found that prominent perpetrators of child molestation are someone with whom the child is familiar with than strangers or predators.

- iii. **Incest:** This refers to sexual contact between family members. Most times it is difficult for the victim to disclose a sexual assault crime when they know the perpetrator. It can be difficult especially when the perpetrator is a family member. This form of sexual assault occurs among close blood relations. Examples are assault amongst parents and children, uncle and niece, aunt and nephew. It is usually the form of an older family member sexually abusing a child or adolescent. Victim of sexual assault by a family member often suffer in silence, and hardly tell anyone about it. They often fear that no one will believe them which is the case in most incest assault cases.

- iv. **Sexual Harassment:** The United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2002, p.1), defines sexual harassment as unsolicited sexual advances, demand for sexual favours, teasing comments, physical harassment of a sexual nature such as inappropriate body contact and touching. A lot of sexual harassment has been found to occur at the workplace, and schools.

- V. **Exhibitionism or Voyeurism:** Psychology Today (2014), states that it is a condition whereby an individual has an urge to expose one's sexual organ to

others, particularly strangers. This is often done to arouse the observer, but it becomes an assault when the observer is upset by the gesture. Voyeurism on the other hand is a psychological disorder in which an individual attains sexual pleasure from looking at naked bodies and genitals organs or observing the sexual acts of other against their will (Encyclopedia of Mental Disorders, 2016).

Effects of Sexual Assault on Victims

The effects of sexual assault on victims can be very devastating. It can have a psychological, emotional, and physical effect on a victim or survivor. These effects are not always easy to deal with, but most times with the right help from referral centers and hospitals it could be managed. There is no normal way to react to sexual assault. Individual's response is bound to be different depending on their personal circumstances. The Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (2009) outlined some effects of sexual assault on the victim of:

- i. **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)** - this is a normal human reaction to an extreme or abnormal situation. Every individual has a different way of reacting to situations when they occur and has a distinct threshold for what is perceived as a traumatic event. PTSD involves prolonged feelings of anxiety, or fear, intense horror, experiencing distressing memories of the events, sleep difficulties and so on. According to Geidam, Njoku and Bako (2010), 35.6% of the 206 cases of sexual assault among female students in the University of Maiduguri sustained extra-genital trauma, while others had psychological (24.9%) and genital trauma (15.6%).
- ii. **Flashbacks** - this occurs when memories of past traumas feel as if they are taking place in the current moment. These memories can come in various forms such as: dreams, hallucination, and overwhelming emotions. This re-experience always seem to appear from nowhere and blurs the line between the present and past of the victim, making the victim experience anxiety and fear. Flashbacks could be mild and brief, and sometimes it could last longer at other times.
- iii. **Depression** - this form of effect can be difficult to recognize when it occurs since its symptoms can be attributed to other forms of effect. It occurs when the normal feeling of sadness lasts longer than two weeks. It involves prolonged sadness, loss of energy or persistent fatigue, feeling of worthlessness or guilt, inability to concentrate, worry, anger, thoughts of death or suicide amongst others. It is not a sign of weakness and can affect any body. Other effects of sexual assault are self-harm, sexually transmitted infections, substance abuse, eating disorders, sleep disorders, pregnancy and suicide.

Empirical Review of Media Coverage of Sexual Assault in Nigeria

The prevalence of sexual assault has given rise to numerous research with focus on newspaper. Most of these studies have reiterated the sexual victimization of women and children. In 2015, a press conference by a Sexual Assault Referral Center in Lagos State, Mirabel Center revealed a record of 737 cases with females being 720 and males 17. Also, The Executive Director of Women Aid Collective (WACOL) also recounted in 2014 that 51 minors were sexually abused in Enugu state between April and August 2014. She

affirmed that the cases included 30 rape cases, 4 attempted rape cases, 10 sexual assaults, 37 defilements and 15 other cases of domestic violence (The Nation Newspaper, 2014). Odu, Falana and Olotu (2014), investigated the prevalence of violent sexual assault on girls in South West Nigeria. The study examined the etiological and causative factors engendering sexual assault, it explored the predicaments and provided the characteristics of males that are sexually assaulted and conditions that precipitates sexual assault. The study used the descriptive survey to determine the vulnerable girls in South West Nigeria. The study found that virtually all the media had daily reports on sexual assaults of girls by relatives, teachers, peers and acquaintances.

A content analysis of newspaper coverage of sexual violence against women and children in selected newspapers in Nigeria by Egbo (2012) found that stories on sexual assault hardly made headline as 77% of the 183 articles analyzed were published on the inside pages of the paper. Also, Nwabueze and Oduah (2014), agrees with the fact that sexual assault cases are not treated as priority in Nigeria as they found in their study on the framing and representation of rape case by Nigerian newspaper dailies that most articles on rape were published on the inside pages. This is a concern with media coverage of sexual assault in Nigeria. It implies that a social issue such as this is not given the prominence it requires in media agenda.

Another area of concern is with the protection of the identity of sexually assaulted victims. Often times the pictures and names of these individuals are published on the newspapers despite the stereotypical implication in Nigeria. According to Jones, Finkelhor and Beckwith (2010), when names of child victims and other identifying information are disclosed, it could result in exacerbated trauma, and discourage other victims from reporting assault. Also, a study on the framing and representation of rape cases in the Nigerian dailies: *Daily Sun*, *Vanguard* and *Guardian newspapers*, Nwabueze and Oduah (2014), found the degree of coverage of rape by the selected newspapers to be minimal especially in *The Guardian*. Also, the prominent use of straight news journalistic gentry in reporting the cases revealed a lack of in-depth discourse on the issue of rape in Nigeria by the media.

Methodology

The quantitative content analysis research design was adopted in this study. It is the systematic approach for the objective study and analysis of media content. Content analysis as defined by Kerlinger (2000) in Asemah, Gujbawu, Ekhareafu and Okpanachi (2012, p.80), is a “method of studying and analyzing communication in a systematic, objective and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variable”. In essence, it is an analysis based on the manifest content of the mass media messages. This study was limited to a content analysis of the 2015 newspaper editions of *The Punch* from which stories on sexual assault were analyzed. A total of 51 stories were purposively sampled. A standardized coding sheet is the research instrument used to analyse the stories sampled. The units of analysis were: Type of sexual assault (rape, sexual harassment, incest, child sexual abuse, Exhibitionism or Voyeurism), Journalistic Genre (straight news, feature, opinion, and editorial), Placement of the story (front page, and inside page), and Direction

of the story (prevention against sexual assault, victims account of assault, advocacy, and counsel for victims of sexual assault. In order to ensure reliability of the research instrument, the Cohen Kappa (K) inter-coder reliability test was used to determine the level of reliability. Three reliability coders were selected for the purpose of coding specific pre-identified variables for this study. These reliability coders were trained for a period of two weeks in order to ensure they understood the objectives and implications of the study, the meaning of each variable intended to be coded and importance of accurately interpreting and inputting the variable were explained to the coders.

Also, face validity was adopted, Asemah et al (2012, p.208) defines it as “an assertion on the researcher's part claiming that they have reasonably measured what they intended to measure”. It is essentially a “take my word for it” kind of validity. The face validity of this research was examined in relation to the objectives of this study. The data were analyzed using Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS), while the results were presented using statistical tools of simple percentage and frequency tables.

Discussion of Findings

Placement	Type of sexual assault	Frequency	Percentage
Front page	Rape	09	18%
Inside page	Rape	39	76%
	Sexual Harassment	02	4%
	Child Sexual Abuse	01	2%
	Total	51	100%

Analysis

Table 1 presents the placement of stories on sexual assault, and the prominent types of sexual assault in its coverage by *The Punch newspaper* in 2015. It reveals that 82% (42 stories) were published on the inside pages, while a minority of 18% (9 stories) made front page. This reiterates the findings of Ebgo (2012) and Nwabueze and Oduah (2014), who reported that sexual assault stories were not given the level of prominence it should receive by newspapers in Nigeria. The front page is by far one of the most important pages of the tabloid. It is the first page readers see, and stories on the cover page are considered by readers to be of utmost importance. Political stories, and disasters often take preeminence on Nigerian newspaper's front page. Stories on sexual assault by *The Punch* in 2015 addressed three types of sexual assault: rape, sexual harassment, and child sexual abuse. However, rape was found to be the most prominent at 94% (48 stories), while a mere 4% (2 stories) were on sexual harassment, and only 2% (1 story) of child sexual abuse.

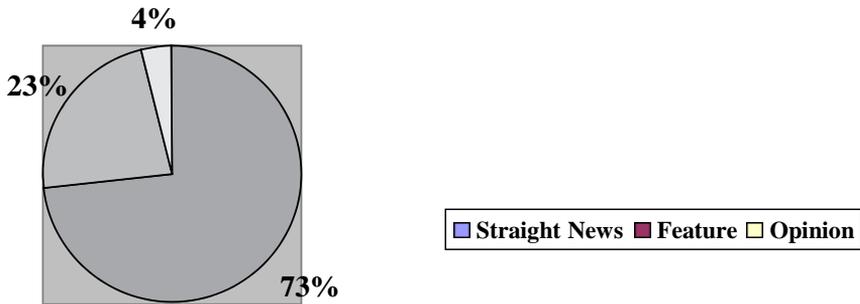


Figure 1: Journalistic Genre Utilized in the Coverage of Sexual Assault by The Punch in 2015

Analysis

Journalistic genre determines the concentration of media discourse. In essence, the type of genre adopted in reporting stories will determine what is said, and how it is said. Table 2 shows that the coverage of sexual assault by *The Punch newspaper* in 2015 was reported using three journalistic genres of: straight news, feature, and opinion. 73% (37 stories) were straight news stories, with 23% (12 stories) feature, and 4% (2 stories) interview. The prominent use of straight news shows a high level of occurrence of sexual assault cases considered to be newsworthy therefore illuminating a high level of social responsibility by the media, thereby fulfilling its primary societal obligation. According to Ochonogor & Hyacinth (2011), serious and current events are usually given straight news treatment.

On the other hand, the prominent use of straight news journalistic genre suggests a lack of in-depth discourse on sexual assault by *The Punch* in 2015. This is because straight news are mere narrative accounts of events, and occurrences in the society.

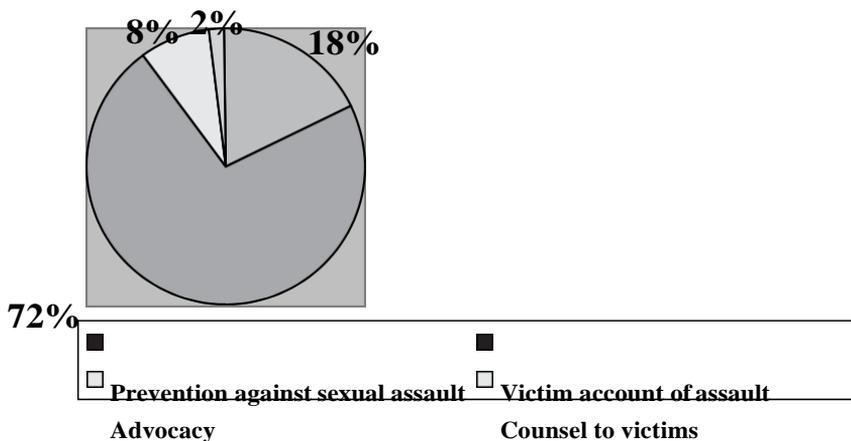


Figure 2: Direction of the coverage of Sexual Assault by The Punch in 2015

Analysis

The direction of the coverage of sexual assault as is presented by table 3 implies that majority of the stories were victim account of sexual assault. 72% (37 stories) were the narrative accounts of victims who had been sexually violated, while 18% (9 stories) centered on preventive measures against sexual assault, 8% (4 stories) advocatory a call for an intervention by the authorities, and a mere 2% (1 story) was a counsel to the victims of sexual assault. The high level of victim account of sexual assault is expected with the high level of straight news journalistic genre utilized in the stories. This also shows the willingness of sexually assaulted victims to tell their stories.

The low level of advocacy presents a concern. One of the primary responsibilities of the media is to advocate for the masses. A social ill such as sexual assault requires a high level of advocacy from the media especially to the government. The direction of the stories also revealed that not much is done by the media to help victims deal with the post-traumatic effect of sexual assault.

Summary and Recommendations

The media is expected to give a high level of prominence to social ills such as sexual assault. The study concludes that rape is the most prominent form of sexual assault in Nigeria at 94%. It is also evident there was an unsatisfactory level of prominence in the coverage of sexual assault by *The Punch* in 2015. Only 17% were front page stories, and majority (73%) of the stories were straight news reports narrative accounts of sexual assault cases. Also the lack of intentionality in fulfilling the advocatory role of the media as only 8% of the stories were directed towards advocacy reveal a shortfall in the execution of the social responsibility expected of the media.

The following recommendations are put forward upon the conclusion of this research:

- i. There is need for more in-depth reporting and analysis of sexual assault cases in Nigeria by the media. The current practice of just reporting cases in straight news is not a true reflection of the seriousness of the problem.
- ii. Sexual stories should be made more prominent by publishing them on the front pages of the newspapers. The prevalence of sexual assault in Nigeria is such that should be treated with utmost seriousness, and priority.

There should also be more coverage in the area of available counselling programmes for victims of sexual assault. This is important because a lot of victims battle the trauma of their experience, and are unable to tell anyone or get direct counseling because of the fear of stigmatization.

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