

## **Newspaper Coverage of Domestic Violence against Women in Ebonyi State, Nigeria from March 2020 – January, 2021**

Blessing EWA-IBE, Ph.D & Simon Igwe IROH,

### **Abstract**

From the social responsibility theoretical perspective, this study investigated how two Nigerian national daily newspaper covered domestic violence against women in Ebonyi State from March 2020 – January, 2021 which was the peak of the COVID-19 lockdown. Content analysis method was adopted. Coding sheets were used to generate the data for the analysis. The population of the study were all issues of the *Daily Sun* and *ThisDay* newspapers from March 2020 – January, 2021, which was the period of the first COVID-19 lockdown in Ebonyi state. Three sampling techniques were employed: simple random sampling gave the needed samples equal chance of selection. Purposive technique ensured that only samples with the needed attributes were chosen. Selection of copies of the editions was systematic. A total of 600 editions of the two newspapers were published within the ten months period of 40 week; 3 editions of each newspaper were systematically selected per week at the sampling frame of two days interval, after determining the starting point (nth element) which was Thursday, March 26, 2020. Four content categories were identified and applied: news, features, opinion articles, and editorial comments, while the units of analysis were: prominence, frequency, depth or magnitude of coverage, and slant or direction. Findings indicate that the issue was not given the prominence it deserved in the papers as they were mainly reported in the centre spread pages. There was also limited depth of coverage, and majority of the reports were straight news stories, thereby, denying the needed interpretations. The tone was however, unanimously unsupportive of domestic violence in the society. The study recommends more media attention to gender issues and gender violence in particular through greater interpretations of the menace. It further recommends possible integration of gender reporting into journalism curriculum to better acquaint future reporters with the requisite skills and technicalities involved in reporting gender issues including violence against women.

**Keywords:** Newspaper Coverage, Domestic Violence, Women, COVID-19 Lockdown, Ebonyi State

### **Introduction**

Domestic violence refers to violent behavior between current and former intimate partners, typically where one tries to exert power and control over the other, usually through fear. It can include physical, sexual, emotional, social, verbal, spiritual and economic abuse. Women form a greater percentage of the population of human population around the globe and as well play significant and varying roles both at home and at their places of work (Sambe, 2015). Unfortunately, this set of people face the highest level of unimaginable inhuman treatment globally, tearfully from their much-needed spouses who are expected to provide for them and protect them from all kinds of harm. On the contrary, their husbands unleash harm on them at every slightest provocation. Violence generally, is a threat to the globe with women and children as the most vulnerable and its outcome highly devastating. Domestic violence against women is a global infestation that transcends boundaries and occurs in all cultures and societies around the world (Albana, 2017).

The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (UNDEVW) describes violence as “a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women,” and as “one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate

position compared with men". Women's lack of social and economic power, accepted gender roles and the low value put on women's work perpetuate and reinforce this subordinate position. Early marriage, inheritance of widows and male control of property encourage female dependency, particularly in regions with high under and unemployment of women and poor access to social welfare services limit women's ability to escape violent situations. There is lack of information on accurate estimates of the magnitude of physical and Sexual violence against married women in Nigeria largely due to violence being unreported; and in most cases, those reported are not recorded by authorities. Information provides stimulus for all thought and actions of human beings. According to Olawu (2014) cited in Akarika, Iwok & Ikon (2019) information entails data, facts, imaginations, ideas, opinion, cultural values in a variety of media which include print, audio visual materials and electronic processors.

The Amnesty International (2002) report entitled: "Rape –The Invisible Crime", noted that victims of rape in Nigeria had an enormous problem persuading the police and other prosecuting authorities that they had actually been raped. The victims had to prove that they did not consent to the act, or that their agreement was obtained through threats. Also because of the stigma attached to sexual abuse in many Nigerian cultures, women blame themselves and fear that they will be ostracized from society if they admit to being sexually abused (IRIN, 2017), and thus continue to suffer in silence. Hence, the available statistics may not reflect the actual prevalence. However, men experience violence perpetrated by women, though theirs is not alarming.

Surveys conducted by women's organizations have shown that the media portray gender stereotypes that are detrimental to women and that can impact negatively on the attitudes towards violence against women. However, because mass media communications reach and influence large numbers of people, they also have the potential to play a positive role in the struggle against violence against women (Pickup, Williams, and Sweetman (2011). The vital role played by the print media in the society is of pivotal importance in confronting gender-based violence. One of the roles is creating awareness, in this case, issues to do with domestic violence in the society. The media also update the readers on what is currently going on.

Another role of media is to reflect the public opinion on broad issues, mostly through the letters to the editor, commentaries and documentaries as the case may be. Readers are able to let known how they feel on issues on domestic violence and how the government may deal with these issues. Globally, domestic violence is one of the most pervasive violations of fundamental human rights which affect women of all ages, race, creed and economic backgrounds (Sutherland, McCormack, Pirkis, Easteal, and Vaughan, (2015). It is harm that goes beyond the physical realm and transcends into perpetual emotional feeling leading to torture, severe pains and depressions. The dominant myth and expectation is that the media are neutral and objective and journalists are guided mostly by the code of conduct in their reporting of issues of domestic violence. This is not always the case and thus each journalist brings to the newsroom his/her views, opinion, beliefs and attitudes. These essentially inform the way in which the journalists view a particular issue. Thus the media are not passive transmitters of information to society but are sources of information that come with value judgments. It is in the light of this, that this study seeks to examine Ebonyi residents' opinion on media coverage of domestic violence in Ebonyi State.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Significant part of the year 2020 will be remembered in many years to come for the COVID-19 lockdown that shutdown many businesses and offices in many countries across the globe. During the time, families that were hitherto always kept busy apart by their businesses and office engagements were forced to spend more time together. As good as this could be a moment for more family sharing and bonding, reports show that it was also one of the periods in the recent time that experience the highest cases of domestic violence and marriage separation. Meanwhile, whereas copious literature exist on domestic violence against women in general, not many of such studies have focused on the period of the lockdown in Ebonyi state and how the Nigerian Daily Sun and ThisDay Newspapers reported the menace during the time. Lacking also was the frequency of the reports, direction of the stories, as well as placement and

prominence accorded the stories. Attempt at filling this knowledge gap and academic lacuna has prompted the study.

### **Objectives**

1. To investigate the nature of newspaper reports of domestic violence against women in Ebonyi State from March 2020 – January, 2021
2. Ascertain the frequency of coverage.
3. Find out the prominence attached to the reports.
4. Investigate the depth of coverage.
5. Identify the slant, tone or direction of the reports.

### **Research Questions**

1. What were the nature of newspaper reports of domestic violence against women in Ebonyi State from March 2020 – January, 2021?
2. What was the frequency of coverage?
3. What prominence was attached to the reports?
4. What was the depth of coverage?
5. What were the slants or directions of the reports?

### **Scope of the Study**

The study covered the period between March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020 when inter-state boundaries were declared closed in Ebonyi and 18<sup>th</sup> January, 2021 when COVID-19 lockdown was fully eased and schools were declared open in Ebonyi state. This was the period when the issue under investigation dominated discussions in the nation and occupied most pages of the newspapers. The study focused on two select newspapers that are national in outlook with good geographical spread and have regular reporters in Eboni state.

### **Review of Related Literature**

According to (Heisse, 2011) violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, often leading to domination over and discrimination against women. For instance, at the very beginning of life, a girl is a target of sex selective abortion or female infanticide in cultures where son preference is prevalent. During childhood, girls face enforced malnutrition, early marriage and forced prostitution or bonded labour (UNICEF, 2013). In fact, some go on to suffer throughout their lives through rape and murder in the hands of intimate partners (UNFPA, 2013). Girls at puberty are prone to female genital mutilation in some cultures and often become victims of incest, child prostitution and pornography. Adult women mostly become economically dependent on men and often become victims of incest, sexual harassment, pornography, marital rape, trafficking in women, dowry abuse and partner homicide. The elderly women often face abandonment while disabled women at times become victims of rape. Violence against men on the other hand has been going on in some parts of the world but under great cover. Many societies do not encourage men to talk publicly about their misery. Rather, some men suffer violence in their families in silence and in fear of intimidation by other men (Ingolo, 2015). Women can also be violent and many men may not be violent. Men are also frequent victims of domestic violence, particularly young men, with homicide being a major cause of death amongst 15-44 year old men.

A review of literature on Crime and Violence cited by Barker (2012) concludes that masculinity has been seen as inherently violent and that the impact of gender socialisation on men has largely been ignored in the study of violence. Some of the literature suggests that while girls are usually socialised closer to home, young men tend to find their peer support on the street or outside the home. Many

cultures condone aggression as a means for males to express anger. In some cultures, there may also be rigid codes around "family honour" leading to "honor killings" of women who have been raped, usually by male members of their own family. Barker (2012) observes that in low income settings, where mainstream sources of masculine identity such as educational achievement or stable employment are difficult to access, young men may be more inclined to adopt violence or other behaviours of control as a way to prove their manhood. A better understanding of how masculinities are shaped in different environments would be an important contribution to the field of violence and not just to violence against women. In terms of prevention and other interventions, it is certainly important to have more men address violence against women as an issue and to take some responsibility for changing the social norms and values that allow this gross violation of human rights to go on unquestioned (Piot, 2013). However, at the same time it is necessary to critically assess the approaches being used, and to ensure that resources to address the issue are allocated in the most effective way and are not diverted from the hard-won programmed efforts of many women organisations.

### **Domestic Violence and the Mass Media: A Preventive Approach.**

The United Nations (1993) sees domestic violence as any act of violence which has no generally accepted interpretation because it has different dimensions and perspectives of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life. From the above definition, it is clear that men can equally suffer domestic violence. This study is only concerned with newspaper coverage of violence against women. The reason for the high rate of domestic violence in the country is most rooted in the fact that rules are just made in Nigeria only to be violated. Generally, Nigeria has laws guiding domestic violence, but these laws don't count in the real-time when the need arises (Vanguard News, 2016).

Discussing domestic violence, the mass media are placed on the side of responsibility to deliver the needed views to ensure that the lives and health of the women are set free from domestic violence of any kind. This is because the media wield enormous power to shape and manipulate public opinions and discussions in matters that affect the larger society. This was captured more clearly by Carll (2003) when he argues that the mass media features are seen as the most vibrant priority area in primary prevention of domestic violence because it has the potential influence to guide and shape public understanding of violence against women through its frequent reportage. Considering the why and how of media influence on its audience belief system, Eastaerl, Holland, & Judd, (2015) vehemently argued that unquestionably, the way information is structured can increase public understanding of violence against women.

### **Review of Empirical Studies**

Yusuf, O., Arulogun, O., Oladepo, O., and Olowokeere, F. (2011) examined gender based violence with emphasis on physical violence among men and women in intimate relationship. The study reported the prevalence and factors associated with physical violence taking into account the hierarchical nature of the data. A descriptive cross sectional study was carried out on adult women and men in three selected states of Nigeria. The minimum sample size required to determine level of domestic violence at a 5% level of significance with a 90% power and a 5% error tolerable was calculated and a minimum sample size of 989 was arrived at which was increased to 1000 per state. A multi stage cluster sampling procedure was employed. The 6 geo-political zones of Nigeria were identified as clusters. Findings of the study revealed that more females experienced physical violence than males. The study recommended that strategies should be put in place and all major stakeholders should help to curb this menace. This study is however related to this research because it shades more light on physical violence which is the most recurrent practice in recent time and an aspect of domestic violence.

Talabi, F. (2016) study was to examine the angle framed around reported housewives' abuse stories by the print media. The research design for this study was content analysis. The units of analysis in this study were stories, features articles, opinion articles, editorials and cartoon/graphics. The study employed

multi-stage sampling method at various stages to choose sample. Purposive sampling was used to select two Nigerian national newspapers. The reason was to ensure that the population was well represented and the two newspapers have popularity, credibility and the newspapers' focus on national and human interest issues. Each newspaper edition for sampling had duration of six months, that is, from January to June, 2016 and the issues (daily editions) content analysed was picked randomly. In the findings, the study showed that newspaper actively reported housewives abuse incidence, but the tone of editorial bias in most abuse stories portrayed in newspaper were not clearly given while the one given tilted towards neutrality. Based on the findings, it was recommended that the newspaper should do more than just creating awareness about housewives' abuses by mere reportage but a mediatory and change stimulating coverage of housewives' abuse should be done. This study is of relevance to this research because the print media which always cover issues of housewives' abuse stories but without any effort of stimulating a change is also one of the major components media under study by this current one.

### **Theoretical Underpinning**

This study is anchored on The Social Responsibility Theory of the media. It was propounded by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm in 1956. The theory postulates that, the press is attached with freedom but must act responsibly in carrying out fundamental functions of mass communication. The social responsibility theory places the media on the obligation of doing the needful in getting the evils in society and exposing them objectively to see if society can do away with it. By the provision of social responsibility theory, the press has the duty to engage objectively in coverage of domestic violence in the society since it has been classified as a global issue against the life and rights of women. It makes the media responsible for being the voice of the voiceless. The social responsibility theory of the press states that though the media should have the freedom to carry out their duties, such duties should have a level of obligations and responsibilities (Nwabueze 2012). McQuail (2005) writes that while it is necessary for the press to be free, the public also have the right to a free press and the right of the people takes precedence. Justifying the responsibility of the media; the theory holds that the press has a right to criticize negative actions in society. It is therefore the duty of the media to identify the causes of domestic violence against women for the societal liberation of domestic violence.

### **Research Method**

This work was a content analysis study. This was to enable extraction of manifest contents of the two newspapers in relation to frequency, depth of reports, placement of stories, and slant of the stories. Coding sheets were used to generate the data for the analysis, and this was done in relation to the objectives and research questions.

### **Study Population**

The study population was composed of two national daily newspapers published in Nigeria. The period studied covered ten months from when the lockdown was first declared in Ebonyi state (March 26, 2020 to January 18). A total of 600 editions of the two newspapers made up the study population consisting of 10 months X 30 days editions X 2months = 600).

### **Sample and Sampling**

In selecting the newspapers whose contents were analysed, three different sampling techniques were employed. First, the simple random sampling technique gave the needed samples equal chance of being selected. The purposive sampling technique ensured that it was only samples with the needed attributes were chosen. Then, the selection of copies of the editions of the newspapers was systematic.

### **Sample Size**



Because it was not possible to analyse all the 600 editions of the two newspapers published within the ten months period of 40 week, 3 editions of each newspaper were systematically selected per week at the sampling frame of two days interval, after determining the starting point (nth element) which was Thursday, March 26, 2020.

### **Content Categories**

In carrying out the analysis, four content categories were identified and applied. They included: news, features, opinion articles, and editorial comments.

### **Unit of Analysis**

Four major units of analysis were adopted - prominence, frequency, depth or magnitude of coverage, and slant or direction of coverage.

## **Data Presentation/Analysis**

### **Research Question 1: What were the nature of newspaper reports of domestic violence against women in Ebony State from March 2020 – January, 2021?**

<b>S/N</b>	<b>Content Categories</b>	<b>No. of Publications</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1.	News Stories	31	62%
2.	Features	11	22%
3.	Editorials	6	12%
4.	Opinion Articles	2	4%
<b>Total</b>		<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>

The table above indicates that majority of the stories were news (62%). The implication is that the newspapers accorded domestic violence serious treatment. It also got a fair amount of editorial comments which was the major avenue for the newspapers to ventilate their opinions on the issue. This took 22%, while features and opinion articles received 12% and 4% respectively.

### **Research Question 2: What was the frequency of coverage of the incident?**

Within the three months under study, a total of 265 stories on the August 26, 2011 bombing of the United Nations building in Abuja, Nigeria were published in the 120 editions of the four newspapers selected. This is shown in the table below.

<b>S/N</b>	<b>Newspaper</b>	<b>No. of publications</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1.	The Sun	29	58%
2.	ThisDay	21	42%
<b>Total</b>		<b>50</b>	<b>100%</b>

The implication of the above table is that the newspapers covered and published stories about the domestic violence during the time investigated, however, the *Daily Sun* gave more attention to the issue than *ThisDay* with 58% and 42% respectively.

**Research Question 3: What prominence was given to the reports by the sampled newspapers?**

To measure the prominence given to the bombing, the reports were classified into six categories and assigned points as follows:

- Front Page Lead Story (FPLS) = 5 points,
- Front Page Sub-Lead Story (FPSLS) = 4 points,
- Centre Spread Story (CSS) =4 points,
- Back page Lead Story (BPLS) =3points,
- Back Page Sub-Lead Story (BPSLS) – 2points, and
- Inside Page Story (IPS) -1 point.

S/N	News Placement	No of Publications	Placement score	Percentage
1.	FPLS	5	5 x 5 =25 points	18%
2.	FPSLS	7	7 x 4 = 28 points	20%
3.	CSS	15	15x4 = 60 points	34%
4.	BPLS	6	6x3 =18 points	13%
5.	BPSLS	4	4x2 =8 points	6%
6.	IPS	13	13 x 1 =13 points	9%
<b>Total</b>		<b>50</b>	<b>140 points</b>	<b>100%</b>

The table above shows that domestic violence stories were mainly reported in the Centre spread pages of the newspapers. This suggests that the issue was not really given the prominence it deserved during the period investigated.

**Research Question 4: What was the depth of coverage of the event?**

To determine the depth of coverage of the incident by the newspapers, the length of the news stories were calculated in column inches. Out of the total of 2, 232 column inches of the issue published in the two newspapers on the subject-matter during the period investigated, the incident received half page coverage in one of the newspapers studied (The Daily Sun) while the incident occupied one-third space of ThisDay within the period studied. This shows limited depth of coverage to the issue in the papers.

**Research Question 5: What were the slant and tone of the reports?**

The data generated showed that all the reports condemned domestic violence during the period as all were unsupportive of the issue.

**Discussion of Findings**

This study investigated newspaper coverage of domestic violence against women in Ebonyi State, Nigeria from March 2020 – January, 2021. This was basically when the COVID-19 lockdown was in place in the state and many residents were at home. Two Nigerian national daily newspapers were investigated: the *Daily Sun* and the *ThisDay*. Period studied covered ten months from when the lockdown was first declared in Ebonyi state (March 26, 2020 to January 18). A total of 600 editions of the two newspapers made up the study population consisting of 10 months X 30 days editions X 2months = 600). Out of this, only 50 issues reported domestic violence stories that were eventually analysed.

Findings indicate that majority of the stories were news (62%). The implication is that the newspapers accorded domestic violence serious treatment. This finding is consistent with that of Nwafor, K.A., Odoemelam, C.C Duru, A.V. Ekerikevwe S.A. (2013) which suggests that human interest stories should always be given prominence in the news media. Again, it was found that the *Daily Sun* gave more attention to the issue than *ThisDay* with 58% and 42% respectively. This, again, supports the works of Ojomo and Adekusibe (2021) which ranks the *Daily Sun* top among several newspapers in quality reportage. However, the issue was not given the prominence

it deserved in the papers during the period investigated as they were mainly reported in the centre spread pages of the newspapers. There was also limited depth of coverage. This finding further gets a buttress from the works of Nsude (2021) which indicates that issues such as child rights and violence against women do not get the expected treatment in our news media, as in most cases, do not occupy front page lead stories in many of our national dailies. However, the tone of the two newspapers were uniaunimously unsupportive of domestic violence in the society.

### **Conclusion**

From the findings, the study concludes that:

1. The issue was not given the prominence it deserved in the papers during the period investigated as they were mainly reported in the centre spread pages of the newspapers.
2. There was limited depth of coverage.
3. The issue was not given the required interpretations as majority of the reports were straight news stories.
4. The tone of the two newspapers were uniaunimously unsupportive of domestic violence in the society.

### **Recommendations**

From the conclusions, the study recommends:

1. More media attention to domestic violence in the society through greater interpretations of the menace, the dangers and most importantly, encouraging better family cohesion.
2. Gender reporting could also be introduced in media studies to acquaint future reporters with the requisite skills and technicalities involved in reporting gender issues including violence.

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