

Media Discourses on Gender in the Time of COVID-19 Pandemic in Zimbabwe



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Abstract Media institutions always have a public obligation to disseminate news that is fair, balanced and gender sensitive, more so in times of crisis. Within the context of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) global pandemic, it is important that media provide a diverse, balanced and gender sensitive coverage that reflects existing inequalities in a society rather than merely prioritising statistics of the infection and its death rates. Informed by poststructuralist feminist theory and normative roles of the media, this chapter investigates the discursive parameters of gendered media discourses within the context of COVID-19. This chapter presents results from a case study of two main daily newspapers—the *Chronicle* and *NewsDay*—circulating in the country by investigating their representation of gender. Findings indicate that while there was generally more coverage of issues affecting women, both newspapers reinforced deeply rooted biases in their reporting. The findings further show that the emphasis was on gender-based violence with statistics indicating that it was on the rise during lockdown. We argue that newspapers must always strive for sensitive reporting that challenges hierarchical gender relations if the transformative potential of the media is to be realised.

Keywords Covid-19 · Gender · Print media · Frames · Zimbabwe

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Introduction and Context

In 1995, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, an outcome of the Fourth International Conference on Women, highlighted gender stereotypes and limited women in decision-making roles as major challenges impeding equality of men and women. The declaration further identified media as major areas of concern constituting “the most important yet challenging area of work for advancing gender equality” (Lowe-Morna 2002, p. 1). Since then, the relationship between gender and the media has been considered as an “add-on” in AU gender equality frameworks. The media are seen as central to the construction of gender ideologies hence they constitute a central site of struggle in which gendered identities are constantly negotiated and renegotiated. Thus, they have a significant impact on the ways in which gender is defined and understood hence the focus on investigating the Zimbabwean media discourses on gender in this chapter. Furthermore, the media do not only mirror reality but also shape public opinion and culture (Ross and Padovani 2017). Largely dependent on the ways in which they are used, the media can contribute to the promotion of gender equality. Williams (2000) argues that by using sensitive contents and language, and non-stereotypical representation of women and men, the media can enhance the equality of men and women in communities, which the study is concerned with. More so, the media have huge potential in advancing and empowering women by enabling them to participate and to be heard in the process of development and transformation (Bhagwan-rolls 2011).

However, 25 years after the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Africa and the rest of the world are still grappling with gender equality as shown by the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Five on achieving gender equality and empowerment of all girls and women, which encourages states to enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women. In Africa, underrepresentation and misrepresentation of women is intensified and further reinforced by patriarchal traditions and social customs that presume women’s inferiority to men (Kareithi 2014). With regards to Zimbabwe, Tapfumaneyi and Rupande (2013) posit that despite the widespread conscientisation on the need to balance the gender scale for the betterment of society, women continue to suffer unfair and abusive portrayal in the media. They also note that even media organisations such as Zimbabwe Union for Journalists (ZUJ), have often decried that while Zimbabwean media have increased the coverage of women and children, the extent and manner of coverage is highly unsatisfactory. More recently, Hove’s (2017) study on the portrayal of women in Zimbabwe’s tabloid newspapers found that women were largely stereotyped as witches, gossips, adulterers and prostitutes. Similarly, Mlotshwa (2018) found that the *Chronicle* played an ambivalent role in erasing Ndebele ethnic women’s voices while making them “hypervisible” through their portrayal as loose and uneducated. Lowe-Morna (2002, p. 1) argues “the key challenge confronting us is how to change mind-sets hardened by centuries of socialisation

and cemented by custom, culture and religion” towards the realisation of gender equality, and media is key to dissolving this challenge.

Accordingly, this chapter is concerned with unpacking the discourses on gender during the COVID-19 pandemic in two main daily newspapers—the *Chronicle* and *NewsDay*—circulating in the country. The study seeks to answer these questions; how did the two newspapers portray gender in the coverage of COVID-19 stories? Was the coverage fair, balanced and gender sensitive? Within the context of COVID-19 global pandemic, it is important that media provide a broader picture that looks at women and other marginalised groups in communities rather than just prioritising statistics of the infection and its death rates. Without gender sensitivity in media coverage, there is a danger of reinforcing deeply rooted biases that can have long-lasting and devastating effects on how the society responds to crisis and ultimately to gender equality. Noteworthy, within the Zimbabwean context, the media has always been highly censored by the government, (Mbikwana 2020), hence the need to interrogate the function of the media during a pandemic in such an oppressive environment. With the government continuing with its legacy of human right violations, such “oppression is and has been of a highly gendered nature, disproportionately affecting the lives of women” (Toyana 2020, p. 2). As a result, digital platforms became a sphere where bloggers, especially feminists, expressed their displeasure and abuse of power by the state. Therefore, the COVID-19 era raised various gender discourses that people discussed. As such, this chapter seeks to explore the discourses on gender during the COVID-19 pandemic in mainstream newspapers.

“The Other Room”: Global Media and Gender Context

Ahead of his country’s elections in 2016, Nigerian President General Muhammadu Buhari was asked about his wife’s potential vote, and he responded: “I don’t know which party my wife belongs to, but she belongs to my kitchen, my living room and the other room.” His views were consistent with previous findings that patriarchy had an effect in the manner in which women were treated on economic matters, politics and also their representation in the media (Ndlovu 2020; Tshuma 2020). By stating that his wife belonged to the “kitchen and the other room,” Buhari privileged the all too familiar gendered narrative which perpetuates the view that women belong to the private sphere, while the public sphere was reserved for their dominant male counterparts. Generally, there is sufficient evidence of underrepresentation of women as subjects in the media coverage. According to the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP 2020) report, unequal gender power relations are entrenched and validated, and in which gender stereotypes are replicated and reinforced by the world’s news media. Ndlovu and Madziwa (2009) note that within the African continent, journalistic gender lens in source selection was not only male centred, but it was also skewed to a certain kind of masculinity when selecting interviewees for all types of views, from “expert” opinion to “ordinary” person testimonies.

Furthermore, although women represent more than half of the population in many African countries, they are underrepresented or misrepresented throughout all existing media whether online or offline, news media or entertainment (IAWRT 2015). Their voices are not heard, they are likely to be portrayed in a stereotypical manner and they are less likely to hold influential positions in the media and ICT (GMMP 2015). The global media monitor also noted that in Africa women's relative presence in the news had increased from 19% in 2010 to merely 22% in 2015. Prejudices about gender in the media content are not accidental; they are a result of choices made by the gatekeepers in media houses (Toyana 2020). Broadly, in African societies, social structures and systems, which are mainly influenced by patriarchy, have seen the reproduction of gender roles in the manner in which the media frames men and women. It has been noted the media "eclipsed women's success", given that the media has, in most cases, been complicit in belittling women and according them second citizenry status, resulting in it (media) being blamed for its reportage which has stalled the achievement of gender parity.

In this chapter, gender is conceptualised as a social construct as roles which are assigned to men and women are not inherent. Thus, as Butler (1990) argues, no one is born a man or woman, instead people are socialised into specific gender roles as they grow up. Thus, gender is defined as the set of roles, behaviours and attributes that society defines as appropriate for men and women (Baker 2008; Unger 1979). As such Butler (1990, p. 33) argues that "gender is performative, a social construct and never-ending process, a work in progress and in practice, which are continually engaged in." These conceptualisations and understandings of gender support earlier feminist views that one is not born a woman but becomes a woman (Beauvoir 1989). These observations show that both men and women can equally perform most roles and should be framed in equal light. Hence the case of modulating and portraying men in masculine positions and as real leaders is seen as a myth. Therefore, gender inequalities are rooted "in social and cultural attitudes" (Giddens 2009, p. 616) with the media representation being a "by product of deep misogyny in society" (Van Zoonen 1994, p. 19).

In this milieu, a plethora of studies have been conducted on health communication and gender. Some studies have assessed health communication strategies by non-governmental organisations (Chasi 2007). The findings have shown that NGOs are critical in conducting health awareness campaigns and also educating families on health-related issues. More so, key findings have seen the move by NGOs to include both men and women in packaging their health strategies (Chasi and De Wet 2006). In a study on Zimbabwe's online feminists, Toyana (2020) argues that oppression in Zimbabwe was and had been of a highly gendered nature, disproportionately affecting the lives of women. In the political realm, female politicians and activists who dared to criticise the state were often labelled prostitutes or whores, in "grammar that was perpetually reanimated in Zimbabwean political discourse" (Mudiwa 2020, p. 2). However, studies solely dedicated to assessing the "gender" of health communication are scant. This chapter therefore sought to fill this gap by assessing how the print media in Zimbabwe incorporated gender-related discourses in their reportage on the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies relating to COVID-19 in Zimbabwe

investigated how different forms of media were being utilised to access information on COVID-19 from a tourism perspective (Tarakini et al. 2021) and from a public health perspective; Shumba et al. (2020) focused on people's perception on the government's response to the pandemic. In the African context, existing studies examined the conduct of print media in communicating health issues. In Nigeria, studies found that print media were dominated by government officials with people who were affected by given disease or pandemics being silenced (Torwel and Rodney 2010). In addition, broadcast radio which is easily accessible to many populations in Africa was found to be thwarting citizens' voices, especially community health workers, of whom the majority are women (Umana and Ojebode 2010, pp. 257–260). Health communication in Zimbabwe has largely not been given much scholarly attention despite the view that there has been a surge in many health cases which include HIV/AIDS, malaria, typhoid and cholera. Much of the scholarly interest has been on politics due to the perennial hostile political Zimbabwean system (Tshuma 2019).

Theoretical Framework

The COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly led to unprecedented changes in the economic and socio-cultural landscape world over. The media landscape was not spared either. These changes led to a re-evaluation of the media's role in society with urgent questions as to how the media responded to the unfolding crisis. The four theories of the press (Siebert et al. 1956), albeit revised a number of times (McQuail 1983; Christians et al. 2009), provide a critical starting point to interrogate the role and task of the media in society (Christians et al. 2009). These theories continue to offer a blueprint for making sense of the media's roles and keep evolving as they adapt to different societies and rapid technological advancements. The limitations of the normative theories are well documented in literature but this section highlights the framework that was useful for this study. The monitorial and facilitative roles are useful for understanding of the ideal relationship between the media and society, particularly in times of crisis. As Baran and Davis (2012) note, normative theorising on the media's role in society is chiefly concerned with accuracy, objectivity and public sensitivities, issues which this chapter addresses.

Christians et al. (2009) identify four normative roles of the media as monitorial, facilitative, radical and collaborative. The monitorial role pertains to the media functioning as informer and educator to the public with an emphasis on the quality of information, that is, accurate, relevant and verifiable. The collaborative role is concerned with aligning the needs and expectations of the state with those of the media, which normatively speaking, implies a relationship built on mutual trust. In the facilitative role, the media ought to promote dialogue and deliberative democracy. In this way the media "facilitate the process of negotiation over the social, political and cultural agenda" such that "norms and institutions are open to challenge and debate, and derive their legitimacy from the actual agreement of citizens"

(Christians et al. 2009). Whilst the monitorial role tends to take certain power structures for granted and strives to make such social configurations work, the radical role in contrast, recognises that power holders hold an unfair advantage in communication flows. As such, the role of journalists in the radical role is defined by a commitment to absolute equality of all members of the society and thus articulate concerns of the marginalised and challenge injustices perpetuated by hegemonic powers. This has led to the proliferation of emergent publics that fall outside of the mainstream media, much like Fraser's subaltern counter publics (Fraser 1989).

Reformulating the original Habermasian public sphere to suit contemporary contexts, Fraser (1989) argues that the subaltern counter publics are marked by alternative publics in which members of subordinated groups (such as women, children, people of colour, etc.) come together to discuss matters of direct concern to them. The groups constitute "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs" (Fraser 1992, p. 122). Accordingly, subaltern counter publics specifically originate under conditions of dominance and subordination and notably feminist studies, which informs evaluation of the media discourses on gender, are included in this rubric of radical theorising of the media's role in democratic societies.

This chapter thus considers the media discourses on gender within a critical feminist theoretical lens that is driven by an emancipatory agenda. As such, we employ poststructuralist feminist theory that is concerned with critiquing social institutions and discourses that maintain a patriarchal social order and whose values are espoused broadly within feminist media studies. Broadly speaking, feminism—which defies a single definition because of its troubled history—refers to a transformational movement aimed at destabilising unequal power relations through critiques of sexual hierarchy (Steiner 2014; Van Zoonen 1994; Weedon 1987). Feminism is therefore expressly political and the feminist media theory in turn, is informed by "feminist principles and politics in researching media processes and organisations, regardless of whether the media content expresses a feminist ethos" (Steiner 2014, p. 359). Feminist media studies are thus primarily concerned with investigating media production, its content and its consumption as central sites for the struggle and negotiation of gender relations and identities (Van Zoonen 1994). With its primary focus being the content of news during the COVID-19 pandemic, this chapter therefore emphasises the role of media as sites of meaning that had a tremendous impact on the construction of subjectivity and identity. As Santos et al. (2018) argue, the value of critical feminist perspectives in addressing the gendered nature of news is demonstrated by an explicit concern with how the existing gender order maintains existing inequalities.

As such, there is an established concern with re-evaluating standards of newsworthiness to give visibility to gender issues by ensuring that there is equal coverage of women and other disadvantaged groups. There should be emphasis on creating emancipatory narratives and media practitioners should advocate for the inclusion of alternative voices as sources and opinion makers as well as promote the use of non-sexist language. Our understanding of gender is informed by anti-essentialist

“poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change” (Weedon 1997, p. 40). Understanding language use as a social practice (Talbot 2010), signals the central role that language plays in society. While texts bear ideological imprints of their producers through language use, they are also interpreted in varying ways by their audiences hence news media are therefore critical in this scenario as they should be central in creating an alternative knowledge base that is empowering to women and challenges common sense notions of gender (Brooks 1997; Talbot 2010). This frames understandings of the coverage of COVID-19 by the *Chronicle* and *NewsDay*.

Methodological Premise

This qualitative oriented chapter analyses emerging media discourses on gender during the COVID-19 pandemic reportage. As such, this chapter analyses news stories produced by the two main daily newspapers, the *Chronicle* and *NewsDay*. Although Zimbabwe has four mainstream daily publications, *The Herald*, *NewsDay*, *Daily News*, and *Chronicle*, this chapter, selected the *Newsday* and *Chronicle* for the following reasons. The *Chronicle*, a state media publication, was one of the leading publications in the country with notable followers on its social media pages. The publication had 92,000 followers on Twitter and 102,125 on Facebook, at the time of writing. It was instrumental in the dissemination of COVID-19 related information, especially in the Southern part of the country, where the researchers were based. The *NewsDay*, a privately owned publication under Alpha Media Holdings (AMH) had 811,882 followers on Facebook and 539,246 on Twitter at the time of writing. Both publications were instrumental in the coverage of gender aspects during the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter covers a nine-month period, that is, from April 2020 soon after Zimbabwe introduced its first lockdown to December 2020 when the government arguably relaxed most of the restrictions and fully opened the country. Archival research was deployed for data gathering, with purposive sampling used to select hard and feature news stories for analysis using qualitative thematic content analysis. Feature stories were selected for analysis because they normally reflect a newspaper’s position on a particular issue (McNair 2003). In contrast, hard news stories were selected because of their presumed factual and impartial characteristics. From over 100 stories that came out from the search, researchers noticed that although most of the stories were about COVID-19, most of them were not about the pandemic and gender; they simply mentioned the latter in passing. Consequently, 18 purposively sampled articles (*Chronicle* 9 and *NewsDay* 9) were subjected to qualitative content analysis. These stories were harvested through a key word search, COVID-19 + Gender, from these newspapers’ websites. Resultantly, preliminary reading of the stories allowed researchers to select stories that were primarily focused on gender as opposed to those that mentioned it in passing.

Qualitative content analysis is particularly useful because it allows researchers to decipher the hidden meaning of media texts, allowing an insight into the general ideological trends of a given period (Larsen 1991). Qualitative researchers also support their interpretations by “weaving quotes from the analysed texts and literature about the contexts of these texts into their conclusions” (Krippendorff 2004, p. 88). A form of qualitative content analysis known as framing analysis was applied predominantly in this chapter. In media studies, framing analysis is concerned with identifying specific themes within media texts. In its basic function, it seeks to show “how the language and structure of news items emphasise certain aspects [and omit others]” (Billig et al. 2005, p. 2).

Findings

The key findings of the study relate to gender equality challenges, lack of community voices and gender-based violence. There was an attempt by the media to highlight gender and gender equality challenges during the pandemic albeit with parochial voices of ordinary citizens. The two publications also made an effort to shine light on gender based violence (GBV) during the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant child marriages. This analysis notes that while the media highlighted these issues, the coverage was full of official sources, detached from grassroot issues affecting ordinary voices. Concerning gender, the media appeared to promote a narrow conceptualisation that merely focused on women and girls.

Gender and Gender Equality Challenges and Lack of Community Voices

Within this thematic category, there was an attempt by the two publications to weave in issues of gender and gender equality and challenges thereof. This chapter submits that the media made an effort to highlight the impact of COVID-19 on gender and gender equality initiatives thereby playing a commendable monitorial role. On this point, the media reported on government programmes and initiatives with regard to women empowerment during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, in a story on October 2, 2020 by Farirai Machivenyika titled, *Zim(babwe) remains committed to achieving gender equality*, the *Chronicle* reported that: “Women in the small and medium enterprises sector have also benefitted from the \$18 billion economic stimulus package availed by the Government following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.”

Similarly, in a story titled “Reduced income fuels GBV,” published on September 11, 2020 and written by Brenna Matendere, the *NewsDay* tackled measures that the

Zimbabwe Gender Commission was implementing to protect the gains of gender equality scored so far.

Most importantly, the two publications prioritised women's issues as they included gender issues in their coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the stories reflected how COVID-19 impacted the lives of women. The media tended to focus on different categories of vulnerable women, such as, the elderly, pregnant and those in the informal sector. The following cases provide this testimony. In a *Chronicle* story written by Mthabisi Tshuma on April 1, 2020 titled "*Coronavirus: Isolation centres for pregnant women*" the publication stated that:

There is a need to have COVID-19 isolation centres that can accommodate pregnant women during the lockdown period... because the COVID-19 pregnant woman cannot be mixed with other pregnant women at a maternity ward as they might infect others.

Equally, in the *NewsDay* story titled "COVID-19 has deepened inequalities: Minister" Phyllis Mbanje (2020), reported that "the impact of COVID-19 has deepened existing inequalities and vulnerabilities particularly for women and girls." In this case, the media was seen playing a facilitative role by putting women issues on the public agenda. This function, which Christians et al. (2009, p. 158) call the facilitative role is when "news media promote dialogue among their readers and viewers through communication that engages them and in which they actively participate." Much more, through this role, the media facilitated the process of negotiation over social issues and through this process created interactive dialogue between citizens who engaged one another on equal standing and promoted grassroots voices as opposed to elite dominance (Christians et al. 2009).

Noteworthy, the media highlighted some of the challenges that arose due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The two publications attempted to illuminate the various ways that women were particularly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. They both highlighted the economic and social impact of COVID-19 on women and other vulnerable groups to some extent. In a story headlined, *Climate change compounds gender crisis*, written by Thandeka Moyo-Ndlovu on October 22, 2020 the *Chronicle* newspaper wrote: "The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated food insecurity and other social challenges, leaving women and girls in impoverished communities, marginalised people, refugees and other displaced people vulnerable."

On the other hand, Veneranda Langa of *NewsDay* on July 31, 2020 reported that because of existing social problems in Zimbabwe, women were more vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper reported that: "The shortage of water has forced women to fetch the precious liquid from boreholes where social distancing is difficult to observe, increasing the risk of contracting COVID-19." In this case, the media may be credited for shining light on the gender differences in the vulnerability to and impact of the health pandemic. In particular, the flagging of traditional gender roles to show how they played out in worsening the effects of the pandemic on women is consistent with feminist media theory's concern with affording visibility to women and other disadvantaged groups. In this case, the media should be lauded for championing women's challenges during the pandemic therefore, putting them

on the public agenda. However, simply highlighting the issue without explicitly challenging the stereotypical representations and the burden of care women and children face, implicitly renders the media complicit in reinforcing conditions of inequality. To this end, the radical role of the media advocates for structural change that “literally goes to the roots of the power relations in society, challenging the hegemony of those in power and offering an alternative version not just for some building blocks but for the whole structure of society” (Christians et al. 2009, p. 181). Critical feminist perspectives foreground the critique of patriarchy in perpetuating asymmetrical power structures (Evans 1995; Weedon 1997). Journalism within the radical role should seek to redistribute social power from the powerful to the disempowered.

Furthermore, while the media highlighted the plight of women and other vulnerable groups during the COVID-19 pandemic to some extent, such efforts fell short owing to failure to include voices of ordinary women and other vulnerable groups. Instead, the media chose to prioritise elite voices such as government ministers and women leaders in the Non-Governmental Organisation sector. In most of the stories about affected women, the media failed to give them an opportunity to speak for themselves. Rather they were routinely represented and spoken for. For instance, in the *NewsDay*'s story, *COVID-19 has deepened inequalities: Minister*, written by Phyllis Mbanje on August 11, 2020, the Minister of Gender was the main source and there was no attempt to include voices of ordinary women to share their daily experiences on the matter. Again, the *Chronicle* in a story, *Women entrepreneurs hardest hit by COVID-19*, prioritised the views of Elena Ruiz, the United Nations Women's Economic Empowerment regional policy advisor for West and Central Africa. The story does not quote voices of women entrepreneurs for them to share their stories. This over-reliance on elite sources by the media to talk about women's issues serves to perpetuate the marginalisation of women.

COVID-19 and Gender Based Violence (GBV)

The fundamental role of the media is that of “making something or someone visible” (Bucher 2012, p. 1164), or as argued by Entman (2004, p. 1) media frames select “some aspect of a perceived reality” and make them visible or salient. In this paper, we consider Gender Based Violence (GBV) as the salient or visible key issue that was emerging through COVID-19 related stories. Analysis of the *Chronicle* and *NewsDay* shows that media foregrounded problems faced by women under the state's imposed lockdowns with emphasis being mainly on GBV cases which were increasing as a result of victims being “locked down with the perpetrators.” However, from the onset, this paper notes that victims of GBV can be either male or female and while we acknowledge that the largest number of victims were females, it is journalists' duty to unpack the aspects of GBV so that it does not turn out to be “women based violence.” As such, in their reportage, they exposed causes of an increase in GBV cases which included “food insecurity” as a result of the lockdown

that “disrupted people’s ability to earn a living and access affordable food and goods” which ultimately contributed to an increase in GBV in Zimbabwe by about “60% during the COVID-19 induced lockdown,” as “90% of GBV cases were intimate partner violence and women remained the most affected group” (Moyo-Ndlovu and Matutu 2020).

The *NewsDay* also carried similar discourses about the pandemic with GBV as a major issue. For the victims of GBV, the lockdown was a disservice for them as “restrictive movement measures as per COVID-19 requirements had already been noted as a barrier to reporting, relocation and/or accessing health services” (Kadau and Malomalo 2020). According to Fourie (2005, p. 163), normative roles of the media provide a yardstick against which media performance, accountability and quality could be measured and if need be, controlled. Through the facilitative role of the media, the media was expected to help bring out issues and assist in coming up with solutions for betterment of the community (Christians et al. 2009). Thus, the media reportage suggested that GBV was of interest and it needed to be discussed in the public sphere by all citizens so as to reach a consensus. Furthermore, providing statistics, the *Chronicle* reported that “from March 2020 when COVID-19 first hit the headlines in Zimbabwe to the end of May 2020, about 6906 women reported abuse to five major Non-Governmental Organisations that dealt with gender-based violence” (Moyo-Ndlovu and Matutu 2020). Statistics further showed that physical violence increased by 43.8%, emotional violence increased by 80.3% and economic violence increased by 42.4% during lockdown. Notably, in journalism, statistics are a currency which is used to show the gravity of the matter. As such, the picture painted by the statistics was that COVID-19 had a negative impact on victims of GBV, of whom the majority were women.

However, discourses on GBV were framed as associated with societal gender roles as disruption on the economy owing to the pandemic “increase tensions within intimate relationships and disrupt gender roles” resulting in men “failing to fulfil their gender roles as providers, resorting to violence as an outlet” (Mbanje 2020). The media thus showed, as prescribed by postcolonial feminist theory, that women suffer from what they call “double colonisation” which refers to ways in which women have simultaneously experienced the oppression of colonialisation and patriarchy (Mututwa and Matsilele 2020; Petersen and Rutherford 1986). This further means that in the postcolonial society, “her colonised brother is no longer her accomplice but her oppressor” (Tyagi 2014, p. 45). Therefore, men are framed as perpetrators while the government, as the decision maker and solution provider, “still maintained zero tolerance to all forms of violence against women” (Gonye 2020).

With women being in danger from their male counterparts, this chapter found that *Chronicle* and *NewsDay* provided solutions to cases of GBV by covering different institutions that were calling for the establishment of one stop centres across all districts in the country for GBV survivors, as statistics showed an increase in abuse during the national lockdown period. Thus, “one stop centres were meant to improve access to quality and comprehensive services for survivors of gender-based violence under one roof” (Moyo-Ndlovu and Matutu 2020). In some cases, civil society

organisations were lauded for having managed to secure shelter centres for victims of GBV. In this milieu, guided by the normative roles of the media, the *Chronicle* and *NewsDay* were “shaping public beliefs and desired behavior or empowering readers to action to think, interpret and view health issues through critical, accurate and clear news presentation and interpretation” (Torwel and Rodney 2010, p. 238).

COVID-19 and Child Marriages

One of the important areas that the media focused on during this pandemic was child marriages. As indicated earlier that COVID-19 had varied effects on the social well-being of citizens in their different demographics, one of the challenges was child marriages. It was widely reported in the media that because of COVID-19 and lockdown related restrictions, many teenagers engaged and others were forced into marriages. In a story titled “*Girls vulnerable as COVID-19 drives child marriages*” written by Andile Tshuma on July 21, 2020, the *Chronicle* newspaper reported that:

Girl child advocate and Parliamentary portfolio chairperson on Education, Mrs. Priscilla Misihairabwi-Mushonga said child marriages were being worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic and that there were many girls being married off, however with few being reported.

Similarly, the *NewsDay* in a report titled “*COVID-19 lockdown spawns child marriages*” written by Cliff Chiduku on July 11, 2020 noted:

The report noted that deepening poverty owing to loss of livelihoods brought about by COVID-19 drove many families to marry off their under-age daughters. This happened despite Zimbabwe outlawing child marriages in 2016.

From a normative point of view, this chapter argues that the media attempted to give a multi-faceted approach by focusing on critical interests such as women. By shining light on the impact of COVID-19 on the girl child, the media was arguably setting an agenda for community leaders and policy makers to take action.

It is also important to point out that in its coverage of child marriages within the context of COVID-19, the media advocated for action from key persons. Most of the stories cited sources such as parliamentarians (Priscilla Misihairabwi-Mushonga), Women Affairs Minister Sithembiso Nyoni, Church leaders and gender activists. This is termed the mediation function of the media in that news media intervene between events and sources on the one hand and individual members of the public (Christians et al. 2009). Christians et al. (2009, p. 140) noted that under this normative function of the media, “news is selected according to the anticipated informational needs of audiences. [...] guided by criteria of relevance, significance and reigning normative frameworks for the public arena.” By going beyond daily government statistics, the media managed to expose the issues that faced girls during the COVID-19 pandemic. While this chapter acknowledges the active role played by the media to expose girl child abuses, it did not afford them an opportunity to speak.

Most of the stories tended to utilise activists, politicians and in some instances reports that tended to generalise.

Discussion and Conclusion

The chapter acknowledges the radical ways in which gender relations can change in crisis situations such as war, epidemics or economic restructuring (Connell 2011). To this end, the COVID-19 pandemic had a tremendous impact on the gender order which should be reflected, to some extent, in the reporting around issues of gender. In as much as it takes years to observe shifts in the gender order, we observe that there was a notable increase in gender related coverage in both newspapers since the onset of the pandemic and this was arguably correlated to the inevitable increase in COVID-19 related news stories. This is a positive development considering that issues affecting marginalised populations have traditionally been excluded in mainstream media. In this regard, both *Chronicle* and *NewsDay* made headway in giving visibility to how the pandemic variously affected women and children.

However, a mere increase in the number of stories pertaining to women does not automatically translate to gender equality. Feminists have long established that being visible or accessible to others does not necessarily translate into liberation, therefore one should, in turn, ask “Who does visibility benefit and on what terms is it offered?” (Mann 2014, p. 1). We should therefore be mindful that the “turn to gender” by the Zimbabwean press could be more superficial than beneficial when considering that ownership and managerial influences have a bearing on what gets accepted as newsworthy. The lack of informed critique in media discourses on gender could be attributed to the fact that women are rarely represented in the production structures. Rather, they are simply the writers who do not get to decide on the framing of stories and as a result, discriminatory practices in selecting stories and sourcing thrive. We therefore agree with Van Zoonen (1994) that the gendered nature of news can indeed be traced back to the structure of news production (Carter and Steiner 2004). The patriarchal framing of stories however is not surprising considering that the contemporary gender order in Zimbabwe continues to presume women’s inferiority to men (Ndlovu 2020).

We also noted that there were more female reporters reporting on COVID-19 and gender related news than male reporters. Of the nine stories selected for analysis in each publication, only two were written by male reporters in *NewsDay* and three articles were written by male reporters in the case of the *Chronicle*. This is consistent with the longstanding stereotypical belief that women are better at or more interested in covering soft news (Van Zoonen 1998). It is also hardly surprising considering the fact that hard news is predominantly equated with masculine traits and soft news with feminine traits; with men dominating in political, government and economic news and women more likely to report in the science and health, social and legal categories (North 2016). Furthermore, more COVID-19 and gender related stories appeared in the features section (and therefore “soft”) than in the general news

section. When they did make it into the main news, they involved reports from the United Nations, government and other elite sources, which elided the need for alternative voices and remained problematic, as argued earlier.

With regards to the diversity of issues covered, both newspapers should be applauded for highlighting a diversity of issues affecting women during the pandemic. In as much as some of the issues were not traditionally “feminist” they advocated for a policy of equality and advancement for women. As already established, the bulk of stories covered GBV followed by water and health, reproductive rights, rural women as well as issues affecting vulnerable children/orphans and child marriages. Notably, the *Chronicle* tended to offer more contextual background on articles related to women and the girl child. *Newsday* articles in contrast tended to be brief and not proffer possible solutions. Be that as it may, a more in-depth concern with ordinary women could have improved coverage for both newspapers as they tended to speak “about” them and “for” them rather than having affected women (and children) speaking of their experiences directly. In all the published stories, there were 34 elite voices with eight (8) of them being male voices. Ordinary female voices were three (3) and there were no male voices. We therefore argue for participation on (ordinary) women’s own terms.

In conclusion, the *Chronicle* and *NewsDay* made strides against the “symbolic annihilation” of women by the mass media (Tuchman 1978), but this attention appeared cosmetic because the standards of newsworthiness remained underlined by a standardised perception of what makes news (Harcup and O’Neil 2001; Byerly and Ross 2006). It is worrying that hard news is still structured and delivered with a predominantly male perspective that is disempowering to women which encourages the reproduction of stereotypical masculine and feminine identities. A truly transformative journalism would constitute of more representation of women as agentic citizens and challenge hierarchical gender relations that continue to confine women to the private sphere. Given that media institutions carry a public obligation to disseminate news that is fair, balanced and gender sensitive, this responsibility is paramount in times of crises—be it economic, political or health related—where media practitioners are implored to make it more than a priority to provide a diverse, balanced and gender sensitive coverage that reflects existing inequalities in a society. We propose a radical rethinking of the media’s role in advancing a feminist ethos in a changing Zimbabwean context, particularly during a pandemic with emerging conditions of precarity that have devastating consequences yet to be fully appreciated. This research centred on news content exclusively but further research on female journalists’ experiences in the newsroom during this time could be insightful.

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