The Voicelessness of the Subaltern in the Era of Covid 19: The Absence of Women's voice about Covid-19 in Nigeria

Abigail Olubukola Irele

Ph.D., Department of Mass Communication and Media Technology, Lead City University, Ibadan, Nigeria

Abstract

The Covid- 19 pandemic has ravaged the whole world. It has affected humankind and disturbed the daily lives of people. There have been many voices about the pandemic from the medical care people as well as ordinary people. Women who are the subaltern in society have been voiceless. In Nigeria, the media commentators on the pandemic have been males. The female voice has not been heard in the public sphere such as in the media. Newspaper sources have been used essentially to cover some of the events during Covid- 19 lockdown in Nigeria. The purpose of this study is to report the non-representation and non-inclusion of women in the decision process as well as in the overall public sphere of Nigerian society and how to include them in the public sphere and the society's decision process. The study adopted the content analysis of two selected newspapers' reportage of events during the Covid-19 lockdown using a qualitative research approach. Two Nigerian online newspapers were analyzed. The study found that Nigerian women's voices were not heard in the discourse on Covid-19. Almost all the newspapers in Nigeria did not have women in the discursive space about Covid-19. Nigerian women should be given a voice in the discussion about Covid-19 or any other related health pandemic in the future so that they could be sensitized about the danger inherent in any pandemic. The policy-making body should have women representatives to make it inclusive and show that women are not marginalized in society.

Keywords: *Covid-19, Public Sphere, Subaltern, Two Nigerian Online Newspapers, Women.*

Introduction

Wuhan in China has become synonymous with the pandemic since it started in the year 2019. The pandemic ravaged everywhere in the world causing untold hardship for humankind such as a death in every part of the world. In the year 2020 many countries locked down their borders with other countries to minimize the effects of the pandemic. This affected the economic as well as social exchanges between countries in the world. The effect was most felt in Africa being the least developed continent in the world. There was a reduction in the GDP of most African countries, and this slowed down the economic growth and development of these countries. In Nigeria, the pandemic affected the lives of most people causing untold hardship in all spheres of life. The epicenters of the pandemic were Lagos, and Ogun states, as well as Abuja, the capital of Nigeria. The government of Nigeria locked down completely these states. Some other states were also locked down, but it was in these states and the federal capital, Abuja, that the lockdown was most enforced. Schools were closed and commercial activities were brought to their knees since most shops were closed to curtail the spread of the virus. Other measures taken were the prohibition of mass gatherings of people at churches, mosques, sports arenas, and burials.

The world had experienced pandemics before like the Antonine plaque (165 AD), the

Black Death (1346-1354), the Spanish flu (1918-1920), and the Asian flu (1956-1958) among others [1, 2]. But the severity of Covid-19 was unparalleled. As earlier pointed out, it caused death all over the world and led to measures to curtail it. The various governments of the world took measures in their countries to curtail if not eliminate the effects of the pandemic.

Methodology

The study adopted the content analysis of qualitative research approach whereby two national newspapers were selected on reportage of women and the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown which form the data for the study. Online contents of Premium Times and Daily Trust newspapers were covered from April 2020 to December 2020. These newspapers have national reach and a large readership spread across both northern and southern Nigeria. The population of the study included all daily editions of the two selected newspaper titles, especially during the period covered by the study. Therefore, the population for the study amounted to 195 editions. A purposive sampling technique was adopted to select the editions that have reports relating to women and Covid-19.

Discussion

The information about the pandemic was disseminated essentially through traditional media and social media. This became what could be called the public sphere regarding the discourse on the pandemic. In this connection, there is a need to discuss the idea of the public sphere which was popularized by the German social theorist in the book entitled *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* [3]. In the text, it was noted that the public sphere sprang up in the eighteenth century with the rise of the bourgeois class as well as the capitalist economy and constitutional state. It was during the rise of the bourgeoisie that the private public arose. Public authority, according to [3] referred to the realm of state-related activity "that is, to the activities of the state which had its structure limited to the sphere of the jurisdiction as well as had a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence" [4]. The private space was the intimate sphere of personal relations. The public sphere inhabited the space between society and the intimate sphere. The public sphere was the domain where there was discourse among individuals and public opinion was formed about society. The medium through which the discourse was conducted was the public use of reason, articulated by private individuals engaged in an argument that was open and unconstrained. The print media helped the public sphere in disseminating information about society. The public sphere fizzled out in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Europe.

Although the ideas and principles embodied in the bourgeois public sphere were completely eroded by certain developments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Habermas still believes that these ideas and principles could still be recreated on a different basis. However, he does not spell this in detail. What emerges from the Habermasian characterization of the public sphere is that it is a terrain of dialogical conversation where the participants are equal and there is undistorted communication amongst them. Habermas's notion of the public sphere as can be seen from the discussion above is a place where the public congregates to discuss or debate issues of general concern where opinions are formed, and places where citizens could come together as equals in a forum for public debate and sociability. It is also a place where the media function as the main avenue for these debates to take place.

Hannah Arendt in many of her works, especially *The Human Condition* [5] engaged with the notion of the public sphere or what she calls the public realm before Habermas, though

it is through the work of Habermas that the notion assumes a new dimension in recent social and political discourse. In the text, *The Human Condition,* she consistently emphasizes the idea of the public realm as the site of "tangible freedom", a space that is physically separate from housework and labour and as an arena where "everything (is) decided through words and persuasion, and not through force and violence" [5]. The public realm is premised on the equality of peers discussing political issues through rational argument. It is the site that is common to all citizens, an "in-between" that makes both equality and individuality possible. It is the terrain where dialogical communication, is possible and it is also the sphere, as Arendt rightly notes, where equality of men is possible through speech and "where the central concern of all citizens was to talk with each other" [5].

Some feminist scholars have criticized the notion of the public sphere that excludes women especially from participating in the public sphere [6, 7]. It was a male-dominated arena and as such it does not have equality for all sexes. Thus, Habermas' notion is flawed on this account. The patriarchal society in Nigeria is not friendly to women. Some feminist scholars have pointed this out [8-11]. But some scholars like [12-14] have controverted this, arguing that the concept of feminism is alien to Nigerian societies. It is a Western idea that is "thought to be natural and universal to the human condition" [15]. It is therefore not proper to categorize Nigerian societies as unfriendly to women since men and women complement each other. But some feminists have argued that the position of [14] and others are not tenable because the power relations within Nigerian society are skewed toward male dominance of society [16-19]. What must be noted is that the power relations between women and men are such that male is privileged above female and the cultural practices such as the lived experience of women are such that they do not have any say in the day-to-day power dynamics in Nigerian societies [20].

In recent times the new media, and the internet, have also become part of the avenues through which citizens have also expressed their opinions about certain issues of general concern to society. Moreover, the internet has become extremely powerful now and it has been borderless creating a kind of globalized citizens. In Nigeria, Covid-19 became a national issue, and it was debated in the newspapers and on the internet, but the discussion was gendered; it was dominated mainly by males.

The Nigerian online newspaper, the Premium times discussed the pandemic and came out to say that women were "locked out of Covid-19 and coronavirus decision-making at the national level" [21]. Men were at the helm of the decision-making body. The newspaper write-up noticed that women's perspectives in Covid-19-related news coverage were absent and women's influence over the framing of the crisis in the news was completely voiceless. The write-up went on to say that women were completely marginalized and as such a significant proportion of the population was completely unheard of about the Coronavirus, hence sensitization of women by women was completely muffled. Daily Trust [22] another Nigerian online newspaper corroborated [21] in terms of the voicelessness of women during the Covid-19 pandemic. One hundred and ninety-five (195) editions of the two online newspapers used during the period of the study, thirty-nine (39) editions had contents related to women and Covid-19 which translated to 20%. This result showed that women were not taken into consideration in the discourse about the pandemic and they did not participate actively; hence they were marginalized.

In the Nigerian context, the government formulated some policies through the Nigerian Center for Disease Control (NCDC) for the effective elimination or control of the

pandemic. What is of importance in this regard is that most of these policies were formulated and carried out by men. Women were voiceless in the formulation of these policies. This showed the subaltern nature of women in society since they were also affected by the pandemic. Some of these policies which have social, economic, and political implications affect directly in a much more pronounced way the women in the society [1]. In the economic sector because of the lockdown women were affected much more than men because they were mostly in the informal sector of the economy and since the lockdown debarred them from any economic activity this resulted in a dip in women's income and labour force participation. Some of the measures like the fiscal measures that were introduced during the pandemic to ameliorate the impact of the Coronavirus did not take into consideration women as their target. In other words, there was no gender lens as a specific target for women. In Nigeria, the central bank allocated some amount as a cushion for the loss of income during the pandemic, but the cash disbursement did not take into consideration women's access to this cash. What this meant was that the whole range of economic policies was not designed and implemented with a gender lens. In other words, there should have been a removal of barriers that prevent the full involvement of women in economic activities. This also brings into focus that women should be represented in decision-making processes in terms of the fiscal measures that were put in place by the government which is not the case now. The whole process shows that the existing inequalities in society have become more pronounced with the pandemic.

These invisible economic activities were impacted immensely by the pandemic. Because women were not represented properly in the decision-making process, there were no adequate measures to address the plight of these invisible workers. The health workers like nurses and midwives were mostly women.

They were also mostly health facilities staff. Despite this, they were not properly reflected in the decision-making process or the response to Covid-19.

In the whole range of decision-making processes in response to Covid-19, women have been voiceless because of the subaltern nature of their existence in Nigerian society. The subaltern concept is Marxist, especially Gramscian in orientation and it has been much more adapted to class-ridden societies to explain the oppression suffered by the lower class in the society. It focuses on relations of power and mostly the marginal groups that are excluded from power. The concept of subaltern fits into the situation of women in Nigeria because they are a marginal group hence any decision that affects them is not considered important and as such, they are voiceless. To put it in another register, the subaltern group is a voiceless group debarred by the power relation which is dominated by the dominant or hegemonic group which suppresses their voice. In a patriarchal society, the male voice is dominant and as such, it is the only voice that is heard within the system. The male voice takes decisions for the whole society especially the women and these decisions would not be in the interest of women [23-28].

The most important theorist of the subaltern has expatiated upon the subaltern in her work on *sati,* the ritual immolation of widows in a province in India [23]. In the said work she concludes that the subaltern cannot speak in so far as she remains a subaltern. This statement that the subaltern cannot speak has been corroborated by [24]. In her discussion of the subaltern, she argues that the subaltern lacks the power to resist any form of subordination in the society because the power relation favours the male in a patriarchal society that obtains in most African societies. To put it in another way or register, she says that the subaltern is voiceless because their perspective on the way things is, is silenced in a patriarchal society. The mindset of the subaltern is that of servitude

and subservience which is difficult to overcome because of the relationship within the power structure of the society in which they are immersed [29, 30]. In other words, the subaltern group or women is marginalized as earlier pointed out.

In the specific case of the Nigerian situation, it could be seen that the decision process was dominated by males. Most of the decisions were skewed in favour of male folk. They were not gendered sensitive to take into consideration women folk. Women as a subaltern group were voiceless or mute in the decision process in terms of Covid-19. In the inductive survey of the decision processes, it was found at both federal and state levels, especially in the epicenters of coronavirus that women were not part of the decision processes [1]. They were not represented or, to put it strikingly, they were voiceless as a subaltern group. As could be seen from the discussion above, they were not socially and economically considered in terms of the fiscal and social decisions that were taken to ameliorate the effects of Covid-19 on the populace.

Available reports show that the lockdown in most cities, towns, and villages affected mostly women who were in the invisible labour or informal sector of the economy. These policies neglected women. This shows that the subaltern nature of women in the political system has been much confirmed [31]. The Covid-19 pandemic has shown that its impact has been unparallel in the history of mankind because it has thoroughly affected all sectors of human endeavour, more also women have been severely affected by indices available [32-37]. It is therefore important that any recovery plan should address the gender impact of this pandemic. This means: (1) including women and women's organizations at the heart of the Covid-19 response; (2) transforming the inequities of unpaid care work into a new, inclusive care economy that works for everyone, and (3) designing socio-economic plans with an intentional focus on the lives and futures of women and girls. Putting women and girls at the centre of economies will fundamentally drive better and more sustainable development outcomes for all, support more rapid recovery, and place us back on a footing to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals [30].

Conclusion and Recommendation

The pandemic affected the Nigerian population in general. But in terms of gender specifics, the impact could be seen to have affected women more than men. It impoverished women. From the discussion above, it could be seen that women did not participate in the policy formation to combat the pandemic. Hence it shows their subaltern nature in society. Moreover, the public sphere as well as the traditional media outlets were foreclosed on women. The online newspapers also like Nigerian Premium Times and the Nigerian Daily Trust that were chosen as part of the research data did not have women in terms of the conversation on the pandemic. From what has been said, women should be part and parcel of the policy process in making any decision about Covid-19 in Nigeria and other pandemics that may occur in the future. Women should also participate in the discursive space in society, and this would help to articulate women's position or perspective about any disease-related or pandemic in the future.

Acknowledgment

Conflict of Interest

This paper has not been published anywhere by the author and the literature consulted is referenced.

References

[1]. Obi-Ani, N. A., Anikwenze, C., & Isiani, M. C. 2020. Social media and the Covid-19 pandemic: Observations from Nigeria. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 7(1), 1799483.

[2]. Shirley, O. K., Uzondu, O. C., Onyebuchi, C. C., Onyebuchi, A. C., & Chioma, E. M. 2021. Infodemic in a Pandemic Era: An Analysis of Twitter Misinformation on Covid-19 in Nigeria. *Sau Journal of Management and Social Sciences*, 6(2), 177-184.

[3]. Habermas, J. 1989. The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society, *trans.* by Thomas Burger with the assistance of F. Lawrence. Cambridge: Polity Press.

[4]. Irele, D. 1998. The Public Sphere and Democracy, Faculty of Arts Lecture Series, Ibadan: University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

[5]. Arendt, H. 1957. The Human Condition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Pp. 50-58.

[6]. Fraser, N. (2014). Rethinking the public sphere: a contribution to the critique of existing democracy. In *Between borders* (pp. 74-98). Routledge.

[7]. Landes, J. B. 2013. The public and the private sphere: A feminist reconsideration. In *Feminists Read Habermas* (pp. 91-116). Routledge.

[8]. Korstenbroek, T. (2022). Rethinking the public sphere in an age of radical-right populism: A case for building an empathetic public sphere. *Communication Theory*, 32(1), 68-87.

[9]. Singh, S., & Kumar, A. (2018). Interrogating impunity through counterpublic: Rethinking Habermas's public sphere in Paulaumi Duttagupta's Onaatah of the earth. *Media Watch*, 9(3), 278-290.

[10]. Imran, M., Chen, Y., Wei, X. M., & Akhtar, S. (2020). Veiled courage: Inside the women's resistance against violence through their writings. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 26(1), 74-93.

[11]. Nwagbara, U. (2020). Institutionalised patriarchy and work-life balance (WLB) challenges for female medical doctors: the case of Nigeria. *Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion: An International Journal*.

[12]. Bawa, S. (2021). Culture, rights, and African women's futures. In *The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies* (pp. 2487-2501). Cham: *Springer International Publishing*.

[13]. Fayomi, O. O., Ajayi, L. A., Popoola, R. O., & Njoaguani, O. (2022). Women in Political Leadership in Nigeria: Issues, Prospect and Challenges. In *The Political Economy of Colonialism and Nation-Building in Nigeria* (pp. 189-207). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.Mensah, E. O. (2022). Husband is a priority: Gender roles, patriarchy, and the naming of female children in Nigeria. *Gender Issues*, 1-21.

[14]. Oyewumi, O. 2016. *What Gender Is Motherhood? Changing Yoruba Ideals of Power, Procreation, and Identity in the Age of Modernity,* Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

[15]. Nzegwu, N. 2001. The Politics of Gender in African Studies in the North, Cassandra Rachel Vaney and Paul Tiyambe Zeleza (Eds.) *Women in African Studies Scholarly Publishing*, Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, pp. 111-146.

[16]. Abadie, D. (2021). Probing Gender Injustices in Africa. *African Philosophy for the Twenty-First Century: Acts of Transition*, 35.

[17]. Graness, A. (2022). Ethnophilosophical Tendencies in African Feminist Thought and Philosophy. In *Ethnophilosophy and the Search for the Wellspring of African Philosophy* (pp. 215-232). Springer, Cham.

[18]. Griffiths, D. (2022) Decoloniality and the Impossibility of an African Feminist Philosophy. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 1-13.

[19]. Irele, B, & Irele, D. 2010. When Words Come from Divination: Ifa and the Image of Women. *LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research, 7(3), 300-309.*

[20]. Ipadeola, A. P. 2023 (forthcoming) Feminist African Philosophy: Woman and the Politics of Difference. London: Routledge.

[21]. Premium Times Newspaper. April 9th, 2020, Women's Voices 'drowned out' in Covid-19 reporting in Nigeria, and others. Premium Newspaper, Nigeria.

[22]. Daily Trust Nigeria, Online Newspaper. http://www.dailytrust.com.

[23]. Spivak, G. 1999. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

[24]. Ghosh, P. (2022). Limning the Unheard Voices: A Subaltern Reading of Indira Goswami's The Blue-necked God. *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, *13*(3), 36-49.

[25]. Willen, D. 2018. "Women in the Public Sphere in Early Modern England: The Case of the Urban Working Poor" *In Gendered Domains*, (pp. 183-198). Cornell University Press.

[26]. Farr, P. 2021. Migrant Detention, Subalternity, and the Long Road toward Hegemony. *Ethics and Social Welfare*, *15*(1), 5-19.

[27]. Niraula, S. 2021. Gendered Subaltern in Abhi Subedi's Dreams of Peach Blossoms. *Contemporary Research: An Interdisciplinary Academic Journal*, *5*(1), 132-145.

[28]. Abdelfattah, H. A. M. 2021. When the Subaltern Speaks: Solo Narrative Performance in Heather Raffo's Nine Parts of Desire and Issam El-Yousfi's Tears with Alcohol. *Interventions*, 1-14.

[29]. Crawford, M. 2021. Blurring the boundaries: public space and private life. *In Public Space Reader*. (pp. 26-33). Routledge.

[30]. United Nations, 2020. Policy Brief: The Impact of Covid-19 on Women.

[31]. Luis Enrique Escalante & Helene Maisonnave, 2020. Gender and Covid-19: Are women bearing the brunt? A case study for Bolivia.

[32]. Cameron, E. C., Hemingway, S. L., Ray, J. M., Cunningham, F. J., & Jacquin, K. M. 2021. Covid-19 and women: Key components of SDG-5 and the estimated prevalence of modern slavery. *International Perspectives in Psychology: Research, Practice, Consultation*, 10(3), 138.

[33]. Parry B. R., & Gordon, E. 2021. The shadow pandemic: Inequitable gendered impacts of Covid-19 in South Africa. *Gender, Work & Organization*, *28*(2), 795-806.

[34]. Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs, UN Women, Oxfam, Statistics Sierra Leone 2014. Multisector Impact Assessment of Gender Dimensions of the Ebola Virus Disease.

[35]. Shared Responsibility, Global Solidarity Responding to the Socio-Economic Impacts of Covid-19. March 2020.

[36]. World Health Organization. (2020). http://www.who.int/newsroom/q-a-detail/q-a-coronaviruses. Retrieved June 22, 2022.

[37]. Prasad, A., Centeno, A., Rhodes, C., Nisar, M. A., Taylor, S., Tienari, J., & Alakavuklar, O. N. (2021). What are men's roles and responsibilities in the feminist project for gender egalitarianism? *Gender, Work & Organization*, *28*(4), 1579-1599.