Nigerian Muslim Women in the Media and Issues of Stereotypes

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Abstract
In the 21st century, there seems to be an increase in the number of women found in the media houses. Fundamentally, even the male-female enrolment ratio into departments offering journalism and media training has increased. This, perhaps, is not unconnected with increased awareness on media literacy and the renewed desire by the female folk to be part of the media industry. Women generally (Muslim or Non-Muslims) suffer from one kind of stereotype or the other. Ironically, Muslim women tend to suffer most from this stereotype. Stereotyping and stereotypes have always been a part of our society. Gender stereotypes are common in many Muslim countries and organizations including the media. This paper, therefore, is a modest critique of the account of the Nigerian Muslim women in the media and societal stereotypes. The paper provided a profile of the Nigerian Muslim woman, the media and Nigerian Muslim woman, and gave a clearer picture of what it takes to work in media. The paper identified and categorized the stereotypes and argued that cultural and religious reservations understand women working in the media to be socially alert to their rights and privileges. What remains lamentably odd is the fabricated stereotype of the identity of Muslim women covered with veil that appears on screen. The paper concluded that the erroneous misrepresentation has worsened the religious and ethnic divisions in Nigeria, and depicts a superficial understanding of Islamic norms, cultures and practices—a typical example of Islamophobia. The paper drew proponents of the status conferral theory and drew conclusions on the popularity of the Muslim women in the media, their relationship with media audience and the attendant challenges of the popularity.

***Keywords**: Muslim Women, Identity, Media, Society, Stereotype*.

Introduction
Societal stereotype has been part of us and forms one of the topical issues in the Social Sciences. The origin of stereotype may not be unconnected with the desire and human attempts to not only understand but also describe culture, norms, language, religion, and other values different from ours. This is in line with the submission by Thompson and Hickey (1999) that stereotypes emerge out of our cultural and socialization patterns and our interactions with family, friends, peers, and they exist within the social institutions where we live, work, and play.

Arguably, the manner in which the media employ [Muslim] women is a reflection of the existing social mentality and, perhaps, societal stereotypes. These prevailing

social mentality and societal stereotypes have actually had their roles in this overall trend. In the real sense, providing equal employment opportunities to both sexes is a part of the social responsibility of every media organization. Not gender consideration per say should be a decisive factor in employment, but the most deserving candidate whose qualification and experience match the requirement irrespective of religion, ethnic or regional differences. Sadly, nepotism and societal stereotypes have replaced competence.

The importance of this paper lies in the fact that researches (both conceptual and empirical) on Nigerian Muslim and stereotype are lacking. Studies of this nature have focused on stereotype of women in general. There is no specification on the Nigerian Muslim. In this regard, this paper attempts to explore and discuss the account of Nigerian Muslim women working in the media. To provide a wider and clearer picture, the paper attempts to discuss the profile of the Nigerian Muslim woman, identifies the attendant challenges of working in the media with emphasis on dress code, popularity and relating with the opposite gender. The study employed the propositions of Status Conferral Theory to situate the paper within a theoretical framework. The theory is cemented throughout the work and explanations given on how its different propositions explain the positions and arguments of the paper.

SOCIETAL STEREOTYPES

Societal stereotyping as a social adjustment or reactionary process has been a fascinating discourse within the communication field. Most often than not, we engage in stereotyping knowingly or unknowingly, to resist new norms, cultures, behaviour and realities. MacFarlane (2014) espouses the view that stereotyping does not represent abnormality in human social behaviour and values because we seem to be genetically predisposed to recognize social and physical differences in others, and we naturally use them in our social assessments and evaluations whether we are in search for a friend or significant other.

Stangor (2009) corroborates the above position by noting that we generally agree that stereotypes represent the traits that we view as characteristic of social groups, or of individual members of those groups, and particularly those that differentiate

groups from each other. In short, they are the traits that come to mind quickly when we think about the groups. According to McGarty, Yzerbyt and Spears (2002), to understand stereotypes, there are three guiding principles. The principles covered the fact that stereotypes are aids to explanations, energy-saving devices, and shared group beliefs.

From the above submissions, it can be deduced that stereotypes should be formed in line with the accepted views and norms of the social groups and to help the perceiver make sense of a particular situation. The general view about stereotyping is that it is an instantiation of the categorization process. We cannot have an impression of a group unless we can tell the difference between the group and some other group. Categorization, therefore, is the cognitive process by which we detect those similarities and differences. In essence, stereotype is ubiquitous in nature and usually takes a negative stance.

MUSLIM WOMEN IN NIGERIAN SOCIETY: A GLANCE AT THEIR PROFILE

According to Falah and Nagel (2005), the term 'Muslim women' has increasingly been adopted, especially by younger generations, in an act of supra-national identification with the Muslima that crosses race, ethnicity, sects and class. Edward Said examined how and why the mass media constantly reduce Islam and Muslims to a series of stereotypes and generalizations that merely portray this religion(Islam) as monolithic, as a threat and danger to the West, and as a violent and irrational religion.

In the last two decades, Nigeria, has witnessed a drastic modification in cultural practices, the economy, polity and leadership emanating from consistent awareness creation by religious leaders, advocates of feminism and other relevant stakeholders. A success story from this awareness is the redefinition of the role of women and their lost identity. This awareness has provided a paradigm shift in what many were apt to believe that the role of [Muslim] women generally ends in the kitchen and the 'other room'. Women have continued to generally register their dissatisfaction on the ill-treatment meted against them because of their sex. To underscore this further, there is the consistent use of sentences like: 'females are highly encouraged to apply' accompanying many advertisements on employment vacancies by organizations (both private and public) on the media or website of those organizations.

It is assumed that there is a population balance between the two dominant religions—Islam and Christianity in Nigeria. There are reservations on these assumptions; however, Muslims are the majority in the Northern part and have a significant population in the South West, while Christians lead in population in the East. Because of the fact that Islam permits polygamy, and encourages procreation as many as possible, the Muslim population is on the daily increase in Northern Nigeria. In spite of the security concerns that led to dead of scores of people in Northern Nigeria, one cannot but agree with the fact that the population of Nigeria is increasing.

No doubt, the Northern Nigeria is characterized by what is often referred to as a Patriarchal society. Bawa (2017, p.152) notes that:

> The Northern Nigeria is traditionally patriarchal society where rigid interpretations of Islam and powerful cultural traditions interact to undermine the rights of women. This culture of patriarchy is a strong determinant of male dominance over female and as a result girls' educational opportunities are usually guarded by patriarchal attitudes. The belief that the woman is inferior and divinely ordained to be a man's subordinate with passive social roles, readily offers a latent justification for practices like gendered educational segregation, career discrimination, polygamy, and political marginalization. The practice of purdah or seclusion also determines the extent of women's visibility and mobility in public spaces.

From the above submission by Bawa, it can be deduced that the Nigerian Muslim woman, irrespective of age, educational background and economic status suffers some kind of atrocities which is 'ignorantly' assumed to be an understanding interpreted from religious and cultural provisions. Thanks to the coming up of religious groups like Federation of Muslim Women Association of Nigeria (FOMWAN), which not only resists but challenges the notion through handling issues relating to women.

In Suratul Ahazab (Qur'an, Chapter 33 Verse 33), Allah the Most High said: "And abide in your houses, and do not display yourselves as [was] the display of the

ignorance….” Many have had a wrong understanding of the message this verse contains. Some even suggest that the verse has directed women to remain indoors, and not to display themselves outside.

The Nigerian woman is disadvantaged by gender. The profile of the Nigerian Muslim woman shows her continuing disadvantaged position in comparison to her male Muslim counterpart in the North. A majority of them are afflicted by poverty, early marriage, low level of education, dehumanizing divorce due to cheap marriage, and are relegated to doing house chores and serving as machine for producing children. Additionally, inferiority complex and the continued clamor for a significant number of male children than female further suggest how disadvantaged our women have been defined by the society. However, we cannot take away the shyness from the typical Nigerian Muslim woman.

MUSLIM WOMEN AND THE MEDIA IN NIGERIA: THE WORKING ENVIRONMENT

Monitoring the representation of Muslim women in the Media, finding strategies to challenge gender stereotyping in the media have been long standing concerns of gender and media activists throughout the Muslim world. Globally, women are far less likely to appear in the media than males. Rattan, Chilazi and Georgeac et al. (2019) cited a 2015 study showing that women constitute a mere 19% of experts featured in the news stories and 37% of reporters globally. Of interest in the above statistics is the 37% of the women globally working as reporters in media outfits. If 37% represents the global population, what then would Muslim women be? This clearly explains gender imbalance that has re-enforced harmful stereotypes.

Pate (1994) notes that despite some growth in female employment in areas such as programming, the status of women has remained subordinate in the broader society. His study revealed the concentration of female journalists in the lower status positions and most times, they are relegated to covering women and social issues. He concludes that some of the factors responsible for these include culture, male chauvinism and lack of dedication on the side of women generally.

Noticeably from the above study by Pate is the date the study was conducted. However, one thing is glaringly clear that the change in the 21st century is not much. For instance, in the entire North East, only two stations have females as head of the media organization. Of these two, only one is a Muslim—Fati Audu Yusuf heading

Peace FM Maiduguri, Borno State. Jummai (retired) served as erstwhile General Manager Bauchi Radio Corporation in Bauchi State.

Abubakar and Dauda (2016) submitt that gender diversity is relatively low in Nigeria as found among eight media houses that employed approximately 750 media practitioners. Only 288(38.4 %) were female and 451 (61.8%) were male. This indicates that men outnumbered women in journalism practice. However, there was a moderate movement of women to top management.

Dunu and Okafor (2016, p.39) note:

> Research evidence indicates that men dominate the gate keeping process in Nigerian mainstream media, resulting in a gendered gate keeping process. Among the reasons for this dominance has been the overwhelming number of men in news media operations in the country, both as reporters, the first gatekeepers, editors and finally as publishers, the final gatekeepers. These details suggest a significant relationship between gender status in the news room and the hierarchy of influence in the gate keeping process.

SCHEDULED VS UNSHEDULED BEATS/ASSIGNMENTS: A CHALLENGE FOR MUSLIM WOMAN IN THE MEDIA

The media environment is very dynamic and not easily predictable. This is because of the unusual happenings associated with journalism profession. Assignments demanding media coverage usually crop up at any time of the day - that is 24/7. Refusal to give attention implies loosing readership or viewership, perhaps, loss in credibility and so on. Scheduled beat or assignment, simply put, is a permanent area for regular coverage by a specific reporter of a news media. The organization deploys a reporter who in turn files in news stories as they unfold from the beat. Unscheduled assignments crop up without notice.

Additionally, unlike other employments that specify reporting and closing time, the media organization is an 'essential service provider.' Thus, workers in the newsroom, programme and engineering units operate on shift, irrespective os weekends and public holidays. The reporting time in an ideal media organization

differs depending on the scheduled assignments of the day. During religious festivities like Ed-el Kabir and Ed-el Fitr and even Ramadan period, the ideal Nigerian Muslim woman of Northern extraction has as her duties (recognized by the culture) of preparing meals for breaking of fast as well as meals and snacks to be shared among family members, friends and neighbours. This cultural duty is in conflict with schedules in the media. The media has no arrangement for Muslim women during such period. Except on annual leave or based on arrangements with colleagues (depending on the cordiality), all staff on duty must report to work irrespective of period. Given the fact that a significant number of Muslim women in the media are either housewives or ladies staying with their parents, there is hardly a glimpse of every day adjustments women have to make in the home, the burden of housework, their contribution as housewives, mothers and daughters.

THE DRESS CODE

Islam has prescribed a general dress code for 'pious women'. In Suratul Al-Ahazab (Quran, Chapter 33 Verse 59), Allah said: "Oh prophet, tell your wives, daughters, and the women of the believers to bring down over themselves [part] part of their outer garments. That is more suitable for them that they will be known and not abused…."

According to Posetti (2006), the hijab is essentially a scarf-like piece of cloth worn by Muslim women in some Islamic cultures to cover the hair as an expression of piety, based on interpretations of Qur'anic directives for modesty. This prescribed dress code symbolizes the position of women and protection of their body. As a non-verbal communication, the dress code symbolizes cultural expectations and recommendation of clothing for the women. Within the ethics of media profession generally, there is an acceptable dress code. This dress code must be decent and in line with the culture and tradition. In spite of this clarity in the provisions of dress codes, there seems to be a misconception on the Islamic dress code. Ironically, an ideal Muslim woman dressed in well kitted veil, hijab, or even a gown that appears on a national television is preconceived as a mere attempt to popularize Islam and consequently Islamize media audience. Ordinarily, the veil is used for cover, protection, identification, sometimes cultural symbolism and solidarity. The Nigerian society accords high premium to it and this is a religious obligation and cultural consideration.

Nomani and Arafa (2015 December 21, par. 9) observe that:

> To us, the 'hijab' is a symbol of an interpretation of Islam we reject that believes that women are a sexual distraction to men, who are weak, and thus must not be tempted by the sight of our hair. We don't buy it. This ideology promotes a social attitude that absolves men of sexually harassing women and puts the onus on the victim to protect herself by covering up. The new Muslim Reform Movement, a global network of leaders, advocating for human rights, peace and secular governance, supports the right of Muslim women to wear — or not wear — the headscarf.

Hinged on the fact, the media (specifically broadcast) steadily need audience to seek, attract and absorb; the institution desperately seeks audience. This is in line with the argument by Gorton (2009, p. 1) that writers, producers and media owners understand the importance of moving their audiences and audiences value television programmes on the basis of their ability to move them.

One of the advantages of television as a medium of communication is glamour and this glamour is as a result of the visibility of flamboyancy.

In 2014, Nigerian Television Authority adopted corporate dress code for newscasters to encourage international conformity. The abolition of Nigeria's cultural wears was seen as a deliberate policy to remove Muslim women from the national screen. Additionally, the media only features women in Hijab as resource persons not workers and this is peculiar to programmes related to Islam and women.

Theorizing Popularity of [Muslim] Women within the Context of Status Conferral Theory

Within the field of mass communication, status conferral is a theory and also, undoubtedly, a function of the media. As a function, the media confer status on people especially media workers and those the media consistently cover or give space to add their voices on certain issues of national concern.

Anaeto et al. (2008, p. 91) note that one of the basic tenets of the theory is that the media confer status on individuals by regularly featuring them. This simply means

that the media focus on those that are regarded as important personalities. It assumes that if they are not important, the media would not give them prominence in their coverage. From the submission of Anaeto et al., one cannot distinguish whether status conferral is a theory or a function of the media.

According to Mustapha (2012), status conferral is akin to second-level agenda-setting, particularly with agenda of affective attributes. By selecting some attributes of issues, objects or political candidates to create their images in the news coverage, the media contribute to the shaping of public opinions about the object of the news.

Naveh (2002, p.7) raises the significance of media status conferral thus:

> Communication experience as well as research testifies that the social standing of persons or social policies is raised when these commands favorable attention in the mass media. …The mass media bestow prestige and enhance the authority of individuals and groups by legitimizing their status.

Media popularity has not spared any sex. Both sexes become popular as a result of distinct media quality. Women, because of their position in the media, have access to all sorts of information and very important personalities. As a result of this, their popularity increases.

Muslim Women in Hausa Film Industry

Home videos and films as media of communication have provided an enabling ground for men and women to showcase their creativity. In spite of the religious reservations on the compatibility of the Hausa home videos, Muslim women have continued to join the industry as film artists, singers, producers and even directors. Aljazeera reported in 2016 that statistics obtained from Motion Pictures Practitioners Association of Nigeria (MOPPAN) show that 75 per cent of the Hausa movie actors are females. It is widely assumed (especially in the core north) that women in the Hausa film industry have low esteem. They are often seen as having moral issues, and as escapees of forced marriages who chose the film career without the consent of their parents.

The nude pictures and short sex video of Maryam Hiyana that went viral in 2007 through illicit Bluetooth sharing has reinforced this negative perception of Muslim

women in the Hausa film Industry that a majority have a nonchalant attitude. The spread of what, perhaps, turned out to be the first 'Hausa pornography' has equally confirmed public fear for film making. While it is true that professional life projected in the movies is juggled, however, the society considers the reputation of female artists as questionable and dented with ill-behaved attitudes unacceptable to the Northern tradition and culture. Apart from the sex scandal, the public display by Rahama Sadau, a renowned Hausa film artist who was visibly seen hugging and cuddling a musician—Classiq has further supported the perception by many of Muslim women in the film industry. Within the context of Islam, and of course the Northern Hausa Fulani culture, it is a taboo for a man to hug or hold a woman not lawfully married to him. While innocuous touching is inevitable within the film industry, many people however consider it unacceptable.

The recent squabbles, fault findings as well as public disgrace of each other by current and former film actors across the social media and YouTube is incurring more negativity towards the generality of the participation of women in public based acting. Some horrendous accusations which are horrible and are likely to incur more damage to the fan base and their viewers have observably came to the public domain. The number of women involved in such wrangle is degrading the possibilities of other women joining the film industry. It is also liable to change the decision of parents who are likely to send their daughter to feature in the industry.

In another film *Basaja* (Camouflage), produced by Tahir I. Tahir (2012), young women are situated as machinery for and tools for fraudsters in duping their parents. However, the women's greediness is what makes them so easily manipulated and cheated. The man who dupes people goes from city to city meeting girls and using them to defraud their fathers (Yahaya, 2017).

Findings by Yahaya (2017), of analysis of some Hausa films like *Ina Mafitaga 'ya'yan Mu, Ibro Jega, Makahon Gida,* and *Gabarcikin Gida,* shows that women were labeled as untrustworthy, unpredictable, feeble, sex objects and other negative images of womanhood.

In reviewing the Hausa home video titled: *Yar Film,* there are a lot of problems to grapple with. The major problem is the representation of the female Hausa film

artist. The film, as the name implies, was deliberately produced to correct this negative impression that female artists have questionable character that has been responsible for the deterioration of moral standard in the society. In line with the theme, the film portrayed female film artists as indifferent from what the society sees them. In the film, the renowned female film artist (Hafsat Idris) that married (Sani Sadiq) a man outside the film industry, was subjected to various criticism to the extent that her co-wife was compelled to quit the marriage. Preliminary sleuthing in the film did not favor both male and female film artists.

In *Kwana Casa'in,* a Hausa series home video shown on *Arewa 24,* one of the artists, Hauwa Mohammed Shariff who acted as a journalist, is happily married in reality. The question asked by the viewers is: how true is it that she is married? Why did her husband allow her to act films? This is unlike a northern Muslim married woman. The inquisitiveness of many of us is in line with the stereotypical assumption that Hausa film is not for responsible women. Additionally, Zeiji (2016) notes that women in the film industry face gender impediments.

Relating with Male Colleagues and Media Audience

The media is one indispensable institution that necessitates interaction with audience. Maintaining good rapport with media audience is germane to the sustainability of any media organization. Just like the security, the media creates room for an 'unavoidable' interaction with the affluent, the elite as well as ordinary people on the street, making the cultural and religious expectations for Muslim women difficult to meet. The society is thus killing the interest of women to work in the media. The dilemma of women destined to work in the media is between sustaining the marriage institution or sacrifice it for the work.

In the North, religion and culture have limited the interaction of a married woman and the male counterpart. However, socialization and the working environment have opposed these limitations.

Despite calls and promotion of gender equality as well as campaign to give women their rights, the north is still resisting the notion. Nowadays, even in journalistic interviews, some interviewees prefer to be interviewed by a male journalist rather than female. This is also discouraging the participation of women in beats that are likely to enrich their experience. In this sense, editorial meeting often has to make double-check before assigning beats to married (Muslim) women. This is to respect their marital status. For instance, the coverage of the insurgency in the North-

eastern Nigeria has the least number of women in the circle. This shows that women have been limited to covering designated beats such as ceremonies, fashion display, celebrity gossips and other in-town beats. This further limits their role within the media circle and edges them out from relating with more audience and gaining more public acceptance. Obviously, this cannot be unconnected with the fact that there are stereotypes in the decision making of the organizations. It was like a breakthrough for Kadaria Ahmed to anchor the programme "*The Candidate*" a presidential town hall co-production between Daria Media and the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), with the support of MacArthur Foundation. The programme welcomes personalities participating in the 2019 presidential race. Her appearance on the programme gave her more publicity, exposure and audience. If such opportunities would be granted for "women in the media" especially (Muslim) women, only the sky would the limit of their achievements.

Link between Stereotype and the Disadvantaged Position of Muslim Women in the Media

One harmful stereotype still in the media is the notion that best captures the interpretation and meaning of GMT in Hausa language as:

G= *Giya* (Liquor)
M= *Mata/Maza* (Women, womanizing, Men)
T= *Taba* (Cigarette).

The above are clear attributes of media workers in the early days of Journalism in Nigeria until in the 21st century, when things started changing. These attributes have generated misgivings and negative stance about people (women inclusive) working in the media. Attitudes of certain media workers were responsible for such generalization. The attitude towards people, events and other things are molded by what is said about them. This implies that if people say bad things, or hold a negative attitude towards an object or even a product, such object could suffer rejection for life. For instance, when a Muslim figure and seasoned broadcaster with a National Television in Nigeria was reported to have converted to Christianity, she was rejected outright even after realizing and reverting to Islam. Another instance

is the nude pictures and sex video of Maryam Hiyana as stated earlier, which was instrumental to her rejection in the Hausa film industry and the Northern society.

Bar-Tal and Teichman (2005) posit that the outcome of information processing and categorization is a cognitive approach to understanding stereotype and prejudice. The attempt to categorize Muslim women based on certain identities not far-fetched from the fact that they are Muslim suggests the level of derogation and discrimination. The nexus between Muslim women and societal stereotypes stems from the exposure and the level of interactivity.

Posetti (2006, p.3) notes that:

> Muslim women are almost invariably portrayed as oppressed and veiled, a terrorist threat or exotic, sexualized beings. This is in line with Said's theory of Orientalism (Said, 1978), which contends that the Muslim world and its inhabitants are considered backward, barbaric and outsiders to Western society. This "othering" of Muslims is notable in the media in terms of the coverage of Muslim women. Most representations of Muslim women involve them wearing traditional Islamic clothing such as the hijab, and their role in the media is generally limited to commentary on issues such as the veil.

Muslim women have become contents of stereotypes globally. Men win more promotions, more challenging assignments and more access to top leaders than women do. Men are more likely than women to feel confident they are en route to an executive role, and feel more strongly that their employer rewards merit. Women, conversely, perceive a steeper trek to the top. Less than half feel that promotions are awarded fairly or that the best opportunities go to the most-deserving employees. A significant number of women say that gender has been a factor in missed raises and promotions. Even more believe that their gender will make it harder for them to advance in the future—a sentiment most strongly felt by women at senior levels.

Moreover, there is this religious contention that a Muslim woman should cover herself in public places. This is a strong signal in the core north where religion is the first priority. Accordingly, any woman that does not cover herself is considered in battle with religious injunction. The people however, believe that any woman working in the media especially television is not obedient to such injunction. This

is undoubtedly the reason most (Muslim) women prefer working in radio to working in television. The emergence of media stations like *Arewa 24, Dadin Kowa,* and *Farin Wata* among others and the appearance of women (most of them Muslim Northerners) are hugely countering the negative stereotype against women working in the media. The programme settings and nature of presentation are quite unique and are providing more space for women.

CONCLUSION

The two major Schools of Thought in the feminist rise for women development—Women in Development (WID) and Gender and Development (GAD) recognize the fact that women are an integral part of their societies. No matter the affiliation, the negative societal stereotypes say a lot on the characters in our societies. Therefore, it is the conclusion of this paper that arguments on Muslim women and the media revolve around two major perspectives: stereotypes and representation. Media is seen as the mirror of a society. Portrayal of Muslim women has been amplified by the media itself. The status of Nigerian Muslim women generally has been associated with demeaning and stereotypical assumptions. Muslim women have become content for stereotypes generally. Accordingly, there is need to rework and change the narrative in the media.

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