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## Media Perception and Correctional Centre's Portrayal of Female Offenders in Nigeria

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### ABSTRACT

*Female offending has become one of the topical issues in the Nigerian mass media. It is not news that females are engaged in crimes even though they are often perceived as harmless, meek, weak and in need of protection. The way female offenders are portrayed in the mass media in Nigeria and elsewhere should be of concern to feminist criminologists, media sociologists and development scholars. This issue has hardly received scholarly attention. Both males and females share the propensity to commit crime regardless of the gender differences. Available literature and statistics indicate that they are both actively involved in crime and the frequency of committal by the males is more than the females. Deploying the feminist theory as its theoretical parameter, this longitudinal study examined the portrayal of female offenders in the mass media in Nigeria. The study heavily relied on secondary sources of data*

*collection from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), Nigerian Correctional Service (NCoS), print and electronic media and academic journals. Data was analyzed based on content analysis. The results indicated that though females are in all the categories of offences but their numbers are almost insignificant compared to that of the males. It further established that the highest percentage differences in male and female offending is not more than 6.4% for the females and 93.7% for the males from all the categories of offences analyzed within a period of 6 years in Nigeria (2010-2016). The study, therefore, recommended, among others, that the mass media presentation of offences should be devoid of biased gender reporting.*

KEYWORDS: *Biased gender reporting, Female offenders, Mass media, Nigeria, NCoS, NBS*

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### *Introduction*

Some scholars believe that the increase in females' crime statistics is a result of the overhyping picture presented by the media on crime reports involving females across the globe (Comack, 2006; Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008). Collins' (2014) study on beauty and bullets in Canada revealed that female offenders are portrayed as perfect examples of bad girls or black widows that are full of hatred and desire to harm or hurt others. In other words, female offenders are portrayed to have two sides; sexualized bad girl or hateful girls with desire to harm. In the same vein, female victims are also viewed from two angles; bad victims who blame others for their predicaments. That is, they caused their predicaments and so should not deserve to blame others. For instance, when a female is raped, the media quickly comes to the conclusion that her appearance, dressing or location exposed her to rape. The other side is the good victims who seek sympathy by negatively portraying their offenders. So, whether as offenders or victims, females stand being blamed for whatever happens to them.

Female offenders have a representation in the media that puts them in the category of masculinized hyper violent females, bad girls, nasty girls, monsters, misfits and manipulators (Comack, 2006; Chesney-Lind & Irwin, 2008). For example, the armed robbery incidences that took place at Ikorodu and Lekki in Lagos State on the 23rd of February, 2015 were overhyped when Nigerian newspapers reported that it was a female that led the gang of robbers whereas it was later found out that it was a male that disguised as a female. However, the newspapers later corrected this notion in their later reports that the leader of the gang was a male who disguised as a female. Females are, therefore, double stigmatized either as offenders or victims (double jeopardy). If they are victims they are portrayed as having caused their victimization and where they are offenders, they are portrayed as nastiest criminals. Hence, the general perception that there is an increase in female involvement in crimes or females are becoming violent like their male counterparts is a societal reaction to shift in gendered social boundaries and decline in traditional forms of social control over females (Steffensmeier et al., 2005; Kruttschnitt & Gartner, 2008). This negative portrayal, therefore, strongly influences public opinion and policy (Steffensmeier, 2005).

A very good example of the above in recent times in Nigeria is the video recording of a female portrayed as an armed robbery offender without trial by the Nigerian police on Facebook. The video showed her as the offender when the police actually went to the house of an alleged male armed robbery/kidnapper suspect to arrest him but unfortunately his girlfriend happened to be with him and she was arrested

too. The video recording neither showed the face of the accused male robbery suspect that they went to arrest nor showed the police beating or harassing him. Rather, from the beginning to the end of the video recording, the innocent girl was harassed, beaten, disgraced and portrayed as guilty of the offence without trial. She was ostensibly given what is called 'media trial', which is baseless in legal terms but capable of causing her opprobrium or public condemnation. She was in handcuffs throughout the recording ([https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=226407971810004&id=1666216526824458&sfnsn=scwspwa&extid=wHRix02VKjR2Z14j&d=w&vh=e](https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=226407971810004&id=1666216526824458&sfnsn=scwspwa&extid=wHRix02VKjR2Z14j&d=w&vh=e)). As a result, *The Nation* online report of 23 July 2020 said that the Inspector General of Police (in Nigeria) ordered the arrest, investigation and prosecution of all the officers involved in the case. Hence, two police officers responsible for the video were arrested while one other police officer and a civilian who was an accomplice were still at large (<https://thenationonline.net/two-policemen-arrested-for-dehumanising-lady-in-viral-video/>). This kind of depiction of females who allegedly committed crimes or offences is common sight in the Nigerian media ecosystem. It was within this context that this article examined the mass media's portrayal of female offenders in Nigeria.

### *Theoretical Parameter*

This study adopted the feminist theory to show the need for gender balancing in mass media reporting of offences in Nigeria. If it is not too bad for males to offend then why should it be too bad for females to offend? After all it is a matter of differences in individual behaviour not gender (sex composition). Charlotte (1987) defined gender as composing of two distinct constructs which are: biological attributes related to male and female and socially learned behaviour related to masculinity and femininity. The feminist theory is hinged on the belief that both males and females are equal in all ramifications and so should not be treated differently (Friedan, 1963; Bernard, 1982). Previously, Wollstonecraft (1792) claimed that females are as rational as the males and the differences in behaviour as a result of societal expectations are not basically as a result of gender. Feminist theorists believe that sexism robs females of a mind of their own, independence and reduces them to objects to be dominated and oppressed by males (Bernard, 1982, Daly, 1973). This article is not positing that it is right for females to offend considering their role of socialization in the family and society. The questions are: are they not in the same system, are they not experiencing the same challenges, don't they have rights to choose what strategy to adopt as means of coping with their experiences? The feminist theory

builds on the equality of males and females in every aspect of life; politics, economics, education, health, family, employment, workplace, social activities and we dare say, even crime (Evwierhoma, 2014; 2016; Omoera, 2020). It can be extended, therefore, that female offenders may have peculiar reasons for doing what they do.

In all the reasons for committing crime, females experience larger share; poverty, unemployment, material/financial deprivation, government policies, etc. When you talk about the effect of poverty on individuals, females suffer more than males (Aborisade & Oni, 2020; Schwartz & Steffensmeier, 2017; Ameh, 2013). Hence, some females see armed robbery as the easiest of all crimes because of the ease of operation, quick access to money and material needs that they get in one quick operation (Miller & Stiver, 1998). Their vulnerability status leaves them with no option than involving in crime to meet their needs. Many females are also unemployed and when they are, they occupy low positions with little remuneration that predisposes them to criminal involvements when the opportunity arises. Most female offenders especially in criminal gangs perceive themselves stronger than some males, hence, corroborating the liberal feminists' argument that gender differences are not based on biological composition and so females should not be treated differently. It also corroborates Lee's opinion in comparison with other females where he contended, "specifically, female offenders perceived themselves as glamorous, adventurous, rude and more violent than their peers" (*The Herald*, 2013).

### *Methodology*

This research is a longitudinal study on the portrayal of female offenders in the media in Nigeria. Five major offences committed by females were selected and comparatively analyzed in line with the males' admission into the Nigerian Correctional Service (NCoS) over a period of six years. The five offences were selected from among the highest frequency of females' admission into the correctional service among all other crimes in the six years of study. However, 2010 -2016 was selected because of the availability of data from the Nigeria Correctional Service and National Bureau of Statistics. The data for 2012 could not be retrieved from both sources, hence, it was purposely removed for lack of data. The method of data collection was mainly secondary sources. The published Annual Abstract of Statistics of the National Bureau of Statistics in Nigeria from 2011-2017, the Nigeria Correctional Service Statistics (2017) and print and electronic media presentation of female offenders constitute the sources of the data analysed in this study. In other words, the data was analyzed based on the official publication of statistics from NBS, NCoS and some media reportage of female offenders from 2013 to 2022.

### *Female Offenders Representation in the Media*

Female offenders reported on the mass media to have committed violent crimes such as assaults were often described as wives, girlfriends or fiancés of males just to show a connection of influence. But the activities of female emancipation campaigns organized by bodies such as International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) in Nigeria has made this trend to dwindle to the extent that females in crime are described based on their individuality without connection to their male associates. In the mass media, violent crimes committed by females are described as more deviant than other types of crimes (Estrada et al., 2019). Collins (2016) found that gender gap in crime is mostly heightened/influenced by the language used by the media in articles related to female offenders which usually arouse fear on the minds of the readers or listeners. This is also practically observable in Nigeria. In fact, cases of males who killed their spouses are rampant in the country and a very large number of them are admitted into the Nigeria Correctional Service across the nation but the mass media is almost silent on such cases while they overhype cases of females who killed their husbands.

#### Some Cases of Media Presentation of Female Offenders:

1. Female Graduate Leads 7-man Robbery Gang (*PM News*, 2013). It further stated “Chioma, the suspected seven-man robbery gang leader’ has been smashed by the police.
2. Pregnant Alhaja Lead Armed Robbers Gang in Lagos (*The Spy News*, 2013).
3. Woman murders husband in His Sleep (*Pulse.ng*, 2014)
4. Killer Child-bride speaks, I regret killing my husband, 17days after wedding (*Vanguard*, 2014)
5. “A 27 year-old female armed robbery suspect, Maryam Musa has once again shown that what a man can do a woman can do it perfectly” (*Pulse.ng.*, 2015).
6. Another story presented on the media about a woman who killed her husband was titled How Yewande, Ibadan Lawyer killed her husband (*The News Nigeria*, 2016). After her trial it reads ‘Ibadan husband killer bags seven years for manslaughter’ (*The Punch*, 2017).
7. *Pulse.ng.* (2016) titled Rivers Police nabs all female robbery kidnap gang. It went further to say an all-female robbery kidnap gang was smashed by the Rivers state police “what a man can do women charged for robbery” on the same page we have “what a man can do female robbery gang leader nabbed in Bauchi”

8. The full story was actually captioned “Female robbery gang leader nabbed in Bauchi” (*Pulse.ng*, 2017). Following it is a female robbery suspect has been arrested by the Bauchi State Police.
9. Notorious female armed robbery gang leader arrested in Ondo (*Pulse.ng*, 2017). It went further to say; A 24-year-old woman who is the leader of a notorious armed robbery gang that has been terrorizing the south-west has been arrested.
10. On the same page we have a caption that read “Super Woman; Witnesses say lady led Ikorodu banks robbery raid” (*Pulse.ng*, 2017).
11. Female armed robbery gang leader arrested in Imo (*Pulse.ng*, 2017).
12. Ebuzor’s, (2018) report on *Pulse.ng*. (Online Media Report) titled ‘Wife Kills Husband, Cuts his Genitals with a Knife’. The report stated that a woman killed her husband by stabbing him in the stomach, she cut off his genitals and put it on her deceased husband’s right hand after which she tried to kill herself but didn’t succeed because of the prompt intervention of the neighbors who took her to the hospital for treatment.
13. Another story is titled Women Dressed ‘Provocatively’ are being arrested in Nigeria. The law’s still failing us (*The Guardian*, 2019).
14. Police Arrest Notorious Female Armed Robber in Delta State (*Punch Newspapers*, 2020).
15. Another story was titled NDLEA bursts female drug gang, nabs lady with multiple identities for trafficking 296,000 tabs of illicit drug (*Vanguard*, 2021). Here these the two females arrested were paraded dressed in hijabs with the drugs being trafficked.
16. Police: 22 year-old woman arrested in Imo is IPOB’s spy (*the cable.ng*, 2021).
17. Police arrest notorious female fraudster in Kano (*Daily Post Nigeria*, 2021). She was alleged to have been a specialist in defrauding citizens of Kano and its neighboring cities even without court trial.
18. Osun: Police, Hunters arrest Teenage Female Armed Robbery Gang (*Daily Post*, 2021).
19. Italy-bound woman arrested in Lagos with 100 wraps of heroin (*The Guardian*, 2021).
20. Yet another titled: Human trafficking: NAPTIP arrests female trafficker, six supposed victims in Makurdi (*Vanguard*, 2022). These females were suspected to be on the move to a foreign country not yet confirmed and their pictures were published before court trial.

### *Discussion*

All the females arrested and alleged to have committed the offences mentioned above have not been tried in a court of law but have been condemned in the media publications in real time (that is, they have been given media trial). In this way, the media tend to portray that the prevalence of females committing crimes especially armed robbery and murder is on the increase. For instance, the case of the three female teenagers arrested by the police and hunters in Osun State mentioned above described them as armed robbers while in the report the police did not state that they found any arm with them but right there on the spot they were declared armed robbers. The police raided the capital city of Abuja and its environs arresting over 40 females in night clubs based on alleged prostitution. They, however, based this arrest on dressing 'provocatively' and labeling the arrestees prostitutes and not a single male was arrested. Of course, this arrest was followed by police sexual assault, rape and extortion of money from the females and many of the females were forced to plead guilty as charged in a mobile court on the spot.

Also, mentioned above is the case of the 22 year-old girl that was arrested in Imo State sent negative impression of freedom of association. The police claimed that she was a spy after 72 hours of detention at the police station where she was said to have been abused. She was arrested because she was a friend to an Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) member and her arrest was intended to be used as a bait to arresting her boyfriend who was on the run. Also it portrays that males' killings of their wives are normal cases while females' killing their husbands are abnormal cases. In actual fact, the number of males who killed their wives is higher than the number of females who killed their husbands in the correctional facilities in Nigeria as indicated in Table 1. Also, Table 1 below presents the number of males and females admission into the correctional service in Nigeria for five selected offences. It shows that for all five major types of offences on the table, the number of males is by far higher than the number of females in custody across the country. The table buttresses this article's claim of biased gender reporting of crime in the Nigerian mass media.

*Table 1: Number of Males and Females Admission into the Nigeria Correctional Services for Five Major Offences within 2010-2016*

Year	Armed Robbery		Murder		Assault		Stealing		Indian Hemp Offences	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
2010	18,331	1,176	21,718	971	4,974	517	22,074	1,794	8,304	274
2011	8,703	490	8,653	567	5,515	486	11,504	0	5,336	328
2013	11,661	197	6,852	320	8,302	681	47,689	2,747	4,225	128
2014	9,987	262	8,153	407	7,128	529	44,385	2,491	6,844	216
2015	9,659	54	8,509	314	8,177	603	36,051	2,249	4,205	197
2016	5,871	322	8,141	361	9,411	343	45,201	2,501	7,201	206
<b>Total</b>	<b>64,212</b>	<b>2,501</b>	<b>62,026</b>	<b>2,940</b>	<b>43,507</b>	<b>3,159</b>	<b>206,904</b>	<b>11,782</b>	<b>36,115</b>	<b>1,349</b>

*Source: Nigeria Correctional Service Statistics, 2017 and National Bureau of Statistics, 2012; 2016*

Table 1 showed that in the year 2010, the number of males admitted into the correctional services for armed robbery was 18,331 while that of the females is 1,176 in the same year. Same thing goes for males in murder cases in 2010 the number was 21,718 and that of the females was 971 in the same year. Looking at both data, the percentage difference in females' entry into the correctional service for armed robbery (17,155) is 93.6%. While that of females in murder (20,747) is 95.5%. The percentage difference for assault is 89.6%. All the data indicated that the rate of females' involvements in all crimes is almost insignificant but the media hype their reports in such a way that females are portrayed as championing criminality in Nigeria. Looking at the data for 2013, males' entry into the correctional services across the nation was 11,661 while that of the females is 197. So also that of murder, males' entry into the correctional services was 6,852 and that of the females' was 320. In comparison, both data showed low level of females' participation in both crimes in the same year. That is, a difference of 11,464 which is (98.3%) for armed robbery and a difference of 6,532 which is (95.3%) for murder in the same year.

Furthermore, 2015 recorded 9,656 for males and 54 for females admitted for armed robbery into the correctional services across the Nigeria in the same year. So, murder had 8,509 for males and 314 for females admitted into the correctional services across the country in the same year. The difference between males and females admission for armed robbery in 2015 is 9,602 (99.4%) and that of murder showed a difference of 8,195 (96.3%). These differences are quite much considering the rate at which they are presented in the mainstream media in contemporary Nigeria. In 2016, the number of males that were admitted into the correctional services for armed robbery was 5,871 and that of the females was 322. Murder recorded 8,141 for males and 361 for females. The differences in both data also showed low levels

of females' entry for armed robbery and murder in 2016 (5,549 (94.5% for the males and 5.5% for the females) and 7,780 (95.6% for the males and 4.4% for the females) respectively).

Cumulatively, in six years (2010-2016) the number of males that gained entry into the correctional service across Nigeria for armed robbery was 64,212 and the females' was 2,501. This is a difference of 61,711 which is 96.1%. That means females have 3.9% entry for armed robbery within the six years of study. Whereas, the number of males that gained entry into the NCoS across the nation for murder in the six years was 62,026 and that of the females was 2,940. This is a difference of 59,086 (95.3%). This indicated that the percentage of females in murder cases that gained entry into the correctional services across the nation was 4.7%. The percentage differences for females in both data that is, 3.9% for armed robbery and 4.7% for murder within the six years of study simply indicates that there is an increasing involvements in females' participation in murder than for armed robbery in contemporary Nigeria. But it did not debunk females' active and increasing participation in armed robbery in contemporary Nigeria. In the same vein, the cumulative differences between male and female entry for assault in six years was 40,348 (92.7%) while that of stealing in six years was 195,122 (94.3%) and for Indian hemp offences 34,766 (96.3%).

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, Nwanlozie's (2011) submission as well as the National Bureau of Statistics (2017) and Nigerian Correctional Service (2016) data showed that the number of females in the Nigerian Correctional Service (NCoS) has consistently been 2% or less than 2% over the years. This, in a way, justifies the reason for the existence of only one all-female correctional centre in Nigeria (that is located in the southern part) until recently when another all-female correctional centre was established in the north. Hence, the media portrayal of females being on the increase in criminal involvements is just an overhyped scenario of female criminality. The society consists of both good and bad citizens that could be males or females.

### *Recommendation*

The study recommended that females should be encouraged to abstain from crime as much as possible so as not to negatively influence the younger generations. Also, the media should give balanced treatment in crime reporting given the fact that

both males and females are predisposed to crime. Given this situation, the reasons and motives behind females' involvements in crimes should be investigated and policies to reduce females' involvements in crimes in Nigeria should be worked upon by the relevant government agencies such as NCoS in concert with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including mass media outfits that should take the matter as part of their corporate social responsibility.

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