

MASS MEDIA REPRESENTATION AND GENDER-INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP IN PUBLIC POLICY FORMULATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examines the role of mass media representation in promoting gender-inclusive leadership within public policy formulation in Nigeria. Drawing on Agenda-Setting and Framing theories, it analyzes how media coverage influences public perceptions of women's leadership, particularly amid ongoing underrepresentation and stalled reforms like the Reserved Seats for Women Bill. Nigerian media often underrepresents female politicians, providing less than 10-12% coverage during elections and advocacy periods, while framing them through stereotypes such as appearance, family roles, or emotionality rather than policy competence. This limited visibility and biased portrayal reduce women's legitimacy in policy debates, perpetuating patriarchal norms and hindering inclusive governance, as women hold under 5% of National Assembly seats despite comprising nearly half the population. Employing qualitative secondary data analysis of scholarly literature, reports (e.g., GMMP 2025, WILAN Global 2025), and Nigerian media from 2010-2026, thematic analysis reveals four patterns: underrepresentation, stereotypical framing, visibility-policy linkage, and potential for gender-sensitive practices. Media can foster equity through training, balanced sourcing, and editorial policies prioritizing women's policy contributions.

Keywords: mass media, gender-inclusive leadership, public policy formulation, gender equality, media representation

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Introduction

Gender-inclusive leadership in public policy formulation refers to a governance process in which women and men participate equally in shaping laws, decisions, and development priorities that affect society. In democratic settings, inclusive leadership is essential because policy outcomes are more effective when they reflect the needs and perspectives of all social groups, not only those historically in power (WILAN Global, 2025). In Nigeria, however, women continue to be significantly underrepresented in political and policy-making spaces despite policy commitments to equality and inclusion (NILDS, 2024). This imbalance weakens democratic representation and limits the extent to which women's concerns influence public policy formulation (Ayoade & Ojo, 2018). The issue is particularly important because women constitute nearly half of Nigeria's population yet remain marginal in elective and appointive leadership positions (Nigerian Women's Situation Room, 2023). Reports on women's political participation in Nigeria show that structural barriers such as patriarchy, discriminatory norms, weak

implementation of gender policies, and unequal access to political resources continue to restrict women's advancement (WILAN Global, 2025). These constraints are not only political but also cultural, as traditional expectations often position leadership as a masculine domain and treat women's participation as secondary or exceptional (ALIGN Platform, 2023).

Mass media plays a central role in shaping how the public understands leadership, political relevance, and policy participation. Through agenda-setting, the media influences which issues and actors receive attention, while framing determines how audiences interpret those issues and actors (Ayoade & Ojo, 2018). When women leaders receive limited coverage, the public may perceive them as less visible, less influential, or less legitimate than their male counterparts (African Women in Media, 2024). Similarly, when media stories focus on appearance, family roles, or emotional traits rather than competence and policy ideas, they reinforce stereotypes that undermine women's authority in public life (ALIGN Platform, 2023). Research in Nigeria has shown that media reporting often portrays women in public office as

weak, incompetent, or emotionally unstable, while male actors are described more neutrally (GIZ, 2026).

The relationship between media representation and gender equality in leadership is therefore crucial for public policy formulation. Inclusive policy-making depends not only on legal reforms but also on the visibility and legitimacy of women as policy actors in public discourse (WILAN Global, 2025). Studies and advocacy reports suggest that gender-sensitive journalism, balanced sourcing, and deliberate coverage of women's policy work can help expand their visibility and normalize women's leadership (African Women in Media, 2024). In this regard, the media can either reproduce exclusion or challenge it by providing fairer and more substantive representation of women in governance (Nigerian Women's Situation Room, 2023).

This study examines the role of mass media in shaping public perception of women's leadership in public policy formulation, the influence of agenda-setting and framing on women's visibility and participation, and strategies the media can use to promote gender-inclusive leadership in Nigeria (Ayoade & Ojo, 2018).

Statement of the Problem

Despite Nigeria's commitments to gender equality through frameworks like the National Gender Policy (2021) and Sustainable Development Goal 5, women remain severely underrepresented in public policy leadership, holding less than 5% of National Assembly seats as of 2026. This exclusion undermines democratic governance, as policies on health, education, and gender-based violence often lack diverse perspectives essential for equitable outcomes. A critical yet under-examined factor is the mass media's role in perpetuating this disparity through unequal representation and biased framing of women leaders. Nigerian media coverage consistently marginalizes female politicians, providing them minimal airtime and focusing on personal attributes like appearance or family roles rather than policy competence. This pattern aligns with Agenda-Setting Theory, where limited visibility reduces public awareness of women's contributions, reinforcing perceptions that leadership is a male domain. Framing Theory further explains how stereotypical portrayals, depicting women as emotional or inexperienced, erode their legitimacy and deter participation in policy formulation. Consequently, women's policy agendas struggle to gain traction, stalling reforms like the Reserved Seats for Women Bill.

The problem is acute given media's

influence on public perception, voter behavior, and elite agendas. Without balanced coverage, gender-inclusive leadership remains elusive, perpetuating cycles of exclusion that weaken policy responsiveness. While studies document underrepresentation, few address how media framing specifically hinders women's policy influence in Nigeria. This gap leaves policymakers and media practitioners without evidence-based strategies to foster equity. Addressing these issues is urgent to align media practices with democratic ideals and enhance gender-inclusive public policy formulation.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the role of mass media in shaping public perception of women's leadership in public policy formulation.
2. To analyze how media framing and agenda-setting influence the visibility and participation of women in political leadership in Nigeria.
3. To identify strategies through which the mass media can promote genderinclusive leadership and equitable representation in public policy processes.

Literature Review

Media representation plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of political leadership and influencing participation in governance. Scholars have consistently observed that women remain underrepresented in political news coverage across many countries. According to the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP, 2025), women account for only about 26% of individuals featured in news stories globally. This imbalance contributes to the perception that leadership and political authority are predominantly male domains. In the context of politics, the media does not only reflect reality but also actively shapes political narratives and public attitudes toward leadership. Studies show that female politicians often receive less media coverage compared to male politicians, particularly in relation to policy issues and governance debates. Instead, media reporting sometimes emphasizes personal characteristics such as family life, marital status, or appearance, which can undermine perceptions of competence and authority. Such portrayals reinforce gender stereotypes and contribute to structural barriers that limit women's political participation.

In Nigeria, women remain significantly underrepresented in political leadership. Despite representing nearly half of the population, women occupy less than 5% of seats in the National Assembly. Research examining media coverage of

Nigerian elections indicates that female candidates receive limited attention in political reporting and are often excluded from substantive policy discussions. This lack of visibility reduces opportunities for women to communicate their policy agendas and build public support.

However, scholars also acknowledge that the media has the potential to promote gender-inclusive leadership by providing balanced coverage and amplifying the voices of female leaders. Initiatives by organizations such as African Women in Media, UN Women, and the Development Research and Projects Centre (dRPC) highlight the importance of gender-sensitive journalism in addressing biases in political reporting. By presenting women as competent leaders and policy actors, media institutions can contribute to more inclusive political discourse and encourage greater participation of women in governance. Despite growing research on gender and media representation, limited studies focus specifically on how media narratives influence women's participation in public policy leadership in Nigeria. This study contributes to existing scholarship by examining the relationship between media representation and gender-inclusive leadership in public policy formulation

Conceptual Framework of Gender-Inclusive Leadership

Gender-inclusive leadership entails the equitable participation of women and men in public policy formulation, ensuring policies reflect diverse societal needs and promote sustainable development. This framework is vital for addressing imbalances where women's exclusion leads to policies neglecting critical areas like reproductive health, education equity, and economic inclusion. In Nigeria, the Revised National Gender Policy (2021-2026) targets 35% women's representation, yet as of 2026, women hold under 5% of National Assembly seats, with minimal gains post-2023 elections. Recent advocacy, including 2025 pushes for House Bill 1349 and gender reforms, underscores stalled progress amid cultural and institutional barriers. WILAN Global (2025) argues that gender-inclusive leadership drives GDP growth, potentially 9% by 2025 through women's participation, yet patriarchal norms and weak enforcement persist. GIZ (2026) highlights gender-responsive governance in education policy as a model, where inclusive leadership yields better outcomes. These concepts frame the study's objectives, emphasizing media's role in legitimizing women's

policy influence.

Mass Media Representation of Women in Nigerian Politics

Media representation profoundly shapes political visibility. Globally, GMMP (2025) reports women at 26% of news subjects, trivialized by personal framing. In Nigeria, disparities are stark: 2025 studies show female politicians receive under 10% coverage, focused on stereotypes rather than policy. Premium Times (2026) notes intensified 2025 advocacy for reforms like reserved seats was underreported, mirroring 2023 election biases. Recent content analyses reveal gendered patterns. A 2025 broadcast media study found female candidates framed via marital status or appearance, reinforcing incompetence narratives. Showemimo (2025) analyzed newspapers, linking negative frames to electoral losses for women. Young women endure amplified sexism, with online harassment media-fied to deter ambition. UN Women (2025) condemned this underrepresentation, urging greater female voices in media. Positively, initiatives like Women in Politics Media Advocacy provide training, boosting visibility.

Theoretical Foundations

This study anchors on Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), which posits that mass media influences public priorities by emphasizing certain issues and actors over others. In Nigeria, limited coverage of women in policy debates reduces their salience, signaling to audiences that female leadership is peripheral to governance. For instance, during 2025 gender bill advocacy, scant media attention diminished public support, aligning with the theory's "second-level" effects on attribute salience.

Complementing this is Framing Theory (Entman, 1993), explaining how media selects and emphasizes interpretive packages to define issues. Nigerian outlets often frame women through stereotypes, appearance or emotion, while highlighting men's competence, eroding perceived legitimacy. A 2025 analysis showed gendered descriptors in campaign coverage, reinforcing biases.

Together, these theories address study objectives: agenda-setting explains visibility gaps (objective 2), framing shapes perceptions (objective 1), and both inform promotional strategies (objective 3).

Empirical Evidence from Recent Nigerian and Global Contexts

Recent empirical studies provide robust evidence linking media representation to women's participation in policy leadership. In Nigeria, the 2025 World Economic Forum Gender Gap Report ranks the country low on political empowerment, with women at 3.9% of parliamentary seats—far below Sub-Saharan Africa's 27% average. Ministerial roles dropped to 8.8% in 2025 from 17.6% in 2024, correlating with media undercoverage. Premium Times (2026) documented women's 2025 advocacy for gender reforms, including House Bill 1349, receiving minimal mainstream attention despite intensified efforts. A 2025 broadcast analysis of 2023 elections found female candidates got 12% airtime, framed negatively (e.g., "emotional" vs. men's "strategic").

WILAN's Leading Woman Show (2025) reached 61 million viewers, boosting visibility and public discourse on policy issues, demonstrating media's potential. Dataphyte's Gender in Nigeria 2025 report highlights media bias as a barrier, with women in appointive roles portrayed unfairly. WSCIJ (2026) called for Tinubu's administration to expand women's roles, citing stalled parity due to representational gaps. Nigeria Women Annual (2025) profiled 100 leaders like Sen. Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan, yet noted media's role in amplifying or silencing them. Globally, CFR's Women's Power Index (2026) shows parity stalling at 29/100, with women at 27.5% parliamentary seats—slowest growth since 2017. Cabinets average 22.4%, down from 23.3%. Successes like Bolivia (50% legislature via quotas) and Rwanda (60%) involved media amplification. McKinsey's Women in the Workplace 2025 Nigeria reports 33% entry-level women but sharp drops higher up, tied to biased narratives. Reykjavík Index (2025-2026) scores Nigeria 59/100 on leadership perceptions, matching Germany's 60, signaling readiness unmet by representation.

These findings affirm media's impact: Nigerian underrepresentation persists amid global stalls, but interventions like quotas and advocacy yield gains where media supports. Evidence directly supports study objectives, highlighting framing's role in policy exclusion.

Strategies for Media-Promoted Inclusion

Literature identifies actionable media strategies to advance gender-inclusive leadership in public policy, directly addressing the study's third objective. First, gender-sensitive journalism training is paramount. Toolkits from African

Women in Media (2024) equip reporters to prioritize policy substance over stereotypes, using balanced sourcing (35% women experts). UN Women (2025) endorses workshops, as seen in 2025 Nigerian media programs increasing female coverage by 15%.

Second, editorial policies and newsroom diversity foster systemic change. National Broadcasting Commission guidelines mandate equitable representation; outlets like Channels TV (2026) piloted 30% female political sourcing, elevating policy debates. Hiring more women journalists (target: 40%) reduces bias, per WSCIJ recommendations.

Third, collaborative campaigns and advocacy amplify voices. dRPC and WILAN partnerships produced 2025 roundtables, generating positive stories on women leaders. Social media toolkits for young politicians countered negativity. Monitoring via GMMP (2025) holds outlets accountable.

Fourth, regulatory and institutional reforms ensure compliance. Policy Advocacy Centre (2025) urges NBC fines for violations; Rwanda's model integrated media quotas with policy gains. Community radio targets rural inclusion.

Finally, data-driven evaluation tracks impact. 2026 metrics from Voice of Women Conference assess coverage equity. These strategies transform media from barrier to enabler, normalizing women's policy roles

Methods

This study employs qualitative secondary data analysis and literature synthesis. Sources include peer-reviewed articles, UN Women, UNESCO, CIMA/NED, dRPC, ALIGN, GMMP 2025, and Nigerian-focused studies/updates on the 2023 elections, 2026 bill advocacy, and media coverage.

This study adopts a qualitative research design using secondary data analysis. Academic journal articles, institutional reports, policy documents, and media monitoring studies published between 2010 and 2026 were reviewed. Key databases and institutional repositories such as Google Scholar, UN Women publications, UNESCO reports, Global Media Monitoring Project reports, and Nigerian policy briefs were consulted. Sources were selected based on relevance to media representation, women's political participation, and gender-inclusive policy leadership in Nigeria and comparable contexts. The collected materials were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns related to media framing, visibility of women politicians, and interventions aimed at promoting gender-inclusive leadership.

Thematic analysis identified patterns in

biases, representation, and interventions. No primary data was collected; emphasis was on credible, recent global and local evidence. Limitations include potential Western bias in some sources, mitigated by prioritizing Nigerian and African studies.

Thematic Analysis

The qualitative secondary data reviewed in this study revealed four major themes that explain how mass media representation influences gender-inclusive leadership in public policy formulation in Nigeria. These themes are: persistent underrepresentation of women in media coverage, stereotypical and biased framing of female politicians, the relationship between media visibility and policy participation, and the potential of gender-sensitive media practices to promote inclusive leadership. Together, these themes provide a clear picture of the media's dual role as both a barrier and a catalyst in shaping women's access to policy leadership.

The first theme is the persistent underrepresentation of women in political and policy-related media content. The reviewed literature consistently shows that female politicians and women involved in policy advocacy receive far less attention than their male counterparts in Nigerian news coverage. This limited visibility is significant because the media serves as a major channel through which citizens learn who participates in governance and whose voices matter in public affairs. When women are excluded or minimally featured in political reporting, they are effectively removed from public consciousness as legitimate policy actors. In practical terms, this means that women's contributions to governance, legislative debate, and public decision-making remain largely unseen, despite their importance to democratic development.

A second theme is biased framing and the reinforcement of gender stereotypes. The literature indicates that when women are covered, the emphasis often falls on their marital status, appearance, family roles, emotional tone, or presumed lack of authority rather than on their competence, policy ideas, or leadership record. Such portrayals reproduce deeply embedded patriarchal assumptions that political leadership is naturally masculine. This form of framing can weaken the perceived credibility of female leaders and discourage audiences from seeing women as capable decision-makers. It also places female politicians under a different standard of scrutiny, one that evaluates them more as gendered personalities than as policy professionals. In the Nigerian context, this pattern contributes to a

news environment where women must constantly struggle against symbolic marginalization in order to be recognized as serious political actors.

The third theme concerns the effect of media visibility on women's participation in public policy processes. The reviewed evidence suggests that low visibility in the media is not merely a representational problem but a structural one that affects access, influence, and legitimacy. Public policy formulation depends partly on public recognition, agenda access, and the ability to shape political debate. When female politicians and women advocates are not regularly featured in the media, their policy positions are less likely to enter public discussion or gain elite attention. This can reduce their chances of influencing legislative priorities, budget discussions, and reform agendas. The findings therefore suggest that media invisibility contributes to the broader underrepresentation of women in institutions where policy decisions are made, reinforcing the cycle of exclusion from governance.

The fourth theme is the promising role of gender-sensitive journalism and advocacy-driven media engagement. Although the literature shows a negative pattern of exclusion, it also identifies several pathways for improvement. Initiatives such as media toolkits for young women politicians, advocacy campaigns around the Reserved Seats for Women Bill, and media roundtables organized by civil society and development partners indicate that representation can improve when journalists deliberately adopt inclusive practices. Gender-sensitive reporting can normalize women's leadership by focusing on expertise, issue positions, and governance performance rather than gendered stereotypes. It can also give greater visibility to women-led policy campaigns, thereby strengthening public support for reforms that improve representation. This theme suggests that the media is not fixed in its exclusionary role; it can also become an instrument for democratic inclusion when guided by professional and ethical commitments to balance and fairness.

These themes address the study objectives by showing that mass media shapes public perception of women's leadership, influences their visibility through agenda-setting and framing, and has the capacity to promote gender-inclusive leadership through more equitable representation. The thematic evidence demonstrates that media coverage is not neutral. It can either reproduce inequality or help dismantle it, depending on how women are represented in political and policy discourse.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that mass media plays a decisive role in shaping how women's leadership is understood in public policy formulation in Nigeria. The first objective of the study was to examine the role of mass media in shaping public perception of women's leadership. The evidence reviewed shows that women are still underrepresented in political news, and this underrepresentation directly affects how the public perceives their relevance in governance. When the media gives limited attention to women leaders, it subtly communicates that women are less central to policy leadership than men. This supports the view that visibility is not merely symbolic but politically consequential, because public perception is strongly influenced by who appears in the media and how often they are seen.

The second objective focused on how media framing and agenda-setting influence the visibility and participation of women in political leadership in Nigeria. The study's findings align strongly with Agenda-Setting Theory, which suggests that media attention influences what audiences regard as important. Since women receive less media space and less substantive policy coverage, they are less likely to dominate public debate or become associated with core governance issues. Framing Theory also helps explain the results, because the manner in which women are portrayed affects whether audiences view them as competent policymakers or as gendered exceptions. When media reports center on family life, appearance, or emotionality, they dilute the seriousness of women's political contributions and sustain stereotypes that limit participation. In this way, media framing does not just reflect gender inequality; it actively helps reproduce it.

The findings also show that this media environment has implications for democratic inclusion and policy quality. Public policy formulation benefits from diverse perspectives, especially on issues such as education, health, social welfare, and violence prevention, where women often bring distinct experiences and insights. Yet when women are not visible in policy debates, their concerns are less likely to shape national priorities. This creates a gap between democratic ideals of inclusion and the actual composition of policy-making spaces. The study therefore suggests that gender imbalance in the media contributes indirectly to gender imbalance in governance by reducing women's access to public legitimacy and political influence.

At the same time, the study reveals that the media can also serve as a corrective force. The

third objective sought to identify strategies through which the mass media can promote gender-inclusive leadership and equitable representation in public policy processes. The literature indicates several practical strategies, including gender-sensitive reporting, balanced sourcing, deliberate coverage of women's policy work, newsroom training on gender equity, and stronger collaboration with civil society organizations. These strategies are important because they move the media from passive observation to active democratic participation. When journalists cover women as policy experts and governance actors, they help build public confidence in women's leadership and expand the space available for female participation in public affairs.

The discussion also points to the importance of institutional change within media organizations. Gender-inclusive leadership in public policy cannot be advanced by isolated stories alone; it requires editorial commitment, newsroom diversity, and accountability mechanisms that reduce discriminatory storytelling. Increased representation of women in media leadership may also improve the quality of coverage because women in decision-making positions are more likely to challenge entrenched biases and support inclusive agendas. This means that media reform is both a content issue and a structural issue. Without changes in who produces news and how editorial priorities are set, representation of women in politics may remain limited even when individual reports appear balanced.

The study confirms that the media is a central arena in the struggle for gender-inclusive leadership in Nigeria. It shapes not only what the public knows, but also whose leadership is considered legitimate and visible. The findings show that underrepresentation and stereotypical framing continue to weaken women's participation in policy discourse, but they also show that media can be redirected toward inclusion through conscious professional practice and advocacy. This has important implications for Nigerian democracy, where meaningful public policy formulation requires the full participation of both women and men.

Conclusion

This study concludes that mass media plays a significant role in shaping public perception of women's leadership in public policy formulation in Nigeria. The evidence reviewed shows that women remain underrepresented in political coverage, and when they are represented, they are often framed

through stereotypes rather than as competent policy actors. Such patterns limit the visibility of women in governance and weaken their influence in public debate and decision-making. The study also establishes that media agenda-setting and framing power can either reinforce gender exclusion or support more inclusive leadership depending on how women are portrayed. The findings show that the media is not just a mirror of society but a powerful institution capable of advancing or constraining gender-inclusive leadership in public policy processes.

Recommendations

1. Media organizations should adopt clear gender-sensitive editorial policies that ensure balanced coverage of women and men in political and policy-related news.
2. Journalists should be trained to avoid stereotypical reporting and to focus more on women's competence, achievements, and policy contributions rather than their personal lives or appearance.
3. Media houses should give greater visibility to women in leadership by regularly featuring female politicians, policy advocates, and experts in news stories, interviews, talk shows, and opinion platforms.
4. Government agencies, media regulators, and civil society groups should work together to support public enlightenment campaigns and reforms that encourage women's participation in political leadership and public policy formulation.

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