

Public Relations and Gender Equality in Nigeria: Assessing Representation and its Impact on Social Change

African Journal of Stability
& Development
Vol 17 No. 2, Nov. 2025
pp. 1169-1180

Ahyenopwa Elmond Tanyishi¹

Abstract

This study examined the role of public relations in shaping gender representation and influencing social change in Nigeria. It explored how PR campaigns have historically framed gender roles and assessed their contribution to either reinforcing or challenging existing stereotypes. Given the significant influence of PR in shaping public discourse, the study sought to determine PR's effectiveness in promoting gender equality through advocacy, awareness, and policy engagement. A qualitative research approach was adopted, relying on secondary data sources such as PR campaigns, media reports, corporate publications, policy documents, and NGO reports. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns in gender-focused PR messaging and strategies. Findings revealed that while traditional PR narratives in Nigeria often reinforced patriarchal norms by portraying women in subordinate roles, contemporary PR efforts have increasingly promoted gender inclusivity.

1. Institute of Strategic and Development Communication, Nasarawa State University, Keffi; tahyeno@gmail.com; <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-6015-4188>

However, cultural, political, and economic factors continue to shape the effectiveness of PR-driven gender advocacy, with corporate and governmental PR campaigns sometimes lacking sustained commitment to genuine change. The study concluded that PR could serve as a powerful tool for advancing gender equality if strategic, gender-sensitive communication practices are prioritised. It recommended policy-driven PR initiatives, stronger advocacy collaborations, and research-driven messaging to ensure meaningful and sustainable progress in gender representation.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Impact, Public Relations, Representation, Social Change

Introduction

Public relations (PR) serves as a powerful force in shaping societal narratives, influencing public consciousness, and driving discourse on critical social issues, particularly gender equality. In contemporary Nigeria, gender representation within PR campaigns, media, and corporate communications is a reflection of both long-standing cultural norms and the evolving fight for equity. While some PR initiatives consciously challenge entrenched stereotypes and champion inclusivity, others continue to reinforce outdated narratives that marginalise women and limit their visibility in public life. The manner in which gender is framed in PR materials, whether in government messaging, advertising, or corporate social responsibility (CSR) campaigns, has profound implications for societal attitudes, policy evolution, and collective efforts towards gender justice (Eze, 2020).

Historically, Nigerian media and PR campaigns have depicted women primarily in nurturing, domestic, or subordinate roles, thereby entrenching gendered expectations. However, in the face of global gender advocacy movements and shifting socio-political landscapes, there has been a notable, albeit gradual, shift towards more gender-inclusive communication. Contemporary PR campaigns, particularly those led by international organisations and progressive local firms, increasingly emphasise empowerment narratives, spotlight female leadership, and challenge

restrictive cultural constructs. Despite these advances, systemic barriers persist, including gender biases within PR institutions, the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles within the industry, and the commercialisation of gender narratives, where diversity is sometimes leveraged more for brand image than for genuine societal transformation (Okafor & Agbo, 2021).

This study critically examines the intersection of PR and gender representation in Nigeria, interrogating the extent to which PR practices either uphold or dismantle gender biases. By analysing how PR campaigns portray gender roles, assessing their impact on gender equality awareness and policy shifts, and evaluating their roles in reinforcing or challenging stereotypes, this research sheds light on the evolving power dynamics of representation. In an era where digital activism and social media amplify gender discourse, PR must move beyond superficial inclusivity to genuinely transformative communication strategies. This study contributes to the broader conversation on gender-sensitive PR and its role in shaping a more equitable Nigerian society (Adebayo, 2019).

Literature Review

Gender Representation in PR and Media

Gender representation in public relations (PR) and media has long been shaped by cultural, social, and political influences, often reinforcing traditional gender roles. Historically, Nigerian PR campaigns and media narratives have depicted women primarily in domestic roles, portraying them as caregivers, homemakers, or subordinate figures in professional settings. Men, by contrast, have been positioned as decision-makers, leaders, and providers, reinforcing a patriarchal structure that limits gender inclusivity. Such depictions have perpetuated systemic inequalities, shaping societal attitudes towards gender roles and expectations. Akinyemi (2022) argues that these entrenched stereotypes are not merely reflective of societal norms but actively sustain gender disparities by reinforcing perceptions of male dominance and female subservience.

However, contemporary PR narratives are transforming, reflecting broader global movements advocating for gender equality. Increasingly, Nigerian PR campaigns are embracing more inclusive storytelling, highlighting female leadership, professional competence, and agency. Notable

case studies, such as gender-sensitive campaigns by multinational corporations and local advocacy groups, illustrate the power of PR in challenging outdated stereotypes and fostering social change. Nevertheless, these efforts often face resistance from entrenched cultural norms and institutional biases, which slow progress towards true gender parity. The challenge remains for PR professionals to go beyond token representation and integrate gender equality into the core of their strategic messaging, ensuring meaningful and sustainable change.

Public Relations as a Tool for Social Change

Public relations (PR) serves as a formidable tool for social change, leveraging strategic communication to influence public perception, advocate for policy reforms, and drive societal transformation. In the context of gender equality, PR has been instrumental in amplifying advocacy efforts, shaping discourse, and fostering progressive attitudes towards women's rights and representation. Through well-crafted campaigns, PR professionals create narratives that challenge entrenched stereotypes, promote inclusivity, and encourage systemic change. PR's role extends beyond messaging; it is deeply embedded in shaping policies by influencing public opinion and pressuring institutions to adopt gender-sensitive reforms.

Gender-focused PR initiatives by government agencies, NGOs, and corporate bodies have played a crucial role in repositioning gender discourse in Nigeria. Notable campaigns, such as those led by feminist advocacy groups and multinational corporations, have strategically employed PR to highlight gender disparities, demand equal opportunities, and showcase female leadership. Okechukwu (2021) asserts that these initiatives, when effectively executed, not only increase awareness but also mobilise public support for gender-equitable policies. However, while progress has been made, many PR campaigns still fall short of effecting deep-rooted change, as they often prioritise optics over substantive commitments. PR must therefore evolve beyond surface-level advocacy and embrace a sustained, action-driven approach towards gender inclusivity.

Challenges in Gender Representation through PR in Nigeria

Gender representation in public relations (PR) in Nigeria is fraught with challenges deeply rooted in cultural and societal norms. Traditional

expectations continue to shape PR narratives, often reinforcing stereotypes rather than dismantling them. The portrayal of gender roles in media-driven PR campaigns frequently aligns with patriarchal ideologies, where men are positioned as authoritative figures and women as subordinate or passive participants. This entrenched cultural conditioning limits the scope of gender-sensitive communication, making it difficult for PR practitioners to introduce progressive narratives without facing resistance from conservative audiences. Even when gender-inclusive campaigns emerge, they are often met with scepticism, highlighting the deep-seated biases that continue to shape public perception.

Beyond representation in PR messaging, gender biases are also evident within the PR industry itself. Women remain underrepresented in leadership positions, despite their significant contributions to the field. Institutional barriers, unequal opportunities for career advancement, and a lack of gender-sensitive workplace policies hinder progress towards gender parity. As Nwankwo (2020) observes, the dominance of male executives in decision-making roles has perpetuated a cycle in which PR strategies often prioritise mainstream patriarchal narratives over transformative gender advocacy.

Review of Empirical Studies

According to Adebayo's (2020) study, titled *Gender representation in Nigeria's PR industry: An empirical analysis of workforce diversity and leadership disparities*, which provides a critical analysis of inequalities, revealing that although women constitute a significant portion of the PR workforce, they remain underrepresented in senior leadership roles. This imbalance reflects entrenched societal norms that continue to position men as decision-makers while limiting women's access to influential positions. Such disparities not only hinder workplace equity but also shape the narratives presented in PR campaigns, reinforcing traditional gender roles rather than challenging them. Furthermore, Adebayo (2020) highlights the subtle yet pervasive biases embedded in PR messaging, where women are often depicted in secondary or domestic roles, reinforcing outdated stereotypes. While some organisations have adopted gender-sensitive PR strategies, these efforts are frequently constrained by cultural expectations and institutional resistance to change. The challenge, therefore, is for PR

practitioners to actively engage in transformative storytelling that promotes balanced representation and confronts restrictive gender norms. If PR professionals and corporate leaders integrate gender equity into their strategic communication, the industry can become a catalyst for meaningful social change in Nigeria.

Eze's (2021) study, *Corporate PR campaigns and gender narratives: Assessing inclusivity in Nigerian advertising*, provides a critical assessment of PR campaigns in the advertising industry, highlighting how corporate messaging continues to reflect deep-rooted gender biases. Despite growing awareness of gender equality, many PR campaigns still depict women in traditional, domestic roles while positioning men as figures of authority and leadership. This persistent imbalance suggests that inclusivity in corporate PR remains more of a rhetorical commitment than a substantive shift in representation. However, Eze (2021) also identified emerging efforts to challenge these stereotypes, particularly among multinational corporations and advocacy-driven organisations. Some brands are deliberately crafting gender-inclusive campaigns that promote female empowerment and challenge restrictive societal norms. Yet, these progressive efforts often face resistance from both consumers and industry gatekeepers who are reluctant to deviate from entrenched cultural expectations. The challenge for PR professionals is to ensure that inclusivity becomes an integral part of strategic communication rather than a superficial marketing tool. If corporate PR genuinely embraces gender equity, it can serve as a transformative force in shaping societal attitudes towards gender representation in Nigeria.

Nwankwo's (2019) study titled *Media framing and PR strategies: Gender representation in Nigerian press releases* examines how PR professionals construct narratives around gender representation, revealing a persistent bias in how men and women are portrayed. The study found that press releases from government agencies, corporations, and NGOs frequently position men as authoritative figures, decision-makers, and industry leaders, whereas women are often relegated to roles associated with caregiving, support, or community engagement. This framing not only reflects but also reinforces societal gender norms, limiting the visibility of women in leadership. However, Nwankwo (2019) also highlights the evolving nature

of PR strategies in response to global gender advocacy movements. Some organisations are beginning to adopt gender-sensitive language and imagery, ensuring a more balanced representation in official communications. Yet, challenges remain, particularly in traditionally male-dominated sectors, where gender bias is deeply embedded in institutional structures. For PR to become a true vehicle for social change, it must move beyond tokenistic inclusivity and actively challenge gendered power dynamics. Only then can PR professionals reshape public discourse in a way that genuinely promotes gender equality.

Okafor and Agbo (2022) in their study titled, *Public relations as a tool for gender advocacy: Case studies from Nigerian NGOs and government agencies*, examined case studies from Nigerian NGOs and government agencies, illustrating how PR has been strategically employed to promote gender equality. Their study highlights that advocacy-driven PR campaigns have successfully raised awareness about gender disparities, particularly in areas such as women's political participation, economic empowerment, and access to education. Government-led initiatives, in collaboration with civil society organisations, have utilised PR to challenge harmful gender norms and push for policy reforms. However, the study also identifies significant limitations. Many gender-focused PR campaigns, while well-intentioned, often fail to translate into systemic change due to deeply entrenched societal biases and institutional inertia. Additionally, some campaigns are criticised for being performative rather than substantive, with organisations engaging in gender advocacy merely for reputational benefits rather than genuine commitment. For PR to be a truly transformative force, it must go beyond awareness campaigns and actively influence legislative change and corporate policies. Only through sustained and authentic engagement can PR serve as a powerful tool for dismantling gender inequalities in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist Media Theory

Feminist Media Theory, developed by scholars such as Tuchman (1978), provides a critical lens through which public relations (PR) campaigns can be analysed in relation to gender equality. The theory argues that media,

including PR, plays a central role in constructing and reinforcing societal perceptions of gender. It critiques the ways in which women are either underrepresented or misrepresented, often confined to stereotypical portrayals that limit their agency and reinforce patriarchal norms. In the Nigerian context, PR campaigns have historically perpetuated gender biases by portraying women in passive, domestic roles while positioning men as dominant figures in leadership and decision-making.

However, Feminist Media Theory also recognises PR's potential as a transformative tool for gender advocacy. Contemporary PR strategies, particularly those led by NGOs and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, have increasingly adopted gender-sensitive messaging to challenge stereotypes and promote inclusivity. Campaigns that highlight female leadership, economic empowerment, and equal representation in decision-making structures align with the feminist objective of dismantling patriarchal narratives. Nevertheless, PR practitioners must critically evaluate whether their campaigns truly advance gender equality or merely engage in tokenistic representation for public appeal.

Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-Setting Theory, developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), provides a valuable framework for analysing the role of public relations (PR) in shaping public discourse on gender-related issues. The theory posits that the media, including PR campaigns, does not tell people what to think but rather what to think about by determining which issues receive prominence in public discussions. In the context of gender equality in Nigeria, PR professionals play a critical role in influencing societal perceptions by amplifying gender narratives through strategic communication.

PR campaigns by advocacy groups, corporate organisations, and government agencies have the potential to bring gender issues to the forefront of national conversations. Campaigns addressing workplace diversity, gender-based violence, and women's empowerment shape public consciousness and influence policy discussions. However, PR can also reinforce gender biases if practitioners selectively frame issues in ways that sustain patriarchal ideologies. The effectiveness of agenda-setting in gender advocacy depends on how consistently PR campaigns challenge

stereotypes and promote progressive narratives. A sustained effort by PR professionals to keep gender equality at the centre of public discourse can drive meaningful societal change by influencing both policy and cultural attitudes.

Framing Theory

Framing Theory, developed by Goffman (1974), provides a critical lens for examining how public relations (PR) shapes public perception of gender roles through strategic messaging. The theory argues that the way information is presented influences how audiences interpret and understand issues. In the Nigerian context, PR campaigns serve as powerful tools for reinforcing or challenging gender norms by shaping narratives that define societal expectations of men and women.

Historically, PR campaigns in Nigeria have often framed women in domestic or subordinate roles, reinforcing patriarchal structures. Corporate advertisements, political messaging, and media-driven PR initiatives have frequently depicted women as caregivers while positioning men as leaders and decision-makers. However, progressive PR strategies are increasingly shifting these narratives by framing women as capable leaders, professionals, and agents of change. Campaigns advocating gender equality strategically employ inclusive language, visual representation, and storytelling techniques to reshape public perceptions. Despite these advancements, challenges remain as deep-seated cultural biases continue to influence PR framing. The responsibility lies with PR professionals to construct narratives that not only reflect gender inclusivity but actively challenge stereotypes, fostering a more equitable society.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research design, employing content analysis to examine PR campaigns, reports, and media materials on gender representation in Nigeria. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of how PR messaging has historically framed gender roles and how contemporary campaigns have sought to challenge or reinforce these narratives. By focusing on the communicative strategies employed in PR initiatives, the research provided insights into the extent to which gender representation in Nigerian public relations has evolved over time.

Secondary data, derived from published PR campaigns, policy documents, media reports, NGO publications, and corporate gender-focused initiatives served as the source of information. These materials were systematically analysed to uncover underlying patterns and recurring themes in gender portrayals. The study examined PR messages from government agencies, corporate organisations, and advocacy groups to assess their roles in shaping societal perceptions of gender roles. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the data, identifying dominant narratives and strategies used in gender-related PR campaigns. While the study focused exclusively on Nigerian PR campaigns, the findings were limited by the availability and accessibility of relevant secondary data. Nonetheless, the selected case studies from corporate and social advocacy contexts provided a comprehensive understanding of gender representation in Nigerian PR.

Discussion of Findings

The study revealed persistent patterns in gender representation within Nigerian PR campaigns, reflecting both progress and enduring biases. Traditional portrayals of gender roles remained prevalent, with women frequently depicted in domestic or subordinate positions, while men were more commonly associated with leadership and authority. However, contemporary campaigns, particularly those initiated by advocacy groups and multinational corporations, demonstrated a shift towards gender-sensitive messaging, promoting inclusivity and challenging outdated stereotypes. Public relations played a critical role in raising awareness about gender equality and influencing policy reforms. Government agencies and NGOs utilised PR strategies to advocate for legislative changes and promote gender empowerment initiatives. However, corporate PR efforts varied, with some organisations embracing progressive representation while others maintained tokenistic approaches.

The analysis highlighted that PR campaigns could either reinforce or dismantle gender stereotypes, depending on strategic intent and execution. Cultural, political, and economic factors significantly shaped PR's approach to gender issues, with deeply ingrained societal norms often constraining efforts towards equality. Despite these challenges, the increasing visibility of gender-focused campaigns indicated a growing recognition of PR as a

tool for social transformation, fostering a more inclusive narrative in Nigerian society.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study highlighted the evolving role of public relations in shaping gender narratives in Nigeria, revealing both progress and persistent challenges in gender representation. Key findings indicated that while traditional portrayals of gender roles remained dominant, there was a gradual shift towards more inclusive messaging in PR campaigns. PR played a crucial role in raising awareness about gender equality, influencing policy reforms, and either reinforcing or challenging societal stereotypes. However, cultural, political, and economic factors continued to shape PR approaches, sometimes limiting efforts towards meaningful representation and equality.

For public relations practice in Nigeria, these findings highlight the need for more deliberate and strategic gender-sensitive communication. PR professionals and organisations must adopt inclusive messaging frameworks that go beyond tokenistic representations and actively challenge entrenched stereotypes. Corporate bodies, government agencies, and NGOs should integrate gender advocacy into their PR strategies, ensuring that campaigns contribute to broader social change rather than merely reflecting societal biases.

Future research should explore the intersection of PR, gender, and digital media, particularly examining how social media platforms influence gender representation. In addition, further empirical studies on the long-term impact of gender-sensitive PR campaigns on societal attitudes and policy development would offer valuable insights into sustainable change.

References

- Adebayo, T. (2019). *Public relations and gender: The struggle for balanced representation in Nigerian media*. Prime Publishers.
- Adebayo, T. (2020). *Gender representation in Nigeria's PR industry: An empirical analysis of workforce diversity and leadership disparities*. Emerald Publishing.
- Akinyemi, F. (2022). *Media, public relations, and gender equality: Reframing narratives in Nigeria*. Spectrum Books.

- Eze, C. (2020). *Media narratives and gender equality: The role of strategic communication in Nigeria*. University Press.
- Eze, C. (2021). *Corporate PR campaigns and gender narratives: Assessing inclusivity in Nigerian advertising*. University of Abuja Press.
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organisation of experience*. Harvard University Press.
- McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), 176–187.
- Nwankwo, C. (2019). *Media framing and PR strategies: Gender representation in Nigerian press releases*. Spectrum Books.
- Nwankwo, C. (2020). *Gender dynamics in Nigeria's public relations industry: Barriers and prospects for equality*. University of Lagos Press.
- Okafor, J., & Agbo, P. (2021). *Corporate communication and social change: The evolving discourse on gender in Nigeria*. Beacon Books.
- Okafor, P., & Agbo, J. (2022). *Public relations as a tool for gender advocacy: Case studies from Nigerian NGOs and government agencies*. Ibadan University Press.
- Okechukwu, R. (2021). *Public relations and social change: Gender advocacy in Nigeria*. University Press.
- Tuchman, G. (1978). *Hearth and home: Images of women in the mass media*. Oxford University Press.