WOMEN IN JOURNALISM PRACTICES IN NIGERIA: FROM THE HOOD TO THE LIMELIGHT

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ABSTRACT
Traditionally, women have been involved in different trade and profession from time immemorial. For journalism, women role cannot be wished away. From humble beginning, women have risen through the rank from being reporters to top management position in both print and broadcast industry. This paper adopted the historical approach to trace the rise of women in journalism profession across several generations. The paper concluded that, the history of modern Nigerian journalism will not be complete without a generous and prominent mention of the role and contribution of women who strived and shone like northern stars to build and nurture the profession.

INTRODUCTION
Women are believed to be the weaker sex – created to be nurtured as a helper. They are meant to stay back at home while the man of the house goes out to work. This is even typified in the biblical recount of Adam and Eve who was left behind while Adam went out. The role of women in traditional African society is not different from that portrayed by Eve. A woman’s role was simply to look after the homestead and tend the children and the elderly while men find jobs outside the home.

The importance of women in traditional African society is illustrated in a Ghanaian proverb which says, ‘A Woman is a flower in a garden, her husband is the fence around’ (Mbiti: 1988). This proverb clearly spells out the value of women in every African society. By interpretation, women are genetically programmed to bear life (childbirth), to nurse the child they give life to, cherish, and give warmth all year round.
Yet, while she does all that she still finds ways to help and contribute her quota to the family finance through her petty trade. So, even though men are the pillar of the family, the role of women nonetheless is still considered equal to that of her man in all ramifications.

Beyond tending her immediate family, the role of women extends to the society – after all how her children turned out, they say, will affect the future of the society. In view of the role women perform in the society, Afisi (2010:230) concludes that in various traditional African societies, the African woman possessed the power that binds the society together. In agreement of this view Leith (1967: 34) asserts that:

African women were the transmitters of the language, the history and the oral culture, the music, the dance, the habits and the artisanal knowledge. They were the teachers and were responsible for instilling traditional values and knowledge in children.

Regardless of the fact that women’s role had no monetary value, they nonetheless have family and society respect. Their sound and taught provoking views on issues and their uncanny ability to handle even the most difficult man are often unequalled.

But with more family demands and economic challenges the role of women as a-stay-at-home wife began to change with more women taking gainful employment to support the family. But the traditional role that has placed women as a second fiddle worked against the type of job women take and the remuneration. It was no surprise that in September of 1995 various countries participating in the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of United Nations in Beijing made a declaration to:

1. To advance the goals of equality, development and peace for all women everywhere in the interest of all humanity,
2. Acknowledge the voices of all women everywhere and taking note of the diversity of women and their roles and circumstances, honoring the women who paved the way and inspired by the hope present in the world’s youth, and
3. To recognize that the status of women has advanced in some important respects in the past decade but that progress has been uneven, inequalities between women and men have persisted and major obstacles remain, with serious consequences for the well-being of all people,

But before the Beijing declaration, women were given limited access and restricted to operate as editors, reporters, sports analyst and journalists. While many female reporters in the 1800s and early 1900s were restricted to society reporting and were expected to cover the latest in food or fashion, there were a few women who reported on subjects that were considered the domain of male reporters.

It must be noted that this article is not to treat the issues of gender equality, but it is necessary to lay the foundation of how women came to be working in a profession that was seen as the exclusive preserve of men. This study therefore attempts to chronicle the contribution of women to the growth of journalism practice from the hood to the limelight.
Women In Journalism: At The Beginning

Historically, journalism globally used to be men’s domain, hence the common phrase; ‘gentlemen of the press’. The history of journalism practice in Nigeria can be traced to attempt by missionaries printing activities first by the Presbyterian Church in Calabar and later in Abeokuta by the late Reverend Henry Townsend. Townsend’s attempt paid off when he started the first newspaper on December 3, 1859. The paper, *Iwe Iroyin fun Aron Ara Egba ati Yoruba*, literary meaning, ‘newspaper for the Egbas and Yorubas’, scored many first; the first newspaper, first religious newspaper and the first vernacular newspaper in Nigeria.

The paper's coverage included commercial news as well as political news. According to Townsend, the reason for the establishment of the paper was a way to get people to read [Ajibade 2003:2]. Although Townsend's good intentions was frowned at by many colonialists, his paper nonetheless set the stage for other newspapers.

The rise of nationalism consciousness gave rise to the establishment of other newspapers across the country. But like many other places across the world, journalism practices at this early stage remain the sole domain of men. For many decades, women were nowhere to be found in the practice of journalism in Nigeria.

Increase in global agitation for gender equality and empowerment in all sector led to changes in gender role in journalism practice as more women oriented stories started appearing in Nigeria newspapers of the early 50s. Coker (1952) chronicle how the journey began for women in the journalism profession in Nigeria thus:

> The first breakthrough for women in this male dominated profession was in feature writing with the establishment of the Nigerian Daily Times, when lively feature articles began to appear with boxed title-heads” (Ikem 1996:189).

When women started venturing into journalism practice in the 50s, they were restricted mainly to women and domestic issues and atimes, they wrote under pseudonyms to hide their identity mainly because of the prevailing social and cultural milieu of that period. Mrs. Doyin Abiola (1986), herself pacesetter in women journalism of her era captured this period thus;

> An era when the women’s page is exclusively reserved for women regardless of their educational background and qualification. And the sad part is women accepted this notion almost as a God-given rule. They … believed … that the entry point for a woman journalist is through the women page (Ikem, 1996: 189-190).

Despite the shaky and limited opportunities for female journalists, they have made steady progress both in number and contribution to the growth of the profession. From just being women or gossip columnists, many of them have into mainstream genre of journalism and some have gone to become editors and publishers.

Among the early pioneers are:

1. Adora Lilly Ulasi Women’s page editor of *Daily Times*
2. Theresa Ogunbiyi, succeeded Ulasi as Women’s page editor at *Daily Times*
4. Dr. Doyin Abiola, first female editor of a national newspaper (*National Concord*)
6. Modupe Ajayi, editor *Weekend Times*
7. Agbeke Ogunsanwo, editor *Health*
8. Toyin Johnson, editor *Woman’s World*
There are other women who worked as reporters and line editors whose names may not appear here but who contributed immensely especially in broadcast journalism. They belong to the silent majority who charted the part for modern female journalists to thrive and hold their heads high among their male contemporaries.

If the listed female journalists can be described as old school, many of their modern peers are doing well in journalism and are lifting the bars and ceiling in areas hitherto considered a-no-go area for their forebears.

The Dawn of a New Era for Women Journalism Practices

If the forebears of women who practice journalism had to write under pseudonyms and concerned themselves to women and gossip stories, its modern contemporaries break all ceiling and barriers to compete, and in some cases outshine their male counterparts in different genre of journalism practices. The National President of the Nigeria Association of Women Journalists (NAWOJ), Asabe Baba Nahaya, also agreed that the situation for women journalists has changed a lot since the organization’s inception. According to her, before the inception of the organization, women were not covering important issues, but now they have been given more responsibilities and we have more female editors than ever before (http://www.ng.undp.org).

From features to columns writing, from politics to defense, from science to technology, from aviation to health, from local to foreign reports, from print to broadcast journalism, women are there all the way. Apart from these, many women are today members of editorial boards of many media organisations. Some are today editors, publishers and CEOs of broadcast organizations.

Below are some women who have taken off the hood and are sharing the limelight with their male counterparts in journalism:

1. FUNKE EGBEMODE: she started her journalism practice in 1989 with Prime People magazine as a staff writer. For 11 months, she wrote a column called ‘Single Girls’ and
also contributed to ‘Ayi’s Diary’. In 1993, she joined The Punch newspaper, one of the leading national newspapers in Nigeria. While at the The Punch, she started two columns; ‘Adam’s Apple and ‘Intimate Affairs, in addition to her other reportorial assignments. In the 2000, she left The Punch for Post Express as the Saturday editor. From the Post Express, Funke left for THISDAY, another leading national newspaper as the Associate Editor, Style. After a brief break from journalism, she returned in 2004, as editor, the Saturday Independent, and also Deputy Managing Editor of the independent Newspapers group, a national newspaper. She left journalism again in 2007, to take appointment as the Special Adviser on Media to the speaker of the house of Representatives, Mrs Patricia Etteh. The lure of journalism pulls her back to the profession in 2009, when she joined The SUN newspaper group as the editor, Saturday SUN, where she currently hold sway. As a reporter, columnist and manager, Funke shone through it all and has many awards to show for it.

2. IJEOMA NWOGWUGWU: Ijeoma journalism career started in 1995, after her banking career and Accounting training. She joined THISDAY newspaper in 1995, and was saddled with the responsibility of managing the Financial Times supplement in THISDAY. From this assignment, she moved to covering Money and Capital markets. After a while, she became the newspaper Energy correspondent. In 1997, she was promoted to Assistant Business editor, Nation’s capital and moved to the federal capital territory office of the newspaper. Two years later, after distinguishing herself in the assignment, she was promoted to the Head of THISDAY’s Abuja Bureau. Sooner than expected, Ijeoma was promoted again and made the first female group Business editor of the newspaper and moved to Lagos. Ijeoma’s incisive, analytical and informed column; Behind the Figures, attracted many readers among the critical segment of the society which informed her appointment as World Bank Consultant for Bureau of Public Enterprises (BPE) in 2001. After her stint with the BPE and brief stay at Suburban Telecoms, she returned to THISDAY newspaper again and became Executive Editor, Nation’s capital. In 2003, Ijeoma was promoted to become Editor, Saturday THISDAY. She is currently a divisional director in the newspaper as well as Editor, THISDAY daily. If critics of women journalists want to accuse them of concentrating on soft sides of journalism such as women stories, family affairs and gossips, Ijeoma break the stereotype and carve a niche for herself as a leading writer and columnist on economy matters.

3. JANET MBA-AFOLABI: in 1988, Janet career in journalism started in 1988, when she got employed by Newswatch magazine as a reporter assigned to the general beat. After spending 12 years at Newswatch, she joined TELL magazine in year 2000. However, her stay in TELL magazine was brief, when she joined her other colleagues; Declan Okpaeleke, Ben Charles Obi, George Mba, and Obed Awowede, to established INSIDER magazine. Her adventure in Insider magazine did to really go as expected, thus in 2007, she pulled out to published her own magazine called the SCROLL. This feat made Janet one of the few women publishers in Nigerian journalism.

4. IBIM SEMENITARI: the journey into journalism for Ibim started at Daily Times when she was employed as a youth corper at POISE magazine, one of the publications under the Daily Times group. Her thirst for serious aspect of journalism propelled her to move
to Newswatch Magazine where she was employed at Quality magazine a sister publication under the Newswatch group.

From Quality magazine, she was transferred to Eko Today, a newspaper from the stable of Newswatch group. After several years stint at Newswatch group, Ibim in 1995 moved to TELL magazine as a Staff Writer.

Shortly after her appointment at TELL, her sterling performance started to shone and awards started flowing in. immediately, she was promoted online Editor, deputy head of the back-of-the-book section of the magazine, Business editor, and head of newsroom of TELL magazine.

By 2006, Ibim’s performances in all the positions she held impressed the TELL management, hence, the management appointed her the first editor of Broad Street Journal, a new weekly business magazine from TELL group. In May 2006, Ibim resigned from TELL magazine after spending 11 years there to take up appointment with BBC World Service Trust as journalism trainer.

Ibim’s love for journalism practice propelled her to leave the BBC assignment to start her own magazine called BUSINESS EYE. After the joy and challenges of becoming a publisher, Ibim left journalism to take up appointment as the commissioner for information in River state in 2009.

Conclusion
The history of modern Nigerian journalism will not be complete with a generous and prominent mention of the role and contribution of women who strived and shone like northern stars to build and nurture the profession. From humble beginning, women journalists have grown in leap and bound in their contribution to profession of journalism as practitioners, editors, managers and proprietors.

However, it is important to note that there are many women whose contributions to journalism profession are outstanding and impressive, and whose contribution is worth mentioning. But time, space and paucity of information make it impossible to accommodate them in this chapter. They and many other women journalists have moved away from what Ikem (1996) described thus:

> while line-editor remains one of the most remarkable positions women in journalism have made great progress, as women editors, observations show that the content of the pages they edit are yet to be drastically dynamic to address wider issues of development.

Today, women in journalism have gone to write columns and be a regular columnist in national newspapers contributing articles that addresses serious issues of development like economy, law, infrastructure, defense, politics and governance, health and many more that have shaped the development of Nigeria.

Some of the women listed above and many others did not only break gender stereotype in journalism, they went on to become teachers, managers, editors and proprietors of print and electronic media organisations where men and women are employed.

As ace broadcaster, Mrs. Bimbo Oloyede rightly advised practicing journalism with the mindset to make purposeful impact will take women to the peak of their carrier. This was the principle that guided early women in the profession of journalism and will guide future female journalists.
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