



Gender Inequality in Nigeria Football: A Critical Analysis of Media Coverage and Sponsorship

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Abstract: Football remains one of the most influential sports globally, attracting massive audiences and significant media attention, with over 250 million players and 1.3 billion followers worldwide. In Nigeria, the sport holds deep cultural significance, serving as a unifying force that fosters national identity, social cohesion, and economic opportunities through media broadcasting, sponsorship, and youth engagement. Despite this prominence, the development and recognition of football in Nigeria are marked by persistent gender inequalities. While men's football enjoys extensive media coverage, structured leagues, and substantial sponsorship investment, women's football – despite notable achievements such as the dominance of the Super Falcons in African competitions – remains underrepresented and underfunded. This study critically examines disparities in media coverage, sponsorship, and public perception between men's and women's football in Nigeria. Drawing on secondary data and supported by Agenda-Setting Theory, the paper argues that the disproportionate visibility given to men's football by Nigerian media shapes public attitudes, reinforces cultural stereotypes, and influences the allocation of financial resources in favor of male teams. The findings reveal that limited media attention, biased reporting patterns, and unequal sponsorship structures collectively marginalize women's football, restricting its growth and diminishing its competitive potential. The study concludes that without deliberate efforts to ensure balanced media representation and equitable investment, gender inequality in Nigerian football will persist, undermining both the development of the sport and the broader goal of gender inclusion.

Keywords: Analysis, Coverage, Football, Gender, Inequality and Sponsorship.

I. Introduction

In the world, football is seen as the most influential sport that attracts large audiences which captures the media attention, making it a lucrative commercial investment. According to Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) there are about 250 million football players and over 1.3 billion people who identify with football in various ways (Bernard et al., 2018). Football often serves as a cultural force that binds people together across regions cutting existing differences (Giulianotti et al, 2006). Alegi (2010) asserted that in African countries football occupies even deeper cultural ties that is connected with the social identity of the people. This have made football one of the sports that can reach people in various place and gives them a shared social identity under the banner of a club or team supported. Okoro and Nwafor (2020), noted that football serves as a powerful source of giving people the same identity and national pride in Nigeria as it brings common interest and excitement across the country.

Nigerians love for football is evident when considering the opportunities, it has provided in the country. Akinleye and Ajayi (2020) noted that football have created broadcasting opportunities for people and as well brought sponsorship deals and merchants who now focus on games for people that loves football in Nigeria. The sport provides jobs, engages young people, and offers a springboard for many Nigerian athletes to gain global

recognition. Also, the high consumption of sports news and information from various media outlets in the country is a pointer that shows how football is rooted in the cultural reality of the Nigerian people (Olorunleke & Ahmed, 2019). Thus, making Nigeria to be widely known as a Nations that loves football though men's football often receives most of the attention and support from various agencies in the country.

Moreover, history of Nigerian football shows that there is difference between men's and women's football. Akubueze (2018), states that men's football has benefited from decades of structured leagues which have produced dedicated fan bases, and strong media coverage dating back to the mid-20th century, women's football emerged much later and has had to contend with cultural stereotypes that reduced support from institutes in the face of societal resistance. Yet, in spite of these obstacles, Nigerian women have made outstanding strides in the football world. In the notion of Alegi (2010), the Super Falcons of Nigeria have dominated African women's football for over a decade, still winning numerous continental titles and consistently qualifies for global world cup. However, Ajibua et al. (2013), noted that even with all of these remarkable accomplishments from Nigerian women football they are yet to gain media attention and befitting recognition.

According to Akubueze (2018), grassroots football through local leagues which have led to and nurturing of talent that has encouraged more girls to participate. However, gender deeply rooted in the Nigerians football landscape. In the postulations of Ogunyemi (2021), media if more dedicated to covering men's football and many times overlooks the successes of female players performing very well. Also, when there are sponsorship and funding opportunities for teams it often flows in a disproportionate manner where men team receives a huge chunk of such support leaving women's football with limited resources, poor facilities, and fewer developmental opportunities (Okwuchukwu, 2019). These differences are rigid through the cultural practice among people in the country.

Furthermore, Nwaoboli (2023) observes that national television stations coverage gives more attention to men's football, when the women football is not given such attention on media coverage it often shapes public perspective to regard men football and leaves women football at a stagnated state. Even though women's football is gaining momentum globally, Nigeria still struggles with biases that limit women's recognition within the sport (Yar'Adua et al., 2023).

Similarly, for trust to be built on Nigerian women league as experienced with men football, media exposure has a critical role of building trust and making the public become interested in women football as they do in men football. However, such have not been experienced within the Nigeria. Okoro and Nwafor (2020) report that major Nigerian newspapers consistently foreground men's football and leaves women's matches with little to no coverage. This imbalance extends to broadcast media as explained by Odeku et al, (2019) where men's games typically receive live coverage, extensive commentary and before the match and after the match discussions also, reviews are received during the match and long after the match media outlets still gives room for review. In contrast, women's football is only mentioned briefly in the sports roundup and sometimes it is ignored entirely.

More also, the manner in which journalist presents media information causes gender disparities in Nigeria football. Olorunleke and Ahmed (2019) found that sports journalists often shows men's football as more competitive, while women's football is treated as less important. Such portrayals influence how audiences perceive the value of women's sports.

This has reflected in his television stations presents football news, Nwaoboli (2023) reported that NTA Benin city airing of football news was more focused on men's sport and it does in any way consider some football.

Away from visibility, sponsorship issues often affect football between women and men. In Nigeria, financial support for football is heavily skewed in favour of the men's category. Bodies and organizations channel their investments toward men's football because it attracts more publicity and is perceived as more commercially rewarding. According to Ogunyemi (2021), this lopsided investment trend places women's teams at a financial disadvantage, limiting their competitiveness within Nigeria and on the global stage (Yar'Adua et al., 2023).

This imbalance is not just a corporate issue; it is also reflected in institutional structures. Okwuchukwu (2019) noted that football authorities and league administrators routinely provide better facilities, equipment, allowances, and welfare support to men's teams. Meanwhile, women's teams are often left to cope with outdated training grounds, inadequate gear, and inconsistent funding. Such unequal treatment affects not only the performance of female athletes but also discourages younger girls who might otherwise aspire to a career in football.

Likewise, societal beliefs have shaped the experiences of women in Nigerian football. According to Okoro and Nwafor (2020), many Nigerians perceive football as a sport reserved for men, a belief rooted in long-standing patriarchal values that define gender roles and limit women's participation in physical and competitive activities. These cultural ideas have discouraged girls from engaging with the sport at an early age in Nigeria.

There are various stereotypes about women that affects how they are seen in football. Olorunleke and Ahmed (2019) note that female athletes are often judged through gendered assumptions that portray them as less capable than their male counterparts which have led to constant questioning of their skill and competitiveness. Even in while interacting in the communities women are often treated as weak and when they engage in anything that is not within the dictates of society women are perceived as deviating from what society expects.

II. Review of Literatures

2.1 Theoretical Underpinning

The paper adopts Agenda-Setting Theory. The theory was developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972). The theory argues that the media may not tell people what to think, but it tells them what to think about through the issues that are frequently covered in News reporting. McCombs (2004), posits that this salience issue in the media influences how public perceives issues that are important. When there is repeated emphasis, the media will shape the public agenda and guide listeners attention toward selected topics.

In addition, Rogers and Dearing (1988) expanded that agenda-setting occurs at multiple levels. In the first-level agenda-setting focuses on salience issues that often dominate the news, while the second-level of agenda-setting is concerned with how these saliencies are portrayed in news. These two dimensions work together to structure what public would understand about events and social problems (Yar'Adua et al., 2023). In the passage of time,

the public begins to prioritize issues that the media consistently projects, thus, believing them to be the most important matters in society.

Relating it to Nigeria, Okoro and Nwafor (2020) explained that Nigerian media frequently give too much attention to men's footballers, their tournaments, and club controversies, while women's football receives minimal coverage. This dis-equal emphasis sets a national agenda that elevates men's football as more newsworthy and cultural relevant to the country. Thus, the general public often follow these priorities displayed from the media, this confirms gender disparities in attention and support for football in Nigeria.

In relation to this study, media outlets repeatedly show men's matches, sponsorships, and achievements but scarcely report on women's football. Thus, audiences begin to perceive male football as more important and more valuable. This imbalance will not only affect how women football is viewed but also sponsorship decisions and societal attitudes toward female athletes (Okoro & Nwafor, 2020).

III. Methodology

The paper used Secondary data to source a wide range of existing materials, including peer-reviewed journal articles, textbooks, policy documents, official reports from sports bodies, media publications, and relevant online databases. In addition, archival materials such as newspaper reports, broadcast transcripts, and digital media content were consulted to provide insights into patterns of sports reporting and representation over time.

3.1 The Concept of Sport

Sport can be understood as any physical activity that is organized, guided by rules, and often competitive in nature. Essentially, it involves structured physical engagement which depends on skill, strength, and strategy. Beyond competition, sports offer recreation and serve as avenues for developing discipline, teamwork, and social values. Koivula (2019) explains that sports function as both physical and social practices shaped by rules that ensure fair play, enjoyment, and meaningful participation (Msughter et al., 2022).

Although many people associate sport with formal competitions, it also includes informal and non-competitive activities such as jogging, swimming, working out, or recreational games. These activities are tied to personal well-being, helping individuals maintain physical fitness, mental balance, and healthy lifestyles. Whannel (2011) describes sport as a socio-cultural institution that has continued to expand in relevance. According to him, the early decades of the twenty-first century witnessed rapid growth in team sports such as football, basketball, volleyball, hockey, baseball, tennis, and athletics which now play an influential role in the global economic and entertainment landscape (Oreoluwa et al., 2024).

Nwanne (2010) further emphasizes that sport refers to any physical activity governed by clear rules meant to promote fairness and discipline among participants. The existence of these rules makes the outcomes credible and allows both public and private organizations to reward excellence. This highlights the value placed on sports and the satisfaction derived from participation. Beyond physical benefits, sports encourage social interaction, unity, and intercultural understanding. They serve as platforms for entertainment, national representation, youth development, job creation, educational enhancement, and cultural promotion.

In Nigeria's National Sports Policy (2019), sport is defined as an organized physical and social activity undertaken for recreation, fitness, or competition. Historically, Nigerian communities and ethnic groups engaged in traditional competitive games long before colonialism. These informal activities gradually evolved into formal sports, especially after missionaries introduced structured sporting practices during the colonial period. Over time, both indigenous and modern sports developed under official bodies such as sports federations, sports councils, and ultimately the National Sports Commission, reflecting the growing significance of sport in Nigeria's socio-political and economic life.

3.2 The Concept of Gender Inequality

Gender inequality has continued to attract global attention for many decades, and the conversation has intensified as women across different societies still encounter structural, cultural, and institutional barriers that restrict their opportunities. According to Guanah and Nwabueze (2021), gender inequality is not just seen as a developmental challenge but as a violation of women's fundamental rights in societies where equal access to education, healthcare, employment, and leadership remains limited.

Over the years, several international charters and conventions such as African Charter on Human and People's Rights (1981), the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance (2001), NEPAD (2001), CEDAW (1979), and the landmark Beijing Conference of 1995 have attempted to address these issues of inequalities. Although these frameworks raised strong expectations for rapid progress, gender disparities remain deeply embedded in many social systems. This makes it difficult to undo the layers of inequality that has been built over generations (Aondover et al., 2024).

More also, certain authors have explained why gender inequality continues to persist regardless of efforts taken globally to address this challenge. Rukhshanda et al. (2017) describe it as a systematic denial of opportunities based on gendered norms, and norms in society have been made strong over time through stereotypes, prejudice expressed in cultures. Linda (2016) adds that gender roles are shaped by the cultural and social environments in which people grow, indicating that these roles are learned behaviours rather than biological traits. Within African societies, this reality becomes even more pronounced.

Evwierhoma (2019) notes that men are frequently positioned as the "norm," while women are treated as secondary across various institutions, including education, the family, labour markets, and governance structures. Also, when women deviate from traditional roles or pursue activities considered "masculine," often attracting criticism or social resistance. Furthermore, Guanah et al. (2018) observe that Nigerian media outlets are often more eager to celebrate male achievements while paying little attention to women's contributions in different fields. This selective visibility contributes to the symbolic marginalisation of women and reinforces public perceptions that portray men as more capable or deserving of recognition.

These issues become even clearer when examined within the context of sports, especially football. In Nigeria, football is widely perceived as a male domain, rooted in long-standing beliefs that physically demanding and competitive activities are more suitable for men. Amara and Odu (2019) highlight how these cultural assumptions discourage many young women from participating in football or pursuing it professionally. Institutional structures add to this challenge. Studies by Sarabi et al. (2025) show that female athletes often struggle with inadequate facilities, limited financial support, fewer training opportunities, and minimal

professional recognition. This inequality in support and access creates a recurring cycle where women's effort are continuously devalued. In summary gender inequality have affected women in communities from reaching their high potentials due to a preconceived idea of norms dictated from practices of held on in eras where modern development has not occurred.

3.3 Perspectives on Media Coverage

Media coverage refers to the level of attention, interpretation, and overall visibility that mass media organizations give to people, events, and issues. Within the sporting arena, it encompasses the different ways information about athletes, competitions, and sports-related developments is shared through television, radio, newspapers, online outlets, and social media platforms. As noted by Eze and Oboh (2021), audiences rely heavily on media institutions to stay informed about sporting activities, making media coverage a crucial driver of sports awareness and public involvement. In Nigeria, the particularly in regions such as Delta State, the way the media chooses to highlight sports has a significant influence on how communities engage with and support athletic activities (Msughter & Abba, 2021).

Rather than merely reporting what happens on the field, the media actively shape the meaning and significance of sports through the narratives they construct. Ibekwe (2022) points out that frequent and consistent reporting can boost visibility for emerging athletes, strengthen fan loyalty, and sustain long-term public interest. Adeola and Okeke (2020) similarly argue that the media not only celebrate achievements but also draw attention to systemic issues such as inadequate funding, policy lapses, and infrastructural needs. Through these agenda-setting functions, the media help determine which sporting matters are perceived as important and which one's fade into the background.

However, evidence consistently shows that the distribution of media attention is far from equal. Research in sports communication reveals that media organizations often replicate existing social imbalances in their reporting patterns. Cooky and Antunovic (2020) observe that women's sports remain significantly underrepresented in media narratives. Smith and McCarthy (2022) argue that this trend has endured for several decades with minimal improvement. In many cases, female athletes are framed in ways that downplay their professionalism coverage frequently emphasizes their physical appearance or personal stories rather than their performances and skills (Aondover et al., 2022).

These patterns indicate that media coverage is a selective and value-laden process shaped by institutional routines, cultural stereotypes, and commercial priorities. Pérez et al. (2024) contend that biased reporting has wider consequences, particularly for women in sports who struggle with limited sponsorship, reduced career opportunities, and inadequate public recognition. Similar challenges have been documented in other global contexts, including Turkey, South Asia, and parts of Europe, where gendered framing continues to undermine equitable representation in sports media.

In response to issues of bias and representational gaps, scholars increasingly highlight the importance of media literacy. Arik and Arik (2021) argue that media literacy equips audiences with the skills to question and analyze how sports stories are assembled, helping them detect bias and challenge the narratives that shape public opinion. Within the sports environment, media literacy promotes critical engagement and encourages more inclusive interpretations of women's and men's athletic experiences. Studies by Galli et al. (2021)

further show that media-literate audiences are more likely to demand fairer representation and resist stereotypical portrayals.

The concept of media coverage recognizes the media as both an information provider and a powerful cultural institution that shapes attitudes toward sports. In Nigeria, including Delta State, the level and nature of media attention influence which sports thrive, the type of athletes who gain recognition, and how resources are distributed. At the same time, persistent inequalities in the way sports are reported highlight the urgent need for more balanced, representative, and inclusive coverage that reflects the diversity of sporting experiences across gender lines (Aliyu et al., 2023).

3.4 Benefits of Sports Media Coverage in Society

Sports and the media share a deeply connected relationship, each shaping and supporting the other in significant ways. As Beck and Bosshart (2013) point out, media coverage influences athletes, sports teams, fans, and even the business community. One of the most obvious benefits is entertainment. Through television, radio, online platforms, and print media, people can enjoy the excitement of sporting events no matter where they are. This accessibility allows sports to reach a much wider audience than would ever be possible in physical stadiums.

In addition, media often affects public perception. Nwaobli (2023), noted that beyond showcasing live matches, it provides updates, analyses, interviews, and commentaries that help audiences understand what is happening in the sports world. At the same time, media coverage subtly shapes people's ideas about gender roles and identities. Pedersen (2013) notes that sports are often presented within male and female categories, reinforcing long-standing assumptions tied to hegemonic masculinity. These portrayals influence how society views male and female athletes.

Sports media also helps create role models. Popular athletes such as Austin "Jay-Jay" Okocha, Kylian Mbappé, and Nwankwo Kanu often become symbols of excellence and inspiration for young people who admire their skill and aspire to achieve similar success (Nwaobli, 2023). These public figures help shape values such as discipline, perseverance, and teamwork.

Economically, the media is a powerful engine that drives growth in the sports industry. Large sporting events benefit tremendously from media exposure, which boosts ticket sales, merchandise, sponsorships, and advertising. Media companies themselves also profit from owning broadcasting rights to major events like the Olympic Games, which generate substantial revenue (Beck & Bosshart, 2013). In this sense, sports and media feed into each other: the more coverage sports receive, the more the industry expands. Media coverage also serves an educational purpose. It teaches viewers the rules of various sports, promotes sportsmanship, and exposes audiences to diverse cultures and values. For many people, watching sports provides a temporary escape from stress, offering excitement, joy, and a sense of shared accomplishment.

Beyond personal benefits, sports media strengthens national identity. Kösebalaban (2004) explains that during international tournaments, media narratives help people build a sense of belonging and distinguish between "us" and "them." In the analysis of Turkish media coverage during the 2012 FIFA World Cup, for example, national pride and cultural identity were strongly emphasized. Sports media therefore helps foster unity, pride, and collective

memory. While it is true that media coverage is not always balanced, yet the influence remains positive as it promotes cultural values, and present social issues. It also aids the expansion of sports industry and keeps the viewers informed on trending news as Beck and Bosshart (2013), asserts that sports media is an important part of modern life that cannot be ignored as it is both entertaining and educative.

3.5 Sponsoring and Funding

Sponsorship and funding are essential in the growth of football in Nigeria. It influences almost every aspect of the game from the quality of coaching to media exposure and to how players are developing in the long-term. Nevertheless, sponsorship opportunities in Nigerian men and women footballs are imbalance which is encoded into the deep-rooted cultural practices in the country. For decades, men's football has attracted the lion's share of financial backing from both the government and private sector. This dominance is largely tied to the historic popularity of male competitions, which consistently draw larger crowds and yield higher commercial value. Aderemi and Ede (2021) explains that organizations which invest in sports often channel their resources toward activities that promises visibility and high returns. Because men's football has long been entrenched as the country's most marketable sport, it has become the preferred arena for sponsorships both from government funding, and private investment (Oreoluwa et al., 2024).

However, within the women's football in the country the narrative is different. Noted that women's team have gained great fit and perform more than the male teams even in international games, yet many investors still view women's' football as a place where low revenue is generated. Ogunyemi (2022) explains that this perception has allowed certain sponsors to cease their support leaving the women's' football team in Nigeria to experience less funding opportunities. This have made women's' football to struggle with irregular salaries for players and their training facilities becomes poorly equipped as there is minimal endorsement deal for the team and players.

The funding gap is also shaped by societal beliefs about gender and athleticism. Football in Nigeria has traditionally been framed as a male-oriented sport, and these cultural assumptions influence how value is assigned within the industry. Ajibade and Adeola (2023) argue that corporate sponsors often assume that men's competitions naturally attract more interest, leading them to focus their investments accordingly. This culturally influenced perception creates a cycle in which women's football is undervalued, receives limited media coverage, and fails to attract sponsorship further reinforcing the belief that it is less profitable.

Global studies show that this challenge is not unique to Nigeria. Cooky and Antunovic (2020) highlight that women athlete worldwide frequently receive insufficient sponsorship because media portrayals often downplay their achievements or shift attention to personal and aesthetic narratives. Smith and McCarthy (2022) add that such skewed representation reduces the commercial appeal of women athletes, making corporate brands more hesitant to invest. In Nigeria, this pattern is visible in the rarity of high-profile endorsement deals for female footballers and the limited financial partnerships supporting the women's league (Vitalis et al., 2023).

Institutional issues within sports governance further complicate the funding landscape. Bureaucratic inefficiencies, irregular league scheduling, and unclear financial frameworks often undermine the development of women's football. Okorie (2021) notes that women's teams frequently face delays in receiving allocations or logistical support, partly due to administrative

instability within sporting bodies. In contrast, men's football tends to receive priority in the distribution of resources and administrative attention, reinforcing long-standing inequalities.

The rise of digital media has created new channels for sponsorship, particularly through online engagement and personalized branding. However, Salami and Uzor (2024) observe that these opportunities mostly benefit individuals or teams with large digital followings—an area where male footballers have a significant advantage due to their existing visibility. Because women's football receives less media exposure, female players often have fewer online followers and consequently attract fewer digital sponsorship deals.

The structure of sponsorship and funding in Nigerian football is shaped by a combination of commercial expectations, cultural ideologies, media patterns, and institutional practices. While men's football continues to enjoy robust and consistent financial support, women's football remains underfunded despite its proven potential and success. Closing this gap will require targeted policies, intentional investment, equitable media coverage, and sustained institutional commitment to supporting the women's game.

IV. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that although football occupies a central place in the cultural, social, and economic life of Nigeria, the structure and practice of the sport remain deeply gendered. While men's football continues to dominate media narratives, attract substantial sponsorship, and enjoy institutional support, women's football operates within a system marked by marginal visibility, limited funding, and persistent cultural bias. These disparities exist despite the outstanding achievements of Nigerian female footballers, whose successes at continental and global levels have not translated into commensurate recognition or investment. The paper highlights a contradiction between performance and reward, where merit alone is insufficient to overcome entrenched gender hierarchies.

Based on the Agenda-Setting Theory, the paper argues that the media play a decisive role in sustaining this imbalance. By consistently prioritizing men's football in news coverage, live broadcasts, and analytical discourse, media institutions shape public perception, reinforce the notion of male football as more valuable, and indirectly influence sponsorship flows. This pattern not only limits the visibility of women's football but also weakens its commercial appeal, creating a cycle in which low coverage leads to low investment and vice versa. Furthermore, deeply rooted societal beliefs about gender roles continue to discourage female participation and diminish the perceived legitimacy of women in competitive sports.

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