

HOW ARE JOURNALISTS WRITING ABOUT ABORTION?

A MEDIA MAPPING ON THE
COVERAGE OF ABORTION IN THE
MEDIA IN WEST AFRICA.



AUGUST 2021 - MAMA NETWORK



AUGUST 2021

How are journalists writing about abortion in West Africa?

The portrayal of abortion in the media plays a critical role in public perceptions of this topic and can therefore have significant public and political impact. News coverage on reproductive health can shape public debate and push for progressive policy agendas. Research has shown that abortion is often portrayed in highly stigmatised, and often inaccurate ways by the media. Due to the breadth of influence held by the media, sexual and reproductive health advocates should harness a strong relationship with the media, and use the media as a tool to further abortion advocacy and gain public support. There is currently very little research on how news outlets portray abortion, with most existing research focusing on the Global North. In 2020, MAMA Network, along with several partners, embarked on a project to explore the coverage of abortion in the media in West Africa.

We would like to thank Kassandra Messier, MSc(c), Cambridge Reproductive Health Consultants, Cambridge, MA, USA, and Angel M. Foster, DPhil, MD, AM, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON, Canada for the support on the research for this project.

Importance of Framing

The ways that abortion is portrayed in the media has a profound impact on the way that society perceives abortion, and therefore has political and social consequences. Framing is the way that a topic is discussed, it outlines the boundaries of a debate, provides the language used to understand a topic and sets the agenda (1). Frames are the meanings that we put into a topic, based on a specific socio-cultural context, that determines which ideas are more legitimate and sensible than others (2). The media plays a significant role in determining the frames used to describe a topic, by highlighting certain elements of reality while keeping others out.

Research has shown that the more news coverage there is on a specific issue, the more the public perceives its importance (3). News coverage is one of the most powerful influences on public opinion, and, by extension, national and local policy agendas. Analysing the media enables us to consider the interactions between media representations of abortion and normative understandings and attitudes around the topic. Examining media constructions of abortion not only enables us to identify emerging public discourse, and identify specific frames that contribute to the stigmatisation or normalisation of abortion, but is also crucial in understanding its impact on the public, including policy makers and healthcare providers.

The media can be an incredibly useful resource for social movements, as it has the capacity to influence social perceptions and political decisions. By having publicity on mainstream media, it is possible to expand the debate around an issue, energise a movement by raising awareness of an issue and mobilising a population, and increase the movement's legitimacy and recognition in the political sphere (4). Proponents of reproductive rights can benefit from forming connections with stakeholders in the media, in order to counteract stigmatising discourses and change the framing of abortion, as well as use the media as a platform to put political pressure. Public discourse on abortion can affect the political environment for abortion, as it plays a role in shaping the way that policymakers understand the issue.

Representations of Abortion in the Media: Previous Research

The media has an important responsibility to provide accurate, nuanced, and unbiased information to the public. Yet research has shown us that abortion is to a large extent portrayed in simplistic, and often inaccurate and misguided ways by the media. Despite abortion being a common and necessary healthcare service, the media often centres the social and political conflict that surrounds the issue of abortion. By centring political opinions and attempting to avoid bias, the media reinforces the polarising debate on abortion, emphasising disagreements in public opinion and thus including stigmatising and inaccurate information on abortion. Abortion in the media is often sensationalised, written about only in extreme cases and in ways that are highly emotional and value laden. It is also often written about as something unusual, dangerous, and traumatic, by emphasising the risk and suffering that people who have abortions go through (5). In doing so, abortion is framed in highly negative ways, reinforcing stigma and putting judgement and moral responsibility on the abortion-seeker, rather than focusing on the political responsibility for public health

Most of the research done on media representations of the media centre Anglophone contexts, specifically the United States and United Kingdom (6). This research has shown that media representation in these contexts over-emphasise the risks and complications of abortion; share false or misleading information on the demographics, safety, and outcomes following abortion. The media around abortion often lacks women's perspectives, and lack of real abortion experiences. The media often uses stigmatising language and images, that are emotionally triggering and portray abortion seekers as well as providers in a negative light. Furthermore, there is a tendency to focus on abortion as a controversial moral, religious, or legal issue, and rarely include facts that would help the public understand abortion as a safe and common healthcare service. Such information and representations of abortion contributes to public perceptions, health policy interventions, and anti-choice legislative interferences.

Such stigmatising discourse has political and social consequences, and allows the public to label abortion as a political and moral issue rather than a public health and human right issue. To counteract such stigmatising discourses, the media needs to reframe abortion and assure the public that abortion is common, and that people who have abortions are not a separate category of society but are 'normal people' accessing regular forms of healthcare and worthy of respect and care (7). It is crucial that abortion frame abortion as a necessary part of reproductive healthcare, and mobilise emotions such as compassion and solidarity. In doing so, the media can counteract the political narratives that aim to control women's reproductive lives and restrict abortion access. By framing abortion as a public health issue, and as a common occurrence, the public will gain understanding and support the socio-political changes that can positively influence people's health (8).

Media Coverage of Abortion in West Africa

A significant proportion of West Africans rely on journalism in receiving reliable information, regardless of the medium, highlighting the importance of credible, accurate, timely journalism in shaping public perception (9). In the vast majority of African countries abortion is severely legally restricted. Despite these legal barriers, nearly 8.2 million abortions occur every year in the region, but only 1 in 4 are deemed safe. Even in countries where abortion laws are less restricted, many women are unable to access safe and legal care. Lack of awareness and knowledge among the public as well as health providers about the legal status of abortion and the existence of safe services drives this dynamic.

In 2020, MAMA Network and several partners conducted a media audit that aimed to generate knowledge of the West African media landscape and identify how the media is representing abortion. For the audit, 60 articles published between January 1 2015 and May 30 2020 were analysed. Most of these were newspaper articles but it also included editorials and special reports. The majority of articles originated of media outlets in African countries, with most of them coming from Nigeria, followed by Burkina Faso, Cameroon and Senegal. Some of the articles came from media outlets outside of the continent.

All the articles could be categorised as either being supportive of, or opposed to abortion rights and services. In articles that were classified as opposed to abortion, journalists commonly employed religious or moral language. For example, these articles used words such as "scandalous," "sins," "unconscionable," "vice," "anti-biblical," and "sacred". These articles also linked abortion to violence and trauma. In contrast, publications that were characterised as being supportive of abortion contained language rooted in academia, medicine, public health, and science. For example, terms like "foetus," "maternal mortality rates," and "sexual and reproductive health" appeared in almost all of these publications.

Articles that were categorised as being opposed to abortion often employed a religious, moral, or “traditional values” frame. Journalists also specifically deployed a frame pitting Western values and (neo)colonisation as in conflict with local norms. These publications consistently decried international non-governmental organisations and United Nations agencies as having population control as an ultimate goal, of which abortion was a tool. In contrast, articles that we categorised as supportive of abortion rights and services typically employed human rights and/or public health frames. Journalists writing these articles often incorporated women’s rights, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and fundamental human rights into their discussion of abortion rights and voiced the importance of valuing these rights.

In both categories, articles were laced with inaccurate information and misleading or false statistics. For example, articles arguing against abortion rights often reported exaggerated risks of using contraception or undergoing a safe abortion procedure. In contrast, articles arguing for abortion rights or the provision of safe abortion care often overestimated maternal mortality and unsafe abortion rates. Journalists appeared to use the information presented to dramatise the situation described in the article and create greater urgency. However, this type of coverage has the potential to spread and further entrench public misunderstandings of the safety of abortion and the consequences of unsafe abortion.

For both major categories of articles, journalists relied heavily on the opinions of professionals or people in power such as religious leaders, politicians, and physicians. Articles that were classified as being opposed to abortion drew heavily on the perspectives of religious officials and traditional community leaders. Articles that were categorised as being supportive of abortion rights and services drew largely from international scientific, research, or medical institutions, such as the Guttmacher Institute and the World Health Organisation. These articles also tended to incorporate statistics and public health indicators into their reporting, more specifically, the rates of unsafe abortion and the subsequent risks. Journalists involved with these articles also routinely quoted both international and local health care professionals, researchers, and advocates. Relatively few pieces in either category included personal abortion stories or the accounts of families and loved ones of abortion seekers. Both of the articles that did include personal testimony highlighted the dangers of unsafe abortion procedures. However, only one of these articles spoke of the greater social and public health implications.

The results of this study show that overall, there is a lack of coverage of abortion in West African media. An analysis of the 50 articles that were found over a 5-year-period show that articles were highly polarised reflecting different language, source materials, and frames. Overall, the articles portrayed abortion as a partisan and gendered issue, creating a narrative that abortion is a matter for public debate and not a critical and common health service.

Call to Action

Frame abortion as a healthcare service. This includes using evidence-based, up-to-date, accurate information from reliable sources. Rather than exaggerating the harms and discussing the controversy around abortion, the media should focus on criticising restrictive abortion laws and the lack of accountability to make abortions safe, forcing pregnant women to turn to life-threatening options.

Use stigma-free and accurate language & imagery. Language and images play a large role in framing public opinion. All abortion messaging should be accurate, clear and non-judgemental. Even where access to abortion is highly restricted it is not illegal to talk about abortion, or recognise that it is a common occurrence. Make sure the language and images you are using are not misleading and value laden.

Collaborate. Those working in abortion rights should consider working with the media to increase their technical knowledge of abortion and promote evidence-based reporting. Advocates of abortion rights would also benefit from identifying and lifting up the voices of local experts, including researchers and decision-makers. International non-governmental organisations and international agencies should work with local partners to identify and support credible carriers of key messages. Identifying local community leaders, including progressive religious leaders, and incorporating information about how safe abortion care is compatible with local beliefs and practices may also be a powerful strategy for combatting anti-abortion framing in media outlets while centring local voices.

Centre women's perspectives. Media coverage should reflect the complexities and diversity of abortion experiences, showing that abortion is common and that there is no one single abortion story. This includes ensuring that there is representation of women and people who have abortions as storytellers. Working with local women's organisations and other community groups to identify those who are willing to publicly share their stories could create new narrative frames. Abortion rights groups could also integrate ethical storytelling practices into their engagement with the media as a way of humanising and personalising the way that abortion laws, policies, regulations, and services impact women, girls, and pregnant people, as well as those that love them.

Combat misinformation. The media has a responsibility to provide factual, unbiased information. When it comes to abortion, that means ensuring that the language you use is clear and neutral, accurate, and non-judgemental. Ensure that the sources being used are reliable. Public health specialists and abortion rights advocates may be able to work with journalists who report on abortion to engage with more reliable sources of information and draw more appropriate and accurate inferences.

Research on abortion in the media. It is important to understand how journalists and media organisations select, shape, and present the news. More research should be conducted on media analysis, particularly in the Global South. It is important to understand how journalists and media organisations select, shape, and present the news.

References

1. Rohlinger, Deana A. 2002. 'Framing the Abortion Debate: Organizational Resources, Media Strategies, and Movement-Countermovement Dynamics'. *The Sociological Quarterly* 43 (4): 479-507.
2. Cullen, Pauline, and Elżbieta Korolczuk. 2019. 'Challenging Abortion Stigma: Framing Abortion in Ireland and Poland'. *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters* 27 (3): 6-19.
3. Rogers, Everett M., James W. Dearing, and Dorine Bregman. 1993. 'The Anatomy of Agenda-Setting Research'. *Journal of Communication* 43 (2): 68-84. Son, Young Jun, and David H. Weaver. 2006. 'Another Look at What Moves Public Opinion: Media Agenda Setting and Polls in the 2000 U.S. Election'. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 18 (2): 174-97.
4. Rohlinger, Deana A. 2002. 'Framing the Abortion Debate: Organizational Resources, Media Strategies, and Movement-Countermovement Dynamics'. *The Sociological Quarterly* 43 (4): 479-507.
5. Woodruff, Katie. 2019. 'Coverage of Abortion in Select U.S. Newspapers'. *Women's Health Issues* 29 (1): 80-86.
6. Conti, Jennifer A., and Erica Cahill. 2017. 'Abortion in the Media': Current Opinion in *Obstetrics and Gynecology* 29 (6): 427-30. Purcell, Carrie, Shona Hilton, and Lisa McDaid. 2014. 'The Stigmatisation of Abortion: A Qualitative Analysis of Print Media in Great Britain in 2010'. *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 16 (9)
7. Cullen, Pauline, and Elżbieta Korolczuk. 2019. 'Challenging Abortion Stigma: Framing Abortion in Ireland and Poland'. *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters* 27 (3): 6-19.
8. Coleman, Renita, Esther Thorson, and Lee Wilkins. 2011. 'Testing the Effect of Framing and Sourcing in Health News Stories'. *Journal of Health Communication* 16 (9): 941-54.
9. Ahinkorah BO, Seidu A-A, Mensah GY, et al. Mass media exposure and self-efficacy in abortion decision-making among adolescent girls and young women in Ghana: Analysis of the 2017 Maternal Health Survey. *PLOS ONE* 2020;15:e0239894.