

The Influence of Public Relations Strategies by Global Women Health, Rights and Empowerment Initiative in the Management of Gender Based Violence in Benue State

*Ndonima Uhwe Danjuma & Maria Okwoli**

Abstract

The study assessed the influence of Public Relations Strategies by Global Women Health, Rights and Empowerment Initiative in the management of gender Based violence in Benue State. The study evaluate the use of public relations strategies by GWHREI and its effects in the management of gender based violence in Benue state, Nigeria. The study was anchored on Agenda setting theory. This study employed survey as research design using interview guide schedule as data collection instrument on seventeen (17) purposively respondents. Findings revealed that GWHREI uses public relations strategies in Gender Based Violence management in Benue state; these include publicity, campaigns, rallies, sensitization, community relations, media relations, advocacy and counselling. Also, there are positive effects recorded by GWHREI in the application of public relation strategies in the management of gender based violence to include reduction of perpetrators in the state, legal support, continuous advocacy and commemoration of notable dates that address incidents of gender based violence has helped victims to speak out, regardless of how the society will look at them. The effect can also be seen in empowerment of victims who were identified during sensitization. The study concluded that if adequately utilized, public relations strategies can be an effective tool in the management of gender based violence in Benue State. It recommended among other things that Donors, government sectors and private bodies should channel more funds to enable GWHREI carry out more campaigns, more rallies and more advocacy programs on gender based violence for more positive results.

Key words. Public relations, Gender, Violence,

Introduction

In general, gender equality is not only misperceived but also hard to be accepted. Gender-based violence (GBV) is a serious international problem underpinned by unhelpful societal attitudes and myths (Ali, Boddy, O'Leary and Ewart, 2016). Gender-based violence recognizes harassment that is predicated on perceived gender identity. This type of harassment must be understood within the larger framework of gender-based discrimination and hatred, particularly against women (Nussbaum, 2010; Citron, 2014; Cross, 2014).

Gender based violence is a serious and widespread social problem with health, social, emotional, and economic consequences for victims and their families (Ellsberg, 2006; Heise, Ellsberg & Gottmoeller, 2002; Nakrey, 2013). In

*Ndonima Uhwe Danjuma Email: danjumandonimau@gmail.com

**Maria Okwoli, Benue State University, Makurdi. Email: omariah8@gmail.com

recent years, prevention approaches have evolved, from treating men simply as perpetrators of violence against women and girls or as allies of women in its prevention, to approaches that seek to transform the relations, social norms, and systems that sustain gender inequality and violence (Jewkes et al, 2015). Gender based-violence takes on many forms and can occur throughout a person's life cycle (Zainab Hawa Bangura, 2014), many experience multiple episodes of violence that may start in the prenatal period and continue through childhood to adulthood and old age. This approach to GBV helps us to understand the continuum of violence (Zainab Hawa Bangura, 2014) and its cumulative impact in terms of physical and mental health consequences for women and girls, boys and men. This shows that "mild" and severe forms of violence are part of the same continuum. Not only the most severe forms of violence are hurtful, but even more so the everyday presence of violence throughout a person's life.

Globally, it affects one in three women (WHO, 2013). It entails "physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life" (Article 1, United Nations (UN) Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women's, 1993), as well as sexual assault, rape, acid violence, female genital mutilation, dowry, family violence and human trafficking (Baker, 2007; Burgess, 2012; Chowdhury, 2007; Cole & Phillips, 2008). The perpetuation of gender violence is maintained by societal attitudes and values that disempower women, children and marginalised groups. Sustainable change to reduce and eliminate gender based violence therefore requires the transformation of societal attitudes in combination with policy and legal responses.

As such, the need to employ the right strategy to manage the issue becomes imperative; Public relations can serve as an effective tool in the management of gender based violence. In line with the assertion Ali et al (2016) opined that Public relations offers strategies that may create positive change in response to gender-based violence. It can be transformative in influencing people's attitudes and choices. To further buttress the above assertion public relations strategies have the potential to challenge these underlying attitudes and create positive change and action.

Global Women's Health, Rights and Empowerment Initiative (GWHREI), as a non-profit organization providing support to marginalized diverse groups of women, female sex workers among others. Whose main purpose is to mitigate the impact of stigma and discrimination towards the marginalized through provision of sexual and reproductive health care services and advocacy, gender based violence screening and access to legal services, as well as through skill empowerment programmes in order to reduce vulnerabilities. GWHREI should serve as communication manager, activist, expert prescriber and communication facilitator to keep advocating for it programme beneficiaries so as to mitigate the negative impact of gender based violence on the victims. This is central to the present study.

Statement of Problem

Gender based violence over the years has become an issue that has called for undivided attention globally. Public relations strategies can be used as an effective tool in facilitating community transformation on critical issues such as

gender based violence. Ali e'tal (2016) asserts that Public relations can be used by communities at grassroots, national and international levels as a tool to create discourses that challenge gender violence by using a variety of media including print, electronic, and social media.

Over the years in Benue State, gender based violence has done so much damages to the society which negatively affects the victims psychologically, physically, sexually, emotionally and can even lead to the death of the victim, this call for the intervention of well-meaning NGOs, agencies and the government. How well the concerned agencies, NGOs and the government employ public relations will go a long way in tackling issues relating to gender based violence. Asemah (2011) opines that Public Relations practice is strengthened by the mass media which help to accelerate the spread of ideas and increase the importance of public opinion by giving people access to new events and information.

Without the use of public relations strategies in curbing gender based violence in the state through advocacy, counseling, campaigns among others, there can be several dire consequences, as such, this study seeks to investigate the use of public relation strategies and it effects by Global Women's Health, Rights and Empowerment Initiative (GWHREI) in the control of incessant rate of gender based violence in Benue State.

1.1 Objectives of Study

The broad objective of this study is to assess the use of public relations strategies by GWHREI and its effects in the management of gender based violence in Benue state, Nigeria. The specific objectives are;

1. Identify the public relations strategies used by GWHREI in the management of gender based violence in Benue State.
2. Ascertain the effects of the use of public relations strategies by GWHREI in the management of gender based violence in Benue State.
3. Determine the constraints confronting the use of public relations strategies by GWHREI in the management of gender based violence in Benue State.

Theoretical Framework

The theory that provides the framework for this study is the Agenda Setting theory.

The Agenda Setting Theory

The agenda setting theory was propounded by Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw in 1972/1973 and assumes that the media set agenda for the public to follow. The theory holds that most of the pictures we store in our heads, most of the things we think or worry about, most of the issues we discuss in our society, are based on what we have read, listened to or watched in different mass media. The media make us to think about certain issues, they make us to think or feel that certain issues are more important than others in our society. The agenda setting theory argues that the media may not tell us what to think, but may tell us what to think about. The foregoing implies that the media play drums and when they play their drums we begin to dance to the tune of their music. Folarin (1998) posit that the agenda setting theory implies that the mass media pre-determine what issues are regarded as important at any given time in a given society.

Kuncik (1998, p.192) points out that opportunity for agenda setting by the media become enhanced when the structure of a society is in a state of flux. He further points out that appropriate procedures for examining agenda setting involves comparisons between media content over a certain period of time and the subject that most people in the society are discussing. As Marshall McLuhan (1968, p.204) concludes that the press can colour events by using them in a particular way or refusing to use them at all.

The relevance of the agenda setting theory to the study cannot be over-emphasized. The media generally set agenda for the people to follow and public relations strategies are not exclusive. What people think about in the society is based on the information conveyed to them through the media. Thus, there is the need to use public relations strategies through the media to set agenda for the people about gender based violence, which will in turn, make people to fight against it.

Review of literature

Gender Based Violence

The United Nations has identified gender-based violence against women as a global health and development issue, and a host of policies and public education programmes have been undertaken around the world that aim at reducing such gender-based violence (United Nations, 2016). This article highlights new conceptualizations, methodological issues, and research findings that can inform such activities, particularly with regard to intimate partner violence.

Gender-based violence against women is not to imply that women are never violent against men. The rates and forms of violence, including intimate partner violence, vary widely across cultures (Kishor & Johnson, 2004). In the United States, recent studies have reported that women and men commonly commit violent acts such as shoving, hitting, or throwing objects against each other, and have found little difference in prevalence rates for such acts by gender (Archer, 2002).

Gender shapes the meaning of violent acts differently for women and men, however, that meaning varies widely depending on the situational and cultural context. For example, severity of specific physical acts will be rated differently depending on whether or not the perpetrator of the act is male or female (Marshall, 1992). A full understanding of gender-based violence requires going beyond a focus on sex differences in rates and ratings of specific acts to examine how various aspects of gender shape the predictors, dynamics, and outcomes of violence for both women and men.

Interdisciplinary research will make critical contributions to this examination for it must take place on multiple levels. Psychological meaning of acts and experiences for the perpetrator, victim, and outside observer will reflect the situational, structural, and cultural context. In particular, the cultural discourse that justifies gender differences in social and economic status, objectifies women, and sexualizes violence needs to be incorporated in the analysis of the dynamics of gender-based violence. We highlight some of the elements of gender-based

violence that can differ for women and men, with our goal to encourage more complex, multilevel approaches in the study of how such violence is experienced in the lives of women and men (Marshall, 1992).

Gender-based violence against women should be taken as a reflection of the need to limit our scope and not as a dismissal of the importance of understanding how gender affects violence by and toward both women and men. Indeed, violence is an interpersonal behavior and both a stimulus as well as a consequence of interaction. A full understanding of gender's impact on violence against women requires considering women's behaviors toward their partners as well, including their violent behaviors (Archer, 2002).

Gender-based violence against women has been defined as "any act that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life" (United Nations, 2016, Platform for Action D.112). This definition, which emerged from the 1995 United Nations Conference on Women in Beijing, represents an international consensus on how to conceptualize the dynamics of gender-based violence and encompasses child sexual abuse, coercive sex, rape, stalking, and intimate partner violence.

The term "gender-based" is used because such violence is shaped by gender roles and status in society. Gender-based violence against women does not encompass every violent act a woman may happen to experience (being threatened by a weapon during a robbery, for example). A complex mix of gender-related cultural values, beliefs, norms, and social institutions implicitly and even explicitly have supported intimate partner violence and provided little recourse for its victims (Koss, Bailet, & Yuan, Herrera, & Lichter, 2003; Koss, Goodman, Browne, Fitzgerald, Keita, & Russo, 1994; Russo, 2006). In particular, gender roles and expectations, male entitlement, sexual objectification, and discrepancies in power and status have legitimized, rendered invisible, sexualized, and helped to perpetuate violence against women.

Recognizing Gender-Based Violence as a Problem

One of the ways that gender has differentially shaped the meaning of violent acts by women and men is by differentially conferring legitimacy on male violence against women. With legitimacy has come invisibility for the victims (Keller, 1996; Stark, Flitcraft & Frazier, 1978). Marriage as social institution has come under particular scrutiny for providing men an entitlement to batter and rape their wives and providing legitimacy for their actions (Finklehor & Yll'o, 1985). Ironically, it was not until the late 1980s that intimate violence became identified as the leading public health risk to adult women by the surgeon general of the United States (Koop, 1985). The invisibility of male violence against women is truly remarkable given its pervasiveness and profound health, social, and economic consequences.

With the rise of what has become a global women's movement, the legitimacy and invisibility of such violence became challenged. Today, male gender-based violence against women is globally recognized as a health, economic development, and human rights concern (Amnesty International, 2004; World

Health Organization, 2004). Yet, in many parts of the world, such violence continues to be viewed as a private matter and is implicitly—indeed, sometimes, explicitly—condoned.

Around the world, girls and women continue to experience gender-based violence over the life cycle in homes, schools, churches, workplaces, the streets and even therapeutic settings (Heise, Ellsberg, & Gottemoeller, 2018). A recent transnational review of population-based survey data found the lifetime proportion of women experiencing physical assault by an intimate partner to range from 10% to 69% (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002).

In the United States, the National Violence Against Women Survey estimated one out of five (22.1%) women to be physically assaulted in their lifetime, and one in 13 (7.7%) to be raped by an intimate partner. An estimated 1.3 million women experienced physical assault and more than 201,394 women had experienced rape at the hands of an intimate partner in the previous year (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Intimate partner violence has been the most common source of injury to women in the ages of 15 to 44 years, more frequent than muggings, auto accidents, and cancer deaths combined (Dwyer, Smokowski, Bricout, & Wodarski, 1995). Physical assault against both married and unmarried women has been a widespread problem, crossing racial, sexual orientation, age, and socioeconomic lines (Koss, 1988).

Research Methodology

The study employed the survey method as research design to collect data. The population of study for this work is the staff of Global Women's Health, Rights and empowerment initiative (GWHREI) which according to GWHREI Annual report 2021 stands at seventeen (17). The study employed the interview guide schedule to elicit the relevant information from 5 staff of Global Women's Health, Rights and empowerment initiative (GWHREI), selected through purposive sampling.

Presentation of Results

Data presented and analysed were based on 100% retrieval rate. The data collected for the study were presented and analysed in the context of the thematic issues in the research objectives.

This section presents and analyzes the responses generated from the interview conducted with the selected staff members of Global Women's Health, Rights and Empowerment Initiative (GWHREI).

Ways GWHREI has utilized public relations strategies in managing cases of gender based violence in Benue State.

In answering this interview question, responses from the interviewees indicate that there are different public relations strategies through which GWHREI did manage gender based violence in Benue State. In her statement, interviewee 1 said the NGO use media outlets such as radio and television stations were also found useful in the dissemination of information on the negative effects of gender based violence and remind the perpetrators of this act of the consequences if apprehended. GWHREI also use campaigns, Performing arts, rallies and reports as strategies in the fight against gender based violence.

On same subject matter, interviewee 2 said GWHREI use social media to publish educative contents that will open the eye of the society on the evil of gender based violence (this can run through the use of hashtag most times which has yielded positive result, these contents gives our audience adequate knowledge of gender based violence so they can report a perpetrator to the right bodies. She further said the NGO engage in community relations where GWHREI organize event with the community and discuss issues of Gender based violence. Lastly, the respondent stated that the NGO create awareness where they sensitize the public on the harm of gender based violence.

In responding to this interview question, interviewee 3 was of the opinion that GWHREI uses flyers that contain pictorial explanation on the negative effects on victims and how the society should frown at such act, the NGO also use Posters to pass message on the subject matter. In same vain, interviewee 4 opined that GWHREI partners with media houses and organizations of like interest. She said in cases of media houses, the NGO send in programs and representatives such as the gender officer and the public relations officer participate in discussion programs on air. Also, they have endorsed organizations in motion by drafting press statements, communiqué that helps to reach the government parastatal

Lastly, interviewee 5 asserted that GWHREI advocates for victims of gender based violence by supplying legal support and as well counsel the victims to help deal with post traumatic disorders and help them handle discrimination and victimization to their own advantage.

Following the responses on the use of public relations strategies by GWHREI in gender based violent management in Benue State to include publicity, campaigns, rallies, sensitization, community relations, media relations, advocacy and counselling.

The results recorded by GWHREI in its use of public relations strategies in Gender based management in Benue State.

In response to the interview question concerning results recorded by GWHREI in its use of public relations strategies in gender based violence management in Benue, interviewee 1 said this can be seen in reduction in perpetrators of gender based violence in the state, victims now get litigations services as GWHREI supplies them with lawyers who offer pro bono services.

The positive effect can as well be seen in cases where victims of gender based violence have voice; some victims now speak out without the fear of stigmatization. “With the aid of sensitization, commemoration of notable dates and advocacy, victims are properly equipped with knowledge of human rights, as such they have confidence to open up to the concerned bodies”. Said interviewee 2.

To further expatiate on the effects of public relations strategies used by GWHREI in the management of gender based violence, interviewee 3 was of the opinion that there are positive effects recorded by GWHREI in the management of gender based violence in Benue State, this is evident in the creation of channel to report gender based violence and also has strengthened addressing interpersonal violence in particular against women and girls in the state. Interviewee 4 in her words opined that one of the effects can be seen in the victims empowered through

some skill acquisition programs organized by some donors for survivors of gender based violence to inculcate self-worth and esteem.

It can be deduced from the above that there are positive effects recorded by GWHREI in the application of public relation strategies in the management of gender based violence to include reduction of perpetrators in the state, legal support, continues advocacy and commemoration of notable dates that addresses incidents of gender based violence has helped victims to speak out, has and some victim's confidence to speak out regardless of how the society will look at them. The effect can also be seen in empowerment of victims who were identified during sensitization.

The barriers that hinder the use of public relations strategies by GWHREI in managing gender based violence cases in Benue State

Responding to the constraints confronting the use of public relations strategies by GWHREI in gender based management in Benue State interviewee 1 enumerated the constraints to include inadequate funds to conduct more campaigns, rallies and seminars, especially in local languages to reach wider target audience as many victims resides in the rural areas) also access to the target audience as many of the victims resides in rural areas. Further identifying the barriers that hinders the use of public relations strategies by GWHREI in the management of gender based violence in Benue State, interviewee 2 was of the opinion that refusal by some victim's family to carry out law suit against perpetrators due to threats by the perpetrators.

According to interviewee 3 some victims still find it stigmatizing to tell their own story despite the sensitization and awareness creation by GWHREI, this is due to societal and cultural norms; not to stain the name of the family in society and how they might be perceived in the end.

Based on the foregoing, it can be surmised that there are constraints affecting the use of public relations strategies by GWHREI in managing gender based violence in Benue State include inadequate funds, difficulty in accessing audience in rural areas, refusal of some victim's families to carry out law suit against perpetrators due to threats by perpetrators.

Conclusion

If adequately utilized, public relations strategies can be an effective tool in the management of gender based violence in Benue state. This is evidence in the role of a public relations officer of every organization to be a communication manager who organize and integrate communication activities, or they can be communication technicians who primarily write and construct messages.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made.

Adequate funding: Donors, government sectors and private bodies should channel more funds to enable GWHREI carry out more campaigns, more rallies and more advocacy programs on gender based violence for more positive results.

Also adequate fund will enable GWHREI engage interpreters of these local dialects for more effective communication with the target audience.

Sufficient funds will aid GWHREI pay for more time in broadcast stations, and messages will be disseminated in diverse Benue languages.

More effort by GWHREI in educating the victims on their civil rights:

According to findings, GWHREI is faced with the challenge of refusal by some victim's family to carry out law suit against perpetrators due to threats by the perpetrators, the NGO should educate the masses on the danger of such act, putting into consideration the victim's human right and the fact that no man is above the law. GWHREI should also assure them of safety and also provide safe spaces for survival of gender based violence who suffers eviction by their families for insisting to continue with law suit.

References

- Asemah, E. (2011). *Understanding public relations*. Jos: Great Future Press.
- Amnesty International (2004). *It's in our hands: Stop violence against women*. Osney Mead, Oxford, United Kingdom: Alden Press.
- Archer, J. (2002). Sex differences in physically aggressive acts between heterosexual partners: A meta-analytic review. *Aggressive and Violent Behavior*, 7, 313–351.
- Baker, C. N. (2007). The Emergence of Organized Feminist Resistance to Sexual Harassment in the United States in the 1970s. *Journal of Women's History*, 19(3), 161-233.
- Bowen, S. A., Rawlins, B. L., & Martin, T. M. (2010). *An overview of the public relations function*. New York: Business Expert Press.
- Burgess, G. L. (2012). When the personal becomes political: using legal reform to combat violence against women in Ethiopia. *Gender, Place and Culture*, 19(2), 153.
- Chowdhury, E.H. (2005). Feminist negotiations: Contesting narratives of the campaign against acid violence in Bangladesh. *Meridians*, 6(1), 163-224.
- Chowdhury, E. H. (2007). Negotiating State and NGO Politics in Bangladesh: Women Mobilize Against Acid Violence. *Violence Against Women*, 13(8), 857-873.
- Cole, S., & Phillips, L. (2008). The Violence Against Women Campaigns in Latin America: New Feminist Alliances. *Feminist Criminology*, 3(2), 145-168.
- Cross, K. A. (2014). Ethics for cyborgs: On real harassment in an “unreal” place. *Loading...*, 8(13). Retrieved from <http://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/article/view/>
- Dwyer, D.C., Smokowski, P.R., Bricout, J.C. & Wodarski, J.S. (1995). Domestic Violence research: Theoretical and practical implications for social work. *Clinical Social Work Journal* 23, 185–198.
- Ellsberg, M. (2006). Violence against women and the millennium development goals: facilitating women's access to support. *International Journal of Gynaecology and Obstetrics*, 94(3), 325-332.
- Finkelhor, D. & Yllo, K. (1985). *License to rape: Sexual abuse of wives*. New York: Holt, Reinhardt, and Winston.
- Flood, M. (2011). Involving Men in Efforts to End Violence Against Women. *Men and Masculinities*, 14(3), 358-377.
- Goodman, L.A., Koss, M.P., & Russo, N.F. (1993). Violence against women: Physical and mental health effects. Part I: Research findings. *Applied & Preventive Psychology: Current Scientific Perspectives* 2, 79–89.

- Heise, L.L., Ellsberg, M., & Gottemoeller, M. (1999). Ending violence against women. *Population reports, Series L, 11*, 1–45: Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University School of Public Health, Population Information Program.
- Heise, L., Ellsberg, M., & Gottmoeller, M. (2002). A global overview of gender-based violence. *International Journal of Gynecology and Obstetrics*, 78(Suppl.1), S5-S14.
- Jewkes, R.; Flood, M.; Lang, J. (2016) *From work with men and boys to changes of social norms and reduction of inequities in gender relations: A conceptual shift in prevention of violence against women and girls*. Lancet.
- Keller, E. L. (1996). Invisible victims: Battered women in psychiatric and medical emergency rooms. *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic* 60, 1–21.
- Kishor, S., & Johnson, K. (2004). *Profiling domestic violence: A multi-country study*. Calverton, MD: ORC Macro.
- Koss, M.P. (1988). Women's mental health research agenda: Violence against women. *Women's Mental Health Occasional Paper Series*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Mental Health.
- Koss, M.P., & Heslet, L. (1992). Somatic consequences of violence against women. *Archives of Family Medicine* 1, 53–59.
- Koss, M.P., Bailey, J.A., Yuan, N.P., Herrera, V. M., & Lichter, E.L. (2003). Depression and PTSD in survivors of male violence: Research and training initiatives to facilitate recovery. *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 27, 130–142.
- Koss, M.P., Goodman, L.A., Browne, A., Fitzgerald, L., Keita, G.P. & Russo, N.F. (1994). *No safe haven: Male violence against women at home, at work, and in the community*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Marshall, L. L. (1992). Development of the severity of violence against women scales. *Journal of Family Violence* 7, 103–121.
- Tjaden, P., & Thoennes, N. (2000). Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence Against Women: Findings From the National Violence Against Women Survey, *Research in Brief; Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, NCJ 172837*.
- World Health Organization. (2004). *Putting women first: Ethical and safety recommendations for research on domestic violence against women*. Geneva, Switzerland: Department of Gender and Women's Health.
- World Health Organisation (WHO). (2013). Global and regional estimates of violence against women: prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence, Geneva, Switzerland. Retrieved on 25 July 2015 from http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/85239/1/9789241564625_eng.pdf?ua=1