

Strategic Digital Narratives? Analysis of a Zimbabwean Public Broadcaster's Gender Perspectives in the Coverage of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Facebook and X

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Abstract

During the onslaught of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe, local media outlets made strategic use of social media platforms, which presented appropriate spaces for the speedy relay of information on the pandemic. This study examines the gender dynamics evident in the online news coverage of COVID-19 by a public broadcaster in Zimbabwe on its Facebook page and X handle. Data were collected from 709 posts on these social media sites. The data were analyzed using quantitative descriptive statistics and thematic analysis in order to determine the gendered representation and communication patterns in the public broadcaster's risk and crisis communication on the pandemic on its social media sites. The findings of this research reveal significant gender disparities in these narratives. Results show a male-centric subject positioning in the narratives. Additionally, findings reveal other deeply gendered communication patterns, such as institutional paternalism and gendered narrative framing that portray male dominance in leadership and decision-making roles and a concentration of women in supporting roles or in vulnerable positions. This suggests the reinforcement of gender stereotypes in these narratives. There was, however, some depiction of female agency in some of the posts. These dominant patterns demonstrate how traditional gender hierarchies are reflected in these digital risk and crisis communication narratives. Yet, positive broadcasting during pandemics should make intentional efforts to promote reframed and empowering narratives of women. Any perpetuation of gender stereotypes limits the transformative potential that media outlets have to contribute to social change and gender equality. The study recommends the need for institutional policy reforms, comprehensive journalist training, and community engagement frame-

works within media outlets that are designed to encourage gender-inclusive risk and crisis communication practices during any pandemic.

Keywords

Gender Representation, Risk and Crisis Communication, COVID-19, Media Analysis, Zimbabwe, Social Media, Feminist Media Theory, Poststructural Feminism

1. Introduction and Context

In January 2020, the World Health Organization declared an ongoing outbreak of the novel coronavirus pneumonia called COVID-19 as a public health emergency (WHO, 2020). The pandemic emerged as an unprecedented global crisis that fundamentally altered social, economic, and political landscapes worldwide. As governments and institutions strategized to communicate critical health information and coordinate crisis responses, media organizations assumed pivotal roles in shaping public understanding and behavioral responses to the pandemic. At this time, reports on the pandemic dominated the news both globally and locally. By the end of January 2020, there were over 41,000 English-language news media reports on the COVID-19 pandemic that could be retrieved from Google by using the search word “coronavirus” (Liu et al., 2020). This pandemic was seemingly similar to the HIV scourge in that there was no known treatment for it, and it took some time before vaccinations were developed that could contain the spread of the virus. As in any risk and crisis situation, strategic communication became key to influencing the general public response to the pandemic, as it can be successfully used to encourage attitude and behavioural change, as well as contain fear. Strategic communication is defined as the purposeful use of communication by organizations to fulfil their missions (Thorson, 2013). Since it incorporates the interconnectedness of an organization, its messages and its stakeholders, social media platforms may be effectively used to create and publish knowledge and information about potential health and disease risks and interventions. Within the health context, strategic communication is significant as it allows for the optimum use of available resources to achieve the necessary social and behavioural change. It helps people implement positive and healthy behaviours that allow for prevention and control of the virus or disease, such as is the case with the COVID-19 pandemic.

All aspects of strategic communication have been affected by the digital evolution, which has proved to be a game changer in the ways in which organizations communicate with their respective stakeholders. Digital media platforms have encouraged the individualization of media channels and content. As such, various alternatives to traditional media are being adopted for storytelling, delivering messages, and connecting to people. The most remarkable of these options has been the arrival of social media, which is defined as “activities among people gath-

ered online who share information using conversational media that make it easy to create and share content in the form of words, pictures, videos and audios” (Welch et al., 2016). This type of media has transformed communication, especially in terms of how people are now networking on Facebook, sharing photos and videos on Instagram and YouTube, and microblogging on X, formerly Twitter (Walsh & O’Connor, 2019). Social media is not only used for networking purposes but also has become a strategic communication tool for the diffusion of news and information by the media, often in real time. The speed with which social media platforms are able to disseminate information has been particularly useful for the spread of risk messages in times of natural disasters or pandemics, including during the prevailing COVID-19 scourge.

Just as with many other broadcasts, the power relations within a society shape the news discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic, as there is a dialectical relationship between the two. Through text, graphics, and audio-visuals, mass media often depict the attitudes, emotions, and opinions of the type of society it writes about. As such, in patriarchal societies, news reports about COVID-19 are sometimes gender biased. This anomaly has been a great concern of many scholars (Hooghe & De Swert, 2009; D’Heer et al., 2019), since research shows the definitive lack of the female perspective in some news discourse, as well as the prevalence of gender stereotyping despite the changing roles of men and women in contemporary societies (D’Heer et al. 2019). Liu et al. (2020) assert that often it is men who are consulted in the news to provide an informative, authoritative perspective as spokespersons or experts, whereas women are usually referred to more for their personal perspectives as eyewitnesses. Their portrayal in the media is normally as part of the domestic or private sphere as opposed to men who are portrayed in the public spaces. This patriarchal structure indicative in the media negatively impacts gender equality. Yet mass media undoubtedly can play a significant role in influencing how society views gender roles, occupation, and personality characteristics.

Some developing African countries, Malawi being a case in point, have followed the global trend of embracing social media as key communication platforms. Zimbabwe is no exception (Mugari & Chen, 2020). The nation actually recognises online communication and media services as essential for the speedy access to information during this global health crisis. In 2020, the Government of Zimbabwe listed the internet as an essential broadcasting service (Government of Zimbabwe, 2020). Subsequently, there has been an upswing in the use of social media platforms dominated by WhatsApp, Facebook, X, and YouTube, amongst other platforms in the country, by both government and private organizations, including by the public broadcaster under study. A poll by Voice of Zimbabwe in 2018 established a phenomenal rise in the use of social media as news platforms, with 52.3% of Zimbabweans getting their news from WhatsApp, X, and Facebook (Sengere, 2018). The same study established that 32.5% of Zimbabweans think that social media is a reliable source of news. Consequently, Zimbabwean mainstream

media—the newspaper, radio, and television—have been outpaced by social media platforms, which have become indispensable alternative sources of information for Zimbabwean citizens (Nyoni, 2017). In light of this challenge, media outlets in the country, including ZBC, subsequently adopted social media platforms as strategic tools for both one-way and two-way communication with their stakeholders.

Significantly, social media is an appropriate platform for the dissemination of information and news content in risk and crisis situations like COVID-19. Despite some of the challenges of their use in these circumstances, such as information overload, misinformation, and possible panic, they have become useful communication tools because they provide for the prompt relay of information and fast response time. In risk and crisis health contexts, these interactive technologies have the advantage of immediacy of dialogic communication and are designed to raise the public's awareness of the pandemic and also of their vulnerabilities. Health experts are able to create risk and crisis messages that are tailored for protection against the virus, and reporters are easily able to speedily facilitate the online sharing of pertinent information and the exchange of ideas about the pandemic.

Ultimately, the strategic engagement of these digital technologies is important in saving lives. A very good example of this dialogic potential is how the Centre for Disease Control (CDC) in the U.S. relied heavily on social media to raise awareness about Hurricanes through the launch of the “Hurricane Tip of the Week” initiative, which had more than 1600 X followers. The CDC also used widgets for product recall of a salmonella peanut product that had 15.5 million views (Wendling, Radisc, & Jacobzone, 2013). Similarly, the Ministry of Health and Childcare in Zimbabwe posted daily COVID-19 updates and pertinent information on its Facebook page, which at the time the study began had 84,000 followers, and on its X handle, which had 169,300 followers. This proves that the use of social media in a crisis is an effective awareness-raising strategy. More significantly, since social media websites and applications are sophisticated sites of gender display and performance, these internet-based platforms offer media outlets spaces on which they may design and customise gender-sensitive risk and crisis communications on COVID-19 to target specific audiences.

Although the full impact of COVID-19, both globally and in Zimbabwe, is yet to be fully comprehended as there are many unknowns, the rapid and consistent reliance on the internet for information on the pandemic cannot be denied. What is also irrefutable is that women bear the brunt of the social and economic damages that are a result of the pandemic. African feminist scholars narrate the negative impact COVID-19 has had on women. Morgan Dadzie et al. (2021) highlight the disproportionate effect that the pandemic has had on indigenous African women's health and lives, which poses a threat to the advances made towards gender equality. Chigevenga et al. (2020) point out how the pandemic has been a double tragedy for women in Zimbabwe as it has negatively affected their lived experiences, especially in the high-density suburbs of the country. The economic downturn that

has resulted from the health crisis has mainly battered sectors where women's employment is concentrated, such as restaurants, retail, the hospitality and tourism industry, and health care. In addition, the pandemic has caused the closure of schools and early childhood centres in Zimbabwe, resulting in children having to stay at home and parents, especially mothers, having to provide the necessary childcare.

Jorge, Sarpong, and Nakagaki (2020) assert that COVID-19 has had a great impact on existing digital gender equality as women and girls in Southern Africa risk falling further behind as a result of the pandemic. They go on to suggest that since the expansion of digital transformation empowers those who have access to online spaces, the health crisis presents a unique opportunity for the shift in gendered narratives to standards that "enable and reflect genuine equality and inclusion on the internet" (Jorge, Sarpong, & Nakagaki, 2020: p. 2). This suggests that during pandemics, public broadcasters carry particular responsibilities for inclusive and equitable communication that serves diverse audience needs. In African contexts, however, these responsibilities are complicated by tensions between traditional gender roles and contemporary gender equality commitments. This requires the careful navigation of cultural sensitivities in news broadcasts, while promoting progressive social change.

Despite growing recognition of COVID-19's gendered impacts within the African continent, the gendered dimensions of risk and crisis communication during the pandemic have received limited scholarly attention, particularly in African media contexts where traditional gender hierarchies intersect with contemporary digital communication practices. In postcolonial contexts, most coverage of the pandemic has focused on government responses and biomedical information. In Zimbabwe in particular, there is a dearth of literature on how media outlets in Zimbabwe have used online spaces as platforms for gender-sensitive reporting during the pandemic. Local studies on media and COVID-19 that exist have, for example, focused on the economic impact of the health crisis on the print industry (Ncube, 2022), how traditional media, such as newspapers, have covered the pandemic (Roya & Ngcobo, 2022), and on the transformative potential of traditional media to counter hierarchical gender relations (Tshuma et al., 2022). This critical knowledge gap is particularly significant given the role public media plays in shaping societal discourse and the potential digital platforms have to either perpetuate or challenge gender stereotypes during risk and crisis communication. Therefore, using feminist media and poststructural perspectives, this study attempts to address this limitation by investigating whether the public broadcaster under study makes strategic use of social media platforms for gender-inclusive narratives on COVID-19. It explores the extent to which the discourse on these social media sites allowed spaces for women's voices. Such an exploration highlights the intersection of digital media, gender discourse, and public health communication in Zimbabwe. The primary research objectives of this study are to:

- 1) Analyze the nature of gender representation patterns evident in the public broadcaster's online news coverage of COVID-19 on its Facebook page and X

handle; and

2) Examine the amplification and visibility of women in these narratives.

The significance of this research is its contribution to an understanding of how media institutions can either perpetuate or challenge gender inequalities during crisis contexts. It has implications for media policy, journalism training, and crisis communication strategies across the Global South.

2. Theoretical Framework

The framework used for the analysis of data comprised two crucial theories, namely, Feminist Media Theory and the Poststructural Feminist Theory on language.

Feminist media theory is concerned with the fundamental issues of power, rights, values, and representation (Gallagher, 2014). In this study, it provides a framework for analyzing women's representation, voice amplification, and the gendered nature of news production. It is also used to examine both the presence and portrayal of women in the public broadcaster's media content and to assess its depiction of women's voices and agency through their roles as speakers, experts, and decision-makers.

The Poststructural Feminist theory on language is a perspective that specifies gender as a crucial variable in understanding language. There has been notable research done in this area of language and gender studies that includes works by well-known scholars, such as Lakoff (1973), Butler (1990), and Cowen and Montgomery (2020). They believe that linguistic imbalances should be studied, as language is quite instrumental to the maintenance of male dominance in society. These scholars assume that the way in which gender is entrenched in a language is related to societal gender equality. Significantly, adopting a poststructural feminist perspective of language functions to allow the researchers to develop a gender-sensitive interpretation of the narratives on the public broadcaster's social media platforms under scrutiny. It provides the necessary tools to analyze aspects of gender stereotyping, gender bias, and gender sensitivity in the news stories on the broadcaster's social media platforms under scrutiny. Such a position allows for the interrogation of the social constructions of male/female and masculinities/femininities dichotomies.

3. Methodology

3.1. Selection Criteria

The public broadcaster was chosen as the focus of this study because it has a significant domestic profile. Its Facebook page and X handle were selected because these platforms are two of the most popular and well-established social media platforms both locally and globally. At the time of the study, its Facebook page had approximately 727,781 followers and its X handle 546,000.

3.2. Research Design

A mixed-method approach was adopted in analyzing the online news reports on

COVID-19 on the public broadcaster's social media sites and within its editorial policy. Both quantitative statistics and qualitative semantic materials were used to complement each other. This allowed for a quantitative description of the number of written news reports, videos, and images of male and female experts and protagonists. The approach also enabled the researchers to connect the news text with the broad social background and explain the deep meaning and causal logic behind the quantitative data.

3.3. Data Collection

Data collection focused on the broadcaster's COVID-19 narratives on its Facebook and X handles. Since many legitimate sites, in particular search engines, use spidering as a way of providing up-to-date data, this study used focused crawling using Web Crawler technology to identify and collect news reports on COVID-19 from the public broadcaster's Facebook page and X handle. This collection of data provided the researchers with a large, virtually in-depth, and statistically significant data set, from which they were able to draw valuable conclusions on the public broadcaster's depiction of gender in its COVID-19 narratives. The researchers used a number of keywords to search for relevant data on both Twitter and Facebook search engines at different stages, such as "the public broadcaster's name", "COVID-19", "coronavirus", "pandemic", "lock-down", "female", "male", "men", "women", "he said", and "she said", which were included in the search. The retrieval time on both internet-based platforms was set to the period between 1 March 2020 and 31 December 2022. Each Facebook post and X tweet was one unit of analysis. The data was collected using different screening stages.

3.4. Sample Selection

The first stage applied a date range filter to retrieve the posts from each of the broadcaster's two social media sites, from which a total of 8314 units were retrieved (Facebook $n = 3057$ and X $n = 5257$). The next stage involved applying the COVID-19 relevance filter, which produced a total of 2167 units (Facebook $n = 972$; X $n = 1195$). The remaining dataset was further screened to remove those units without gender relevance and the daily statistics updates.

3.5. Sample Size

The final dataset included 709 social media units (Facebook $n = 295$; X $n = 414$) consisting of articles, images, or videos for full content review in order to extract information on gendered discourse. The units selected consisted of reports that showed men and women in their professional, personal, and social capacities. Content types included written posts, audios, images, videos, and links. To ensure coding reliability, the two researchers independently coded a randomly selected subset of posts using the study's gender narrative categories and gender-inclusive language cues. Disagreements were resolved through discussions, and

the reconciled coding was used for the final dataset. Gender was assigned from explicit textual references in the units, such as headlines and hashtags. For posts with images, gender was coded by what was observed and what is implied by the visual and its accompanying text. For videos, gender was assigned using spoken references in the clip, who is presented as an expert/protagonist, and the narrative focus. Some posts received multiple codes where more than one gender cue was present.

3.6. Data Analysis

Quantitative content analysis was combined with qualitative discourse analysis to examine women's presence and voice amplification, as well as the gender dimensions in the broadcaster's COVID-19 news coverage on its social media sites and within its Editorial Policy. The analysis employed systematic coding procedures to measure gendered representation patterns across subject identification, roles, narrative framing, and sectoral representation. This design enabled both systematic measurement of representation patterns and deeper exploration of narrative frameworks and meaning-making processes.

Qualitative analysis of the datasets from the social media sites used [Braun and Clarke's \(2014\)](#) thematic analysis framework to identify dominant themes concerning gendered representation narratives and communication patterns in the COVID-19 narratives. This news content analysis was conducted to identify the expert, protagonist, and gender equality indicators. The examination of the amplification and visibility of women was conducted through noting source frequency and subject positioning. This analysis of findings adopted the three key gender equality indicators that [Kassova \(2020\)](#) identifies, namely, women as sources of news expertise; news stories with women protagonists leading; and coverage of gender equality issues in the coronavirus news stories. The analysis process involved familiarisation with data, initial code generation, theme identification, theme review, and final theme definition. NVivo software facilitated the systematic coding and theme development processes. By examining both quantitative representation patterns and qualitative narrative frameworks, this study contributes to an understanding of how crisis communication can either perpetuate or challenge existing gender hierarchies.

4. Results and Findings

The following descriptive statistics and themes emerged from the analysis of the data.

4.1. Gender Mainstreaming and News Production

Analysis of the broadcaster's Editorial Policy reveals that the policy stresses that both genders be given equal consideration in the allocation of assignments to cover news stories. The policy clearly governs and promotes the use of gender-sensitive language when producing and reporting news. What was evident in the

policy was a section that encouraged that gender considerations/mainstreaming be made during all stages of news production, that is, in the news gathering, production, and reporting stages.

4.2. Male-Centric Subject Positioning

Figure 1 reveals the gender representation of male and female subjects in the broadcaster's news coverage of COVID-19 on its Facebook page and X handle.

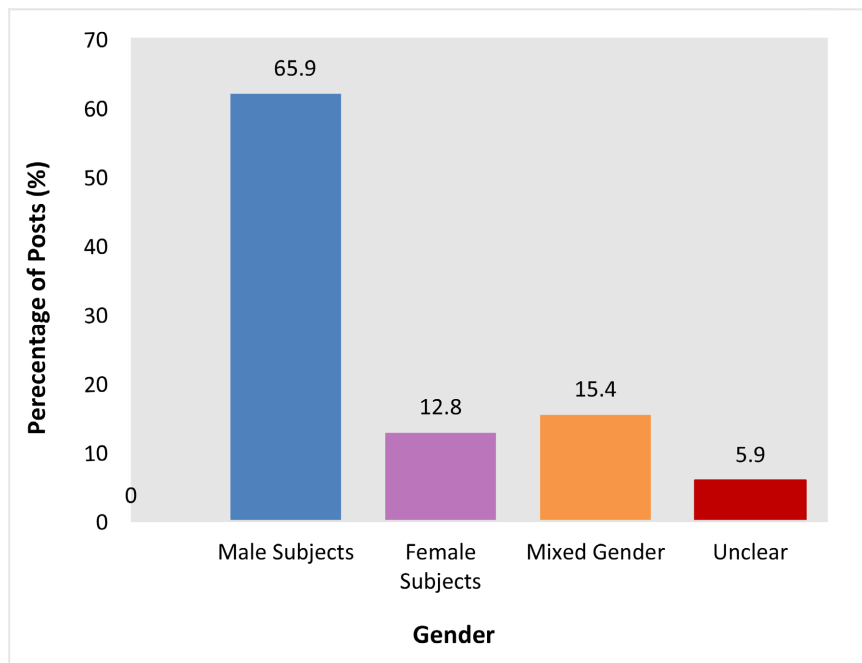


Figure 1. Gender representation in the public broadcaster's news coverage of COVID-19 on face book and X (N = 709).

Analysis of the broadcaster's 709 social media posts reveals significant gender disparities in subject representation. Male subjects feature in 65.9% of posts (n = 467), while female subjects appear in only 12.8% of posts (n = 91). 15.4% (n = 109) feature mixed (both) genders and 5.9% (n = 42) have unclear gender representation. The analysis reveals a significant gender representation imbalance—men are portrayed as active subjects in 65.9%, while women appear as subjects in only 12.8% of posts. Male subjects dominate the dataset, representing nearly two-thirds of all posts, while women as subjects represent only about one-eighth of the content. This reflects a significant male-centric bias (5.1:1) that reveals a marked gender imbalance.

4.3. Institutional Paternalism

Findings of the study reveal that many of the news stories in the public broadcaster's coverage convey a sense of institutional paternalism. From a feminist perspective, institutional paternalism can be defined as the systemic imposition of

policies, decisions, or rules by entities such as the state or a work organization in which an individual's autonomy may be infringed upon through a protective stance. These findings suggest that these news stories were crafted from the perspective of highlighting content on COVID-19 that is considered to be in the best interest of the public. As shown in **Figure 2** below, results give evidence of six distinct narrative voice categories related to institutional paternalism in the news stories, each reflecting deeply gendered communication patterns.

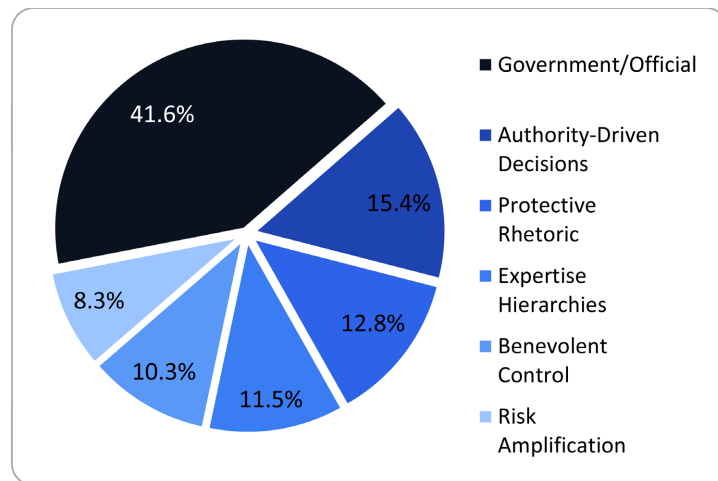


Figure 2. Institutional paternalism narrative voice.

The pie chart illustrates the following supporting paternalistic strategies adopted in the broadcaster's COVID-19 narratives, namely:

4.3.1. Government/Official (41.6%)

The largest segment represents direct governmental messaging, embodying traditional masculine-coded authority patterns. This dominance reflects a “father knows best” approach, where institutional voices assume decision-making power over citizens.

4.3.2. Authority-Driven Decisions (15.4%)

This comprises the second largest segment, indicating top-down decision-making and reinforcing hierarchical masculine leadership models.

4.3.3. Protective Rhetoric (12.8%)

This segment is characterised by the “caring” language that positions institutions as guardians, employing paternalistic care over citizens.

4.3.4. Expertise Hierarchies (11.5%)

This segment shows the professional/technical authority used to implement policies, while privileging masculine-coded rational expertise.

4.3.5. Benevolent Control (10.3%)

Restrictions in this segment are framed as beneficial interventions, which embody

paternalistic control represented as care.

4.3.6. Risk Amplification (8.3%)

This is the smallest segment, suggesting that risk messaging was less prominent than the authoritative voice.

The distribution reveals how institutional paternalism operates through gendered power dynamics during crisis communication. It shows how crisis communication can reproduce and amplify existing gender inequalities.

4.4. Gendered Narrative Framing Patterns

Figure 3 below shows the percentage breakdown of different narrative framing types in the COVID-19 news stories by gender (Expert, Leader, Decision-maker, Victim, Caregiver, Community Member, and Empowerment).

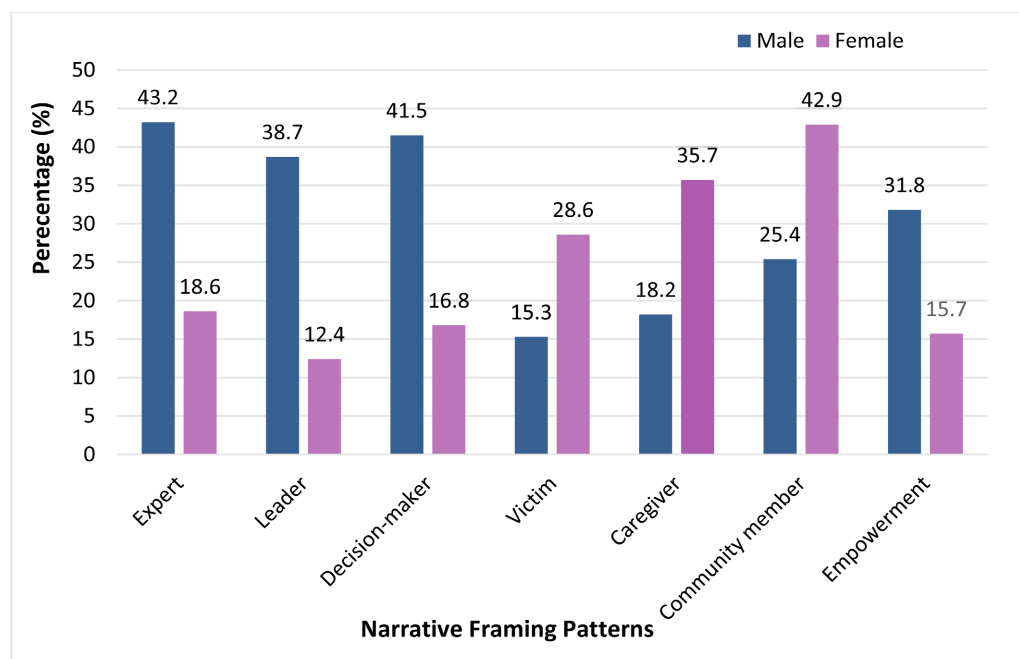


Figure 3. Narrative framing patterns by gender in the public broadcaster's COVID-19 news coverage.

4.4.1. Power and Authority Narratives—Male Dominance in Leadership Roles

The data exposes a stark concentration of male subjects in positions of authority and expertise:

- 1) Expert narratives: 43.2% male vs. 18.6% female (2.3:1 ratio);
- 2) Leader narratives: 38.7% male vs 12.4% female (3.1:1 ratio); and
- 3) Decision-maker narratives: 41.5% male vs. 16.8% female (2.5:1 ratio).

These authority-based framings demonstrate how the public broadcaster may have reinforced traditional patriarchal structures during risk and crisis communication of the pandemic. The overwhelming male representation in expert roles (43.2%) suggests that technical knowledge, scientific authority, and policy expertise were predominantly attributed to male voices, reinforcing gendered assump-

tions about competence and credibility. The most extreme disparity appears in leadership framing (3.1:1 ratio), indicating that when the broadcaster sought to present authoritative voices during the pandemic, they disproportionately turned to male subjects. This pattern reflects broader societal tendencies to associate leadership with masculine traits, particularly during times of crisis when decisive action is valorized.

Similarly, the empowerment narrative shows male dominance (31.8% male vs. 15.7% female). This suggests that narratives of agency were gendered masculine, while female empowerment remained underrepresented in the broadcaster's coverage of the pandemic.

Although men were mainly portrayed in positions of power and authority, an analysis of the representations of women's agency on both Facebook and X reveals women in various professional and social capacities. They show, for example, women in the health sector disseminating information on the importance of proper safety gear for protection against the virus, women as nurses, and women as traders selling fresh produce at Mbare Market (a huge and vibrant marketplace in one of the biggest residential locations in Harare).

4.4.2. Female Concentration in Support Roles

Conversely, findings show that female subjects were predominantly framed within traditionally feminine spheres as caregivers (35.7% female vs 18.2% male), representing a 1.96:1 ratio. The caregiver framing reinforces essentialist notions of women as natural nurturers, positioning them as emotional labourers rather than decision-makers during the pandemic. This depiction, while acknowledging women's contributions, simultaneously marginalises them from positions of institutional power.

The category of the community member narrative of 42.9% female vs 25.4% male (1.69:1 ratio) shows a high female representation, suggesting that women were more likely to be portrayed as grassroots voices rather than official spokespersons. This pattern reflects a tendency by the media in Zimbabwe to position women as representatives of lived experience rather than of institutional authority in risk and crisis communication during the pandemic.

4.4.3 Women as Victims Narrative

The victim narrative disparity of 28.6% female vs 15.3% male (1.87:1 ratio) reveals how the public broadcaster constructed gendered vulnerability during COVID-19. This indicates that women were nearly twice as likely to be depicted as victims as compared to their male counterparts. This potentially reinforces stereotypes about female fragility, while simultaneously diminishing women's agency and resilience during the crisis.

5. Discussion

The public broadcaster's use of Facebook posts and corresponding tweets on X is evidence of a new form of digital campaign that allows spaces for news content on

pandemics to be easily accessed by different types of users. These users include not only the younger generation but also a multitude of people who have come to rely heavily on digital media rather than traditional ones for news feeds. [Webb and Temple \(2015\)](#) point out that social media offers a unique venue for gender performance that affords the enactment of either stereotypical or non-stereotypical behaviour. Encouraging a breaking of gendered roles or norms through socialization on these platforms may help to increase equality between the sexes in all aspects of life.

The Unstereotype Alliance, a feminist group that was convened by UN Women in 2020, developed what it termed the 3Ps aimed at eradicating harmful gender-biased stereotypes in all the content produced in media and advertising communications, including that disseminated through social media. These are Presence, Perspective, and Personality. Presence takes into consideration who features in the communication; Perspective considers how the communication is framed; and Personality refers to the multidimensional levels and depth of a person's character. The Alliance further emphasizes that social media spaces are forces that can drive positive changes in societies in the attempt to address unconscious gender bias and promote inclusion. The feminist implication is that media organizations should be challenged to deliver unsteretyped content and advance the ways in which women are represented on their various social media sites. This is because these spaces present unique platforms that may be used to portray gender-empowering roles. These guiding principles provide media outlets with a blueprint for enabling gender considerations at all the stages of news production and reporting. Therefore, during any crisis context, it is imperative that media outlets, such as the public broadcaster under study, ensure gender-inclusive news stories. Gender-inclusive communication refers to the consideration of gender in the formulation and implementation of strategic communications ([Birchall, 2018](#)).

Similarly, the World Health Organization (WHO) provides a gender equality continuum for these communications that ranges from being gender negative, gender blind, gender sensitive, gender specific, to gender transformative. Those that are classified as gender transformative are those that are designed to transform gender norms, promote gender equality, and include strategies that promote progressive gender dynamics ([WHO, 2011](#)). Additionally, [UNESCO \(2012\)](#) has formulated a set of gender-sensitive indicators for media that encourage these organizations to adopt institutional policies and practices that champion gender equality within the workplace and promote journalistic practices that are inclusive in the portrayal of gender in media content on all platforms. Crucial among these indicators is the need for media organizations to have in existence a written gender policy, a written code of ethics that addresses gender representation, and resources for gender-sensitive reporting, such as a style guide and a directory of women experts in various fields. Given these guidelines, any coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Zimbabwe should present the media with an opportunity for gender-inclusive broadcasting that promotes the significance of women's

voices and leadership. Since women bear the brunt of the pandemic, any muting of women's voices when reporting on the health crisis would only result in marginalizing them. Importantly, too, the media can also be proactive in balancing the burden of care that is experienced in homes around the world due to pandemics. As such, the COVID-19 pandemic should present the media with an opportunity for the disruption of gender stereotypes, especially in relation to caregiving. The changing of traditional African narratives is important to promoting the perception that household chores, caregiving, and the upkeep and teaching of children are shared responsibilities. This, in turn, would serve to advance the notion of equality for all.

Significantly, Zimbabwe has a new National Gender Policy (2025) that supports gender equality and women's empowerment in Zimbabwe (Section 56 of the Constitution). It calls for the need to address stereotypes and prejudices about gender roles. Local organizations draw from this national framework to customize their own gender policies. The public broadcaster under study is no exception. The organization has a comprehensive policy in place in relation to gender at the workplace. In addition, the broadcaster's official regulations encourage gender balance and sanction the use of gender-inclusive language in news production and reporting. This suggests that the broadcaster acknowledges that strategic communications such as these are an effective way to challenge societal attitudes and practices that are discriminatory (Marcus & Page, 2014). Findings of this study, however, show that there was a larger number of male experts' voices in the news stories than female ones. Male subjects dominate the dataset, reflecting a significant male-centric bias. The news stories on the broadcaster's social media sites under study show men positioned as primary actors and decision-makers, while women's roles were often secondary or supportive. Such dominance of masculine narratives and imagery, especially concerning agency, may serve to reinforce gender stereotyping. Journalistic routines and sourcing practices that function to systematically amplify male voices and presence may reproduce gender hierarchies even without explicit intent.

The findings also reveal a limited portrayal of women in leadership positions and as active agents in communicating about COVID-19. Such a pattern is consistent with longstanding findings on gendered news values and the visibility gap in political and health communication (Williams, 2018). For example, in a study on women's representation in the media carried out in six countries (namely India, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, the UK, and the US), Kassova (2020) notes that the responsibility for the national responses to and policy-making on COVID-19 is mainly the preserve of men. This report also refers to the marginalization of the voices of women experts in news stories on the pandemic in these nations. This suggests that in crisis communication specifically, women's voices often recede from the authoritative expert frame, even where women constitute the backbone of caregiving and community health work. By privileging male expertise over that of females, this communication pattern suggests that the public broadcaster under

study may have missed crucial insights from women, given that in Zimbabwe, primary caregivers and community health advocates are mainly women. The result is a discursive narrowing of who counts as a credible expert during COVID-19. It also implies that the broadcaster's news coverage of COVID-19 may inadvertently reinforce traditional gender roles and gender disparities. From its inception, feminist media scholarship has been driven by the need for political and social change in order to minimize such gender stereotyping and bias. For example, [Tuchman's \(1978\)](#) main concern was how the media could be changed so that women are freed from media discourse that limits their lives to the hearth and home. Contemporary feminist media scholars take this concern further, as they believe that addressing such imbalance would require systematic intervention across multiple levels—from individual content creation practices to institutional policies and cultural norm shifts. Similarly, poststructural feminists suggest that these dynamics need to be changed ([Gill, 2011](#)). Although such an approach adopts a more sophisticated method to media theory and analysis that focuses on macro-level change, the fundamental concerns remain. These have to do with gender discourse, representation, power, and rights within specific socioeconomic conditions and political ideology.

Findings of this study also reveal that institutional paternalism is most visible in how the public broadcaster's COVID-19 coverage organizes voice around state and institutional authority. Additionally, they show how the public is presented as an audience to be guided, managed, and protected. The language of protection, discipline, and control draws on what feminist theorists describe as paternalism that may be justified as care ([Durmuş, 2022](#)). From a feminist media perspective, this is not just a neutral communication style; it is a gendered way of producing meaning that privileges particular speakers and forms of expertise. These findings demonstrate how crisis contexts may be used to justify and normalize patriarchal authority structures, positioning masculine-coded institutional power as natural and necessary and often marginalising women's perspectives and experiences. [Harman \(2016\)](#) argues that crisis narratives show how global health governance relies on women's labour, yet often renders them conspicuously invisible in policy and public narratives.

Similarly, the gendered narrative framing patterns in this study reveal that even when women are present in news coverage, they are often positioned in roles that do not define the narrative agenda. They are depicted mainly as community members, caregivers, or victims, while institutional actors set the terms of what counts as responsible pandemic behaviour. The narrative voice distribution has significant implications for effective risk and crisis communication. The paternalistic approach may generate short-term compliance but may also undermine long-term public engagement and trust, particularly among populations who experience institutional authority as oppressive or exclusionary. Therefore, positive broadcasting during pandemics should make intentional efforts to promote transformative and empowering narratives. Overall, the findings indicate that the

broadcaster's COVID-19 coverage illustrates a particular model of public communication that is top-down, authority-centred, and protective. This is an example of how a media institution may reproduce social power by deciding who speaks and what counts as knowledge in a crisis.

Findings on the narrative framing patterns also reveal how risk and crisis communication can inadvertently reinforce existing gender hierarchies. The vulnerability-focused representation of women aligns with feminist media critique of communication that positions women as passive recipients rather than active agents (Borges, 2025). This pattern has important implications for understanding how crisis narratives shape public perceptions of gender roles and capabilities during emergency periods. Narratives on such global pandemics require diverse expertise and perspectives, yet the public broadcaster's framing choices reflect and potentially reinforce societal assumptions about gender roles. The stark disparities suggest missed opportunities to display women's leadership, expertise, and decision-making capabilities during a crisis that disproportionately affected women economically and socially.

Pertinently, these framing patterns likely influence public perception of who holds authority and expertise during crises, potentially affecting future leadership opportunities for women and reinforcing gendered expectations about crisis response roles. The crisis presented an opportunity for the public broadcaster to showcase diverse forms of leadership and expertise capabilities, yet the findings suggest traditional gender binaries were maintained. These narrative choices during a defining global event may have lasting implications for how Zimbabwean society conceptualizes gender roles in crisis response. There is no doubt that the media has a very powerful influence on the way a particular society views men and women, as their messages have a lasting imprint on human minds. In particular, studies on COVID-19 have illuminated how the representations of gender have had a profound influence on audiences during the pandemic (van Aelst et al., 2021; Motta et al., 2021; Beazer et al., 2025). If the female voice is underrepresented in media discourse, as revealed in this study, the implication would be that women's perspectives are not as significant as men's, whose views are often depicted as the cultural standard. Such underrepresentation also suggests that addressing such a gender imbalance requires systematic intervention within broadcasting organizations. Effective risk and crisis message design during pandemics requires understanding diverse audience needs, information processing patterns, and behavioural motivations. These deliberations in message design include recognizing differential risk perceptions, communication preferences, and structural constraints that influence protective behaviour adoption. Gender-inclusive message design improves communication effectiveness by addressing diverse vulnerabilities and capacities, while avoiding stereotypical assumptions about gender roles and responsibilities.

An important implication of the findings of this study is that media outlets should also attempt to promote a gender balance in the burden of care necessary

because of COVID-19 and similar pandemics. The study shows that there was a notable lack of narratives or images of men taking on the role of caregiver, a presumably feminist task in the COVID-19 news coverage on the public broadcaster's social media sites. Taking on such a challenge to depict non-stereotypical gender roles in relation to caregiving may result in the kind of socialization needed in contemporary Zimbabwe in order to do away with stereotypical perceptions of gender. In South Africa, for example, a powerful illustration of this was when, on 24 March 2020, SowetanLive, a news channel, aired a video of Julius Malema—the leader of the Economic Freedom Fighters Party in that country—carrying a baby on his back, firmly secured by a towel in the manner women do. This image of him went viral on social media for the very fact that it demonstrated the breaking of a gender stereotype. It revealed this very powerful man taking on the task of childcare, an area socially prescribed in African societies as a predominantly female responsibility. Therefore, through their institutional policies and practices, media houses should ultimately strive to provide gender transformative content such as this that is designed to change gender norms, promote gender equality, and include strategies that foster progressive gender dynamics.

6. Conclusion

Strategic communication of risk and crisis messages on COVID-19 has a significant influence on a society's response to the pandemic. The representational patterns revealed in this study are significant because media visibility conditions public perceptions of gender. More positive engagement by media outlets with both men and women in the community as proactive sources of risk and crisis messaging can be quite instrumental in the reimagining of gender roles. As such, a gender-transformative approach to public broadcasting should involve instituting gender source tracking and parity targets for expert and spokesperson quotes, and broadening expertise to include female experts and narratives. It should also encompass training editors and journalists on gender-aware framing to avoid defaulting to the male norm. Furthermore, the strategic use of gender-inclusive communication by local media outlets can be achieved by ensuring that gender considerations are made at all stages of news production for the various dissemination platforms, including their social media sites. Only through such comprehensive efforts can risk and crisis communication fulfill its potential as a catalyst for positive social change. This, in turn, would help to promote non-stereotypical perceptions of gender within society that are both transformative and progressive in order to positively influence the attainment of gender equality in Zimbabwe.

7. Limitations

A key limitation of this study is its one-broadcaster scope, which means the observed patterns of institutional paternalism and gendered narrative voice may reflect the specific editorial routines and institutional positioning of this public broadcaster rather than the broader national media landscape in Zimbabwe. The

analysis also focuses on two platforms (Facebook and X), so the findings may not be generalisable to other online spaces where COVID-19 news circulates. Finally, the gender analysis relies on visible or explicit gender cues, meaning some sources may have been misclassified or excluded when gender was ambiguous, not disclosed, or not legible from the available post content.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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