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Media constructions of gendered helplessness and the decentring of women in Lagos slums during the COVID 19 pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic emphasized long-standing social disparities, including the marginalization of disadvantaged populations in popular media coverage and narratives. This study investigates this, examining how Nigerian media coverage of resilience realities in Lagos slums in the wake of the pandemic positioned the response of slum-dwelling women, with critical attention given to the intersection of vulnerability and agency. Grounded in framing theory, feminist perspectives and development media theory, the study adopted a qualitative content analysis of news reports from January 2020 to October 2021. Findings showed a significant under-representation of women-centered, slum-based adaptive activities when compared to the full population of slum-based pandemic coverage, with narratives disproportionately focused on official/institutional and male voices. Consequently, women were relegated to narratives of passive victimhood and dependency in media frames, with helplessness gendered to women's disadvantage, effectively diminishing their roles as community leaders and economic actors. These disempowering depictions emphasise prevalent class-based power dynamics, especially as regards women, while also delegitimizing slum residents' contributions to urban resilience, which informs the call for increased inclusiveness in dominant media narratives.

Keywords Media framing, COVID-19, Lagos slums, Vulnerability, Agency, Urban resilience

1 Introduction

The impact of the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic still lingers, with over 770 million positive diagnoses and about seven (7) million fatalities as of August 2023 [76]. Looking at the transmission of COVID-19, Fasona et al. [25] argued that urban areas served as epicentres for the virus transmission due to their large populations and high population density, both conducive to human-to-human viral spread. In addition, Olajide [58, 59], Lawanson [43] and Ilesanmi et al. [36] report that marginalised areas, such as slums represented significant virus transmission risks due to high population density



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and sub-optimal access to public infrastructure. Albeit, beyond the spread of the virus, the pandemic left a trail of health implications and socio-economic, political, and religious woes. For instance, the pressure on public infrastructure, especially healthcare facilities, worsened as the pandemic exposed the faults in these already under-resourced and stretched systems. Additionally, millions of jobs were lost, and many families were made dependent on government palliatives to survive [12, 31, 38, 72].

This meant that the implications of COVID-19 extended beyond healthcare to include urban resilience, particularly in megacities like Lagos, with its dense, 20 million-strong population. This may account for why Zakianis et al. [77] and Ifeoma et al. [53] believe that the most affected areas during the pandemic were slums, bedevilled, amongst other things, by their dense population and sub-optimal access to public infrastructure. Regrettably, Olajide [59] and Ilesanmi et al. [36] demonstrate that these already-deprived and marginalized areas were often overlooked by government intervention efforts, even though they represented significant virus transmission risks. This is exacerbated when one considers that the demographic composition of these disadvantaged areas significantly features vulnerable populations, especially children and women, who remain amongst the most-impacted by COVID-19 [9, 23], and several assumptions underlie this seeming neglect, one of which provides motivation for this study: that the media's influence in shaping perceptions and social realities, including gender issues and influencing disaster and disease management agendas, has not been in favor of slums and/or women in slums [34]. This is against the backdrop that, without any doubt, the media's role during a pandemic is indispensable.

Capturing this assumption, Gever and Ezeah [30] underscore the traditional functions of the media, including environmental surveillance and information dissemination, which are critical in managing pandemics and fostering proactive preventive behaviours within society. Again, Apuke and Omar [7] argue that the media's performance is often measured by how much they cover relevant issues, such as the pandemic and recommended health behaviours. Also, studies have consistently shown that the media, encompassing both traditional and new media, with a particular emphasis on social media, have been essential to the spread of information about COVID-19 at both global and national levels. In fact, for a significant majority of the population, the media, in its various forms, represent the two main sources of information and knowledge about COVID-19, including essential management and mitigation approaches [5, 51]. Thus, this study, drawing from media narratives and using critical gender lens, delves into media depiction (representation) of agency and vulnerability in Lagos slums during the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus on its implications for urban resilience amidst adversity informs the two research questions that underpin data collection and analysis:

RQ1: How did media narratives on Lagos slums frame the intersectional vulnerability of women in Lagos during COVID-19?

RQ2: What are the implications of this framing for urban resilience and gendered and class-based power dynamics?

2 Literature review

2.1 Media representations and public perceptions of vulnerable populations: a COVID-19 consideration

A predominant critique within scholarship on development media in general and media portrayals of disadvantaged urban communities in particular, is that even the concept of development media subtly speaks to an imbalanced relationship and a dominant paradigm, in this case, represented by mainstream (as opposed to what Kenix [41] describes as ‘alternative media’) news outlets frequently render slums and their residents invisible or portray them uni-dimensionally through negative stereotypes.

Arguedas et al. [8], for instance, imply in their research that there is likely to be a negative perception of the media, especially established (or as is termed in the United States, legacy) media among these demographics, as they are generally perceived as tools of oppression used by the elites to reinforce the prevailing inequalities. Similarly, Jamil and Retis [39] agree, adding that it is highly improbable for minorities’ agenda such as women slum dwellers response during COVID-19 to be featured in mainstream media and even where they are, the likelihood that the representation will be favorable is also low. These findings based in global North contexts, indicate that this phenomenon is global as it mirrors the situation in non-WEIRD countries as well.

For instance, Hasan et al. [35], while evaluating media narratives on Bangladesh’s urban slums, lamented that “the documentation of slum-dweller mobilisation and agency remains largely invisible” (p.8). They identified an excessive focus on slum problems in media accounts while resilience initiatives spearheaded by slum residents themselves were invalidated by backgrounding them, which van Leeuwen [74] describes as exclusion. This provides a comparative context within the Global South, as Bangladesh shares some similarity with Nigeria regarding the presence of high-density informal settlements, which helps to provide some clarity on the extent to which this is just a Nigeria problem or a Global South concern.

According to Akingbade [4], these unbalanced trends in media framing have dire consequences as the stories that news agencies push have a vital agenda-setting function in influencing broader public perceptions, discussion, and policy responses towards marginalised places, particularly women residing in city slums. Fernandez-Bou et al. [26] echo this sentiment as they suggest that disproportionate representation of vulnerable groups, especially when they bear the brunt of under-development hampers positive policy reactions that can tackle the socio-structural inequalities and inequity that sustain the status quo. The point by Arguedas et al. [8] about these populations not trusting the media now becomes pertinent as addressing this lopsided representation would require local participation, which they might not be open to doing. This predominance of uni-dimensional portrayals of vulnerability risks cultivating fatalistic assumptions that slums are static problems requiring top-down interventions, which bypasses local contribution of women slum dwellers, which, again, is another consequence of under-representation.

Hence, there is an urgent need to counter such ingrained media biases by increasing the visibility of solution-focused narratives that portray slums as sites of grassroots adaptive capacity and engines of localised pandemic response. Such multidimensional framing focused on women’s resilience initiatives during COVID-19 pandemic from within urban slums can positively transform dominant perceptions from stigma to solidarity. However, it appears progress has been limited regarding more participatory,

community-centred models of development journalism that avoid stereotyping women in slums as hapless victims. Irele [37] mentions the subaltern classification of women as evidence of their decentering, which reinforces the need for more balanced and inclusive media representations to legitimise women slum dwellers as protagonists and partners in navigating crises.

An example is seen in the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic has posed a stress test for urban infrastructure and systems in many locations, especially in developing countries, for which they were ill-prepared [15, 48]. This stress has had a disproportionate impact on urban residents in economically disadvantaged areas such as slums and vulnerable social groups including women and children who live in these economically challenged areas, with the adverse impact falling most heavily on them [67]. To mitigate the adverse impacts of the pandemic, governments including those of Nigeria and Lagos instituted various measures including the distribution of palliatives to mitigate the immediate impacts of the pandemic and secondary measures to address the deficiencies in public infrastructure [50]. While these mitigation efforts received some coverage in the media, it can be argued that the media's primary focus was on government actions related to the pandemic, with limited attention given to initiatives within economically disadvantaged areas like slums aimed at responding to and recovering from the adverse outcomes of containment measures, such as city lockdowns [20]. This is despite evidence indicating women were active in ensuring personal and communal resilience to the lockdowns, including self-development and skills acquisition initiatives, informal community credit schemes through savings groups to support economic recovery, recommendations how to adhere to safety instructions and providing support materials where available, amongst others [2, 57, 68].

There is clearly a strong correlation between media narratives and sense-making about the pandemic. Obi-Ani et al. [52] approach this from the angle of social media narratives, arguing that what people believe about COVID-19 is significantly influenced by what they consume in media, especially the nature of the narratives (factual information, misinformation, etc.). Egbunike [19] agrees, adding that the media as meso- and macro-level curators of narratives heavily determine the direction of public discourse through their coverage of events. This view, applied to the nature of the media's focus of coverage—covering how they framed the pandemic itself [51], which gave limited coverage of slums, and how coverage of palliative distribution implicated questions of governance [20]—means that what people would make sense of about the pandemic and the recovery efforts will not include these excluded or under-represented perspectives. This may have negative implications for public perception about women's resilience during COVID-19 pandemic.

2.2 Gendered narratives, urban resilience and COVID-19

Within the context of health emergencies such as COVID-19, Adeola [3] points out the already crushing effect that prevalent socio-economic inequalities have on the society in general, and these disadvantaged and vulnerable population in particular. For instance, de Paz et al. [18] affirm that these crises impact on both genders differently with socio-structural systems influencing the extent of this impact. They point out, importantly, that because women are disproportionately distributed in poverty possibility scale, this has implications, not just for their agency but also for their capacity to support or participate

in recovery efforts. However, one area of this inequality can be said to be representation, across different contexts, including and especially, the media. For instance, Acanga et al. [1] talked about the under representation of gender issues in research around public health disasters such as COVID-19. This is corroborated by findings in Lingham et al. [45], who then add that when this underrepresentation is then layered with biased media reportage that reinforces stereotypes, such as gender, racial or ethnic ones it widens the gulf between need and response. Thus, if one considers the development media theory's assumption as hinted above, there is the assumption that the media, in reporting with these 'special' contexts, can either strengthen or counter dominant narratives on gender roles and societal expectations with the hope that it does more of the former than the latter.

However, the reality paints a starkly different picture. Building on critiques of stereotypical media portrayals of disadvantaged communities, a substantial body of literature has scrutinised problematic gender biases in reporting on disasters, conflicts and health crises impacting urban areas. In general, Ogwezzy-Ndisika and Faustino [55] decry the low level of coverage that women enjoy in the media broadly, but in politics in particular, with this under-reportage worsened by the negative bias the media typically extend to women and gender issues. Research shows that women are often depicted in passive victim roles, helpless, vulnerable, and dependent recipients of aid, while men are more often shown in active, empowered roles as leaders managing crisis response and coordinating community resilience initiatives [70]. Oloruntoba et al. [60] found and provided evidence that the media often amplify the 'woman as victim' trope, and usually highlight their need for rescue and by implication, their incapacity to possess agency, thus perpetuating a gender imbalanced and hegemonic agenda.

A related concern is the consistent and worrying media bias in crisis reportage, identified by scholars such as Parlak et al. [62], stemming from the absence of women's voices, experiences, and perspectives. They argue for more inclusive sourcing and representation of women to challenge dominant male-dominated narratives that make women's contributions as leaders and economic actors invisible. This literature emphasizes how imbalanced and stereotypical media framing of gender roles in crisis can perpetuate harmful biases that influence women's self-perceptions, public perceptions of women's resilience, and external policy responses. Thus, efforts to combat gender stereotyping by promoting more diverse and empowering representations of women have been pointed out as an overlooked avenue for fostering more gender-equitable disaster recovery and enhancing urban resilience.

However, despite these calls, there are still concerns regarding the limited progress in addressing stereotypical and imbalanced gender portrayals in media reporting on recent crises, such as the impacts of COVID-19 on marginalized urban settlements [42, 70]. These portrayals typically ignore (at worst or gloss over, at best) the important roles women play in driving grassroots-led intervention efforts that are community-centric, which is a significant consideration when one thinks about how crises-hit communities adapt and respond to public crises, such as COVID-19. Another thing this flawed, often negatively skewed and typically inadequate representation creates is an undermining of the networking of key internal and external stakeholders. This would involve initiatives championed by women often through informal channels and incorporating local and

international government, non-government, and international institutions, to support response and recovery efforts in public health systems during the pandemic [61].

2.3 Theoretical underpinning: framing theory and feminist perspectives on media's gendered narratives

Over five (5) decades of media effects research underline the belief that not only do the media inform what the public is concerned with per time but also that they shape the direction and interpretation of those concerns [69]. Framing theory or as Chong and Druckman [16] term it, *framing effects*, align with the latter, describing the overt or covert process through which the media curate information, which shapes public perception on a particular issue in a certain way. This builds on Entman's [21] work that showed that media representations or frames give meaning to issues and shape public perceptions. His 'selection and salience' postulation suggests that social interpretation of reality is shaped by how the media's narratives selectively emphasize certain aspects of reality while obscuring others [10]. Often referred to as the 'second level' of agenda setting [66] where agenda setting would deal with volume of representation, while framing concerned itself with direction of representation. The key factor in the latter is the salience conferral element, which recognizes the media's power to define social issues through repetitive framing patterns that risk marginalizing certain groups and places.

What is evident from the literature is that both factors; volume and direction are significant to how media narratives shape public opinion and policy action. Liao [44] reiterates media effects' research findings when his findings linking media exposure to perception, with implications for attitudes' formation. Furthermore, Arguedas et al. [8] associate framing theory to the formation of political beliefs and the proliferation of echo chambers and its attendant implications for political polarization. By extension, this implies that under or flawed representation of disadvantaged, disenfranchised and/or vulnerable populations will likely produce undesired public perceptions. This might be inimical to social development, especially when the issues engendering the lack of social progress can be associated with said populations or they are the worse hit by these issues [45].

These suggest imbalance in media representation, which is often a gender concern, especially as women usually get the wrong end of the deal. According to Erickson [22], women are typically featured less in the media and typically negatively portrayed in media coverage. She suggests this is indicative of skewed power relations between the genders that favors men, especially as the frames media adopt in their coverage of similar issues, portray men positively and women negatively. This is similar to findings in Ogwezzy-Ndisika et al. [56] who found that media representation continues to foster inequity in political influence and power distribution in Nigeria. This imbalance appears to be a motivation for the feminist theory, which was developed as a protest to challenge dominant knowledge models that failed to recognize women's contributions, roles and agency within social dynamics [32]. However, Ferguson [28] believes that feminist theory has progressed from just challenging gender-based exclusions to a holistic theoretical agenda that coopts critically intersectional viewpoints in broadly examining global issues. This situates the theory within political and academic perspectives, associating it with movements targeting perceived inequalities and denial of access to freedoms.

Next, we discuss the feminist perspective, which fits well within media framing discourses, especially when one considers the role the media play in perpetuating or challenging these imbalances. Social justice movements like the #MeToo campaign are examples of the intersection between framing and feminist perspectives as media coverage of these; and other similar events of public significance such as COVID-19 often reveal deep-seated gender biases and the social inequalities that underlie them. It also provides the justification for this study's adoption of intersectionality as its functional analytic perspective. Crenshaw [17] presents it as the interlocking categories of discrimination and disadvantage that compound in their effect on social justice and equity. This study recognizes these categories as gender, socioeconomic status, and spatial marginalization (slum dwelling) and posits that these cannot be treated in isolation vis-à-vis their influence on the under-representation of women's agency.

A third framework the study leans on is Denis McQuail's [47] development media theory, which according to Sanusi [64], advocates for the refocusing of media's attention on concerns of development in society, as an extension of the social responsibility normative directive. An extrapolation of this theory, especially within this context, would be that the media would pay attention to and drive agenda towards developmental initiatives that target disadvantaged areas and vulnerable populations such as women in urban slums, and frame the narratives of their agency better, given the negative implications that their continued neglect portends for social development. It thus serves as the normative benchmark against which Nigerian media performance in this context is evaluated. This is to complement the role that framing (how selection and salience construct meaning) and feminist-intersectional perspectives (providing the critical lens, e.g. whose meanings are constructed, and at whose expense) play in the study.

This study is hinged on the assumption that the cross-pollination of framing and feminist perspectives provides a strong underpinning to understand how gendered narratives reflect media's perceptions on disadvantaged, disenfranchised and vulnerable populations' contributions to urban resilience and response to public health emergencies, with development media theory being the normative benchmark. It also aims to show how stereotypical vulnerability and systemic gender biases undermine slum communities and prevent their ability to respond to pandemics [35]. Hence, this study aims to extend focused analysis to media narratives of resilience initiatives by women in Lagos slums during COVID-19 through media framing by examining both how such narratives were framed (RQ1) and the implications of that framing for urban resilience and gendered, class-based power dynamics (RQ2).

3 Research methodology

This study used a qualitative critical media analysis approach, which as defined by Caragee and Roefs [13], goes beyond traditional content analysis to examine how media representations perpetuate or challenge power structures and ideologies. This approach leans significantly into discourse theory, which sees social meaning-making as a discursive construction wherein language (in speech and writing) becomes both the focal point of expression and the unit of analysis to investigate these expressions [40]. Critical media analysis operationalizes discourse theory in data analysis, especially through Fairclough's [24] critical discourse, which assesses media content as the discursive output. This makes it particularly suitable for the study of representations of marginalized groups.

In this study, it is used to analyze secondary data—news reports published online by Nigerian news organizations, including legacy outlets (print-origin newspapers with online editions) and online-only outlets—by interpreting media content through ideological and power-relation lenses, in an effort to understand how representations serve particular interests and marginalize others [73]. The critical media analysis approach is different from experimental social science methods in that it focuses on deconstructing existing media texts rather than manipulating variables and has been successfully employed in several previous studies on similar phenomena. For example, Mridha [49] used this approach to analyze media representations of Bangladesh slums, revealing how dominant narratives made the agency of slum-dwellers invisible. Similarly, Malaolu [46] used critical media analysis to examine the representation of Nigeria in the British media, demonstrating how the method is effective in identifying stereotypical portrayals versus solution-oriented narratives.

3.1 Sample

The study adopted the non-probability sampling to determine the sample; and elements were purposively chosen. This involved determining criteria for sample selection, and purposively including articles that fit said criteria [63], which in this case required that: (a) they are news stories or features published in Nigeria by Nigerian news organizations on their website or social media platforms; (b) they be about COVID-19 and slums in Lagos State; (c) that they are published starting from January 2020 to October 2021. Exclusion criteria include (a) items other than straight news: editorials, opinion articles, reproduced press/media releases, or user-generated social media content; (b) written about slums in other areas other than Lagos State, or just about COVID-19 in general without mentioning slums; (c) were copies or distributed versions of a report already included; and (d) were published outside the study period.

Sampling continued until theoretical saturation, as posited by Charmaz [14] in grounded theory, was achieved. Specifically, theoretical saturation was recognized when: (1) no new codes emerged from three consecutive coding sessions, as determined by two (2) coders, (2) existing themes reached sufficient density and variation, and (3) additional data only reinforced already-established patterns without adding new dimensions [14, 65]. Theoretical saturation was determined through continuous comparative analysis during the coding process, with every newly coded case compared against already-identified codes, and then each interim code compared against the identified themes, across the different articles.

3.2 Data collection

News articles were retrieved from media databases and publications' websites using keywords related to "Lagos slums," "informal settlements" "women," "women in slums" and "COVID-19." The search strategy employed Boolean operators (AND, OR) and included synonymous terms such as "urban poor," "marginalized communities," and "low-income settlements" to ensure comprehensive coverage.

This search was conducted using Google Advanced Search and Google News. These platforms enabled the study to apply specific search rules and settings that aggregate content from a wide range of Nigerian news websites within the specified period. This approach was preferred over outlet-specific searches, which would not only be

time-consuming but also risk excluding relevant reports from less popular or community-based news organizations in Nigeria. It was also preferred because both platforms had archived news indexes, and supported restricted searches, which made it possible to search for content only within the study period (January 2020 to October 2021). Researchers looked over all output provided for each word-search combination, going through pages successively until no new qualifying items were available.

In total, over 127 news stories were retrieved from more than 37 Nigerian online news websites and their associated social media platforms (see Table 1 for breakdown of sample). However, approximately 63% of these stories were duplicated ($n = 80$), largely due to syndication and content replication across outlets, with 47 articles remaining. Following the removal of duplicates, the inclusion and exclusion criteria were then applied to screen the remaining news reports, and 30 were excluded. 17 unique news reports were retained for in-depth qualitative analysis. These reports were drawn from 10 distinct Nigerian news media organizations, including mainstream national newspapers and alternative online platforms.

Table 1 Inventory of analyzed news articles (headline, journalist, outlet, and date)

#	Headline	Journalist(s)	Outlet	Date
1	Report reveals over 20 m Lagos residents live in slums, informal settlements	Victor Uzoho	Ripple Effect	28 July 2021
2	Preventing COVID-19 transmission in Nigerian urban slums	Akinyinka Omigbodun	BusinessDay	30 April 2020
3	Covid-19 adds to misery of homeless Nigerians in Lagos	Ibrahim Adeyemi	BusinessDay	19 July 2020
4	Slum dwellers worst hit as COVID-19 exposes 'homelessness' in Nigeria	Chuka Uroko	BusinessDay	5 May 2020
5	Don't ease lockdown, COVID-19 kills faster than hunger—Lagos residents	Staff report (no byline)	The Nigerian Observer	30 April 2020
6	Covid-19: Paga, Khan Foundation mobilize support for Makoko community	Daniel Obi	BusinessDay	26 May 2020
7	More relief materials for Muslims as coalition moves to states	Shakirah Adunola	The Guardian (Nigeria)	15 May 2020
8	We have malaria and typhoid fever every time, in fact, coronavirus lives here—Lagos's Makoko slum dwellers	Dayo Ayeyemi	Nigerian Tribune	24 July 2021
9	Denied testing centres and basic amenities, Lagos community relies on ancient tradition to ward off COVID-19	Tessy Igomu	Punch HealthWise	10 May 2020
10	For Makoko women, surviving childbirth is a game of chance	Tessy Igomu	Punch HealthWise	17 May 2020
11	COVID-19: Air Peace donates food items to less-privileged in Lagos	Ifeoma Okeke	BusinessDay	18 April 2020
12	Makoko: Lagos slum struggling to overcome squalor	Staff report (no byline)	The Sun	3 October 2021
13	Women who feed Lagos: How lack of education robs fish traders of booming digital market	Taiwo Adebulu	TheCable	20 August 2020
14	Ajgunle residents get hygiene, personal protection items against COVID from Vetsark	Caleb Ojewale	BusinessDay	29 June 2020
15	COVID-19: Carnal [sic] becomes dry land for commuters in Lagos State—Investigation	Staff report (no byline)	Vanguard	17 April 2020
16	COVID-19: 5 months after, canal returns to dry land for commuters in Lagos—Investigation	Joseph Oso	Vanguard	8 September 2020
17	We're dying, say displaced Monkey Village residents	Abdullateef Aliyu, Christiana T. Alabi & Precious Momodu	Daily Trust	24 January 2021

It is apt to mention here that the study does not make any claim of being representative of the entire corpus of news content on the subject. Instead, following the reasoning of qualitative critical media analysis, the goal is to ensure that a well-grounded, context-rich examination of framing patterns is provided. Also, the study argues that the seventeen reports tell a more important story: the small body of available items reflects the under-representation the study is trying to explore. Table 1 provides an inventory of the corpus on which analysis is conducted.

Of the 17 news reports analyzed, BusinessDay Nigeria accounted for the highest number of articles (5 out of 17), while most of the coverage (13 out of 17 stories) was published in 2020, reflecting intensified media attention during the initial outbreak and lockdown phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. This pattern corresponds with the onset of COVID-19 in Nigeria, the imposition of lockdowns, and the period of greatest uncertainty and disruption. During this phase, media narratives were dominated by emergency framing, emphasizing exposure, risk, and humanitarian need within slum communities. In contrast, coverage declined sharply in 2021, with fewer stories focusing on longer-term recovery, adaptation, or resilience.

3.3 Data analysis

The unit of analysis was the articles themselves, treated wholly (headline, body copy, quotes and attributes, captions, etc.), given the focus of the frame that each story constructs. Within each unit, coding targeted the pertinent text portions (sentences or paragraphs), from which themes were identified through an aggregation of these coding units.

The critical media analysis was conducted following the iterative thematic approach, sensitized by the critical discourse framework outlined by Fairclough [24], which involves three levels of analysis: (1) textual analysis examining language choices, metaphors and visual elements, (2) discursive practice analysis focusing on media content and contexts, and (3) social practice analysis examining broader power relations and ideological functions.

The final sample was divided evenly between two trained coders to facilitate rigorous qualitative analysis, with coder alignment ensured through procedures focused on interpretive consistency rather than a quantitative reliability coefficient [54]. Each coder independently applied the codebook, jointly generated drawing on the theoretical framework, to their assigned articles to identify and tag key codes related to the research objectives on gendered framing. NVivo 12 software was used to organise and manage this qualitative coding process, enabling systematic annotation, code frequency tracking and thematic relationship mapping. The software enabled efficient annotation and retrieval of code occurrences across the dataset.

The analysis used a critical lens by continuously asking whose voices were privileged, whose perspectives were marginalized and how representations could serve specific power interests or reproduce existing inequalities [75]. In summary, this rigorous critical qualitative media analysis methodology enabled rich insights into media representations directly from the words, images, and themes present in the sample. Deductive coding applied a priori codes drawn from the theoretical framework to the data: for example, codes for voice (government voice, NGO/corporate voice, male-dominated voices, women directly quoted), victimhood and dependency framing, and women's agency.

Table 2 Distribution of voice and gendered-framing codes across the 17 analyzed articles

Coding category	Present	Limited	Absent
Male-dominated voices	16	1	0
Women directly quoted	10	0	7
Women framed as victims	9	1	7
Women framed as dependents	10	5	2
Women's agency	3	11	3
Tokenistic inclusion	12	0	5
Gender invisibility	8	7	2

Inductive coding was more adaptable, accommodating emerging and unanticipated categories from the texts themselves beyond the framework; examples of which included codes like tokenistic inclusion and othering metaphors which were yielded by this process and incorporated into the codebook. Abductive coding operated at the intersection of both deductive and inductive, applied when categories did not align with existing code. To ensure dependable interpretation, coders worked back and forth between data and theory, refining candidate explanations and evaluating them against more examples in the corpus (for example, adapting 'tokenistic recognition' to accommodate quotes featuring women's voices only within victimhood scripts). By using this approach, coders were able to merge existing knowledge with emerging discoveries, allowing the analysis to extend beyond what the research questions initially anticipated.

4 Analysis and presentation

Sensitized by the media framing framework [21], feminist perspectives [28], and development media theory [47], findings are presented in response to the two (2) research questions. This section takes Borah's [10] position of salience and silence of media narratives and applies it to describe media narratives' systematic marginalization of disadvantaged groups' voice, and the implications of this for inclusive urban resilience efforts.

RQ1: How did media narratives on Lagos slums frame the intersectional vulnerability of women in Lagos during COVID-19?

Findings from the 17 analyzed items show clear instances of intersectional vulnerability of women in media coverage of COVID-19, which corroborates extant literature's position on media stereotyping of coverage of marginalized populations [35]. Before presenting the themes, it is necessary to outline the extent of representation (or under-representation) and how it was determined. Two complementary comparisons were applied. First, proportional, that is, the number of reports featuring women to the total number of reports: only one of the seventeen (17) slum-focused pandemic reports centered women, and only two featured women as the dominant voice. Second, relationally: women's presence was compared with men's and institutional actors within each story. Male voices appeared in sixteen (16) reports, while women were quoted in ten (10) and absent in seven (7). When present, women were framed as victims in nine (9) reports and dependents in ten (10); their agency was coded as present in three (3), limited in eleven (11), and absent in three (3) reports. Table 2 summarises these patterns. Thus, the claim of under-representation reflects a consistent imbalance between male/institutional dominance and women's marginal discursive presence as measured within the corpus.

Using the framing theory [21] in [10], analysis reveal three (3) prevalent themes from media frames: dominance of official and male voices and erasure of women's narratives, victimhood and dependency framing, and dilution of gendered agency.

4.1 Who is speaking and who is missing: dominance of official and male voices and erasure of women's narratives

A central feature of the media narratives was the dominance of official and institutional voices, often at the expense of women residents of slums. Government officials, task forces, corporate representatives, and NGO actors were frequently positioned as authoritative narrators of the crisis, defining both the problem and its solutions. Entman [21] implies this in his selection and salience postulation, through which the media, via their narratives, foregrounds an actor within a frame to the detriment of other actors. For example, in “COVID-19: Air Peace donates food items to less-privileged in Lagos” (BusinessDay), the story is structured almost entirely around institutional action, and this is presented within the text in three categories. Firstly, it is shown in how voices are distributed: statements quoted are attributable to the airline company and its officials, with no resident of the areas mentioned quoted, meaning residents’ description in the story are solely determined by the benefactors—the airline. Secondly, it is demonstrated in how the institutional actor is prominently foregrounded in the process (e.g. “The airline’s officials visited Sabo, Makoko and Ajegunle areas of Lagos where they gave out edibles including bags of rice...”), whereas residents are only depicted as agency-less beneficiaries. Thirdly, it can be seen in the fact that the institutional actor is clearly named and given identity (Air Peace, its officials, their corporate social responsibility initiative), where conversely, residents (including women), are summed up under broad, nameless categories (e.g. less-privileged, etc.). van Leeuwen argues that this speaks to suppression or backgrounding through generalization, where especially as demonstrated in this report, women appear only as implied beneficiaries, and not in their specific identity but as members of families, and not as speaking subjects, which contrasts findings that show women actively engaged in resilience initiatives, not least communal credit schemes, skills acquisition programs, etc. [2, 57]. These three aforementioned linguistic choices adopted by the story depicts active institutional actors doling out benefits to unempowered recipients, describes a power imbalance, highlighting the implied importance and dominance of these actors, and reinforcing disempowered tropes that women often suffer from in media frames. Fairclough’s [24] critical discourse analysis (CDA) captures this as the ideological function of language, which is often used strategically to reinforce social hierarchies and perpetuate hegemonic structures within societies.

Similarly, “More relief materials for Muslims as coalition moves to states” (The Guardian) foregrounds NGO representatives as the determiners of communities’ recovery requirements. This quote from the story: “*We have packaged foodstuffs worth of 5000 naira for 450 families...*” centers the institutional actor (the NGO) prominently as benefactor, whilst slum inhabitants, especially women, lose their voice and identity agency in exchange for aid. These accounts also imply that the voice of authority is male-dominated and institutional, and that the media’s total or partial neglect of marginalized perspectives culminates in an erasure of their agency. This frame persists even in policy-style reports. For example, “Slum dwellers worst hit as COVID-19 exposes ‘homelessness’ in Nigeria” (BusinessDay), used impersonal language, opting to report slum residents as a collective: “*Many Nigerians are homeless; many sleep under bridges; many in shanties under sub-human conditions.*” By using the term, ‘many’, repeatedly, they conjure an image of slum dwellers as a homogenous mass, and reduces them to mere statistics, which strips them of identity, individuality, and personhood, resulting in gendered,

intersectional invisibility [62], particularly in stories that deal with housing, infrastructure, and policy. Even though these issues disproportionately affect women, their perspectives are largely missing, signaling a systematic erasure from narratives that shape public understanding of urban crisis.

The “Denied testing centres and basic amenities, Lagos community relies on ancient tradition to ward off COVID-19” (Punch HealthWise), provides another good instance of this anonymization of women and slum dwellers’ voices. “We are suffering. The government should come here and do a head count and give us palliative care,” credited to a female source in the story, appears to platform gendered experiences on the surface, but deeper introspection reveals otherwise. Rather, it denotes women’s (in particular, and slum dwellers in general) proclivity to be sufferers, always in need of ameliorative intervention, and almost never at the forefront of addressing the systemic failures that create and perpetuate said suffering.

This tempered representation represents an example of tokenistic recognition, one in which a semblance of representation is enacted; however, it limits the extent to which marginalized narratives are given expression, including, but not limited to voice and identity erosion. Here, women (and slum dwellers) appear to be given a voice, but in reality, it is only to the extent that what they want to say fits into the dominant, hegemonic narrative of vulnerability/victimhood; and beneficiaries of government and corporate interventions without mention of their resilience and contributions towards mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on livelihoods and health care particularly in the slums, which furthers the underrepresentation of these much-needed voices in developmental discourse.

4.2 What role are women given: victimhood and dependency framing

When women do appear in media narratives, they are most frequently framed as victims or dependents, reinforcing a gendered construction of vulnerability. These victim tropes [60], often strategically used by the media to provide the semblances of support and allyship by drawing attention to women’s plights, especially in vulnerable periods like during COVID-19, are often culpable for the entrenching of perceptions of women as helpless victims, incapable of bootstrapping themselves without external (usually male-provided) aid. Feminist critiques of media narratives around women in these situations highlight this point, accusing them of reinforcing dependency tropes, while downplaying women’s self-recovery and resilience initiatives [70]. In “Covid-19 adds to misery of homeless Nigerians in Lagos” (BusinessDay), women articulate suffering in stark terms: “We almost died of hunger; there were no palliatives for us... We are lying down helplessly with no food, no water and no drugs.” Yet again, Fairclough’s [24] ideological function of language bears mentioning, with this articulation of suffering bearing all the marks of the typification of gendered helplessness. The use of passive language (“lying down helplessly”) further reduces women’s agency, presenting them as acted upon by circumstances beyond their control. The recurring use of negation (“no... no... no...”) presents women through a deficit prism, tainting others’ point of view of them as only lacking things, rather than possessing them.

There is a doubling down of this in the foregrounding of maternal vulnerability in “For Makoko women, surviving childbirth is a game of chance” (Punch HealthWise). This point: “It is even more precarious for pregnant women, as the probability of surviving

childbirth is very slim”, while presenting a pressing concern for women in these environments, suggests that the location of the problem is in women’s reproductive bodies (pregnancy, childbirth) as against the socio-structural dysfunction (systemic disenfranchisement from healthcare infrastructure, suboptimal funding of public services, spatial segregation and inequality, etc.) that raise the risk level of women’s maternal experiences. This intersection between maternal vulnerability and spatial discrimination, for instance, leans into what Grosz [32] protests as biological essentialism, where the sum of the female experience is reduced to their bodily functions, in this case, their reproductive capacity excised from potentials for political and social contribution (see [71]). Furthermore, it makes maternal mortality an exemplar for the growing slum population problem, thus providing justification for the typical drastic actions that Nigerian governments, at state and federal levels, have usually taken to address the problem. This usually includes gentrification and/or forceful (and often illegal) displacement of slum dwellers under the guise of urban renewal, while actions taken to address the health emergency of maternal (and early-child) mortality and women health vulnerability in these areas are incommensurate to the threat posed.

Dependency narratives are particularly evident in reports on COVID-19 palliative distribution. Women are portrayed as waiting for aid rather than shaping responses. This dependency framing further reinforces a charitable rather than participatory understanding of gendered vulnerability. Dominant focus on institutional action and actors perpetuates a social perception of women as vulnerable positions, a phenomenon that has been hard to shake off. An indication of this is the fact that most NGOs, especially those aimed at achieving poverty alleviation, usually have rural (or urban poor) women as a staple target population—even though the argument can be made that women suffer a disproportionate vulnerability to poverty, especially in developing countries, including Nigeria [6, 29]. This feminization of paupered helplessness and resultant dependence fit nicely into dominant cultural frames that demand women submissiveness, often enacted through the instrument of economic power, drowns out women’s voices when localized participation in addressing urban poor (and other vulnerabilities) issues is demanded.

4.3 Taking her power: dilution of gendered agency

The examples of tokenistic recognition mentioned above represent a minimal departure from the overwhelming pattern of disempowering women in the studied sample. However, the prevalent finding in the sample indicates that this has done little to address the unequal mental real estate that women and women issues occupy amongst members of the media’s publics, as well as their perceptions of women’s resilience capacities. An outlier in the data is the story on “Women who feed Lagos: How lack of education robs fish traders of booming digital market” (The Cable), where women are framed as economic actors: *“The women here... have no other occupation aside dealing with fish. It’s their major source of livelihood.”* During the lockdown, women describe adaptive strategies: *“From the little we sold, we were able to live through the period.”* This account represents a departure from dominant victim frames by presenting women as coping and organizing within constrained conditions. However, the rarity of such representations underscores how agency-based narratives are peripheral within mainstream coverage.

A symptom of what is more dominant in media narratives, however, is seen in the title of the outlying article; by making mention of women’s ‘lack of education’ as a reason

for them not being able to access digital markets, it removes blame from the powerful, institutional actors, e.g. governments, financial institutions, etc. who have created systemic inhibitions that limit women's access to resources that enables them achieve economic self-determination. It situates the problem with the women, rather than with the systemic barriers that militate against their progress. Ferguson [27] takes Grosz's [32] biological essentialism and situates it in economics when she writes about how dominant economic systems—capitalism—acknowledge women's limited economic contributions but places the responsibility for this limited contribution on the women, instead of the broader socioeconomic inhibitions that force this limited contribution. This makes it seem like the women can, and should do more, but does not accept blame for hamstringing their efforts to do so.

This limited focus on gendered agency is arguably deliberate and systematic, and usually within constrained confines that perpetuate dominant economic stereotypes, as the singular reference to it within the dataset of this study alludes to. It downplays or evades coverage of women's organizing or women-led recovery and resilience initiatives—and when it does, the tone suggests that it is a one-off rarity—in favor of textual and photo narratives that reinforce dependency perceptions. Even in more recent coverage of forced evictions from slums, there are even fewer frames of women leading community protest efforts; rather, there is a prevalent depiction of helpless, distraught and disempowered women, which validates this position on diluted agency.

Considered together, the themes above paint a picture of intersectionality as aggregated vulnerability, where gender and economic disadvantage (characterized by poverty and slum dwelling) combine to entrench women in a never-ending cycle of suppression and erasure, where their attempts at participating in resilience narratives is portrayed as an oddity, and only represented to the extent that it conforms to dominant male-centred, institutional tropes. Although it can be argued that the media, in this case, are only mirroring the reality of women in these spaces, these themes reveal a rather concerning failure of the expected therapeutic function of the press, as McQuail's [47] development media theory prescribes. Instead, these frames separate cause from consequence, distancing culpable power (political, social, economic) structures behind women's marginalization and continued vulnerability away from the outcomes of their neglect, while centering these women within the problem in disempowered frames, stripping them of agency, and making them exemplars of the problem of urban renewal and recovery. Women continue to be portrayed only for their biological contribution—reproduction—with limited control over what happens in their bodies, as governments and institutions continue to systematically disenfranchise them from social (including health) systems that will improve their access to care. Media is seen, in summary, to highlight the intersectional vulnerability and reiterate dominant power imbalances, while diluting women's agency and entrenching stereotyped biases that perpetuate the disregard for their ongoing contributions to urban resilience.

RQ2: What are the implications of this framing for urban resilience and gendered and class-based power dynamics?

The framing of women in Lagos slums during the COVID-19 pandemic has significant implications for how urban resilience is imagined, enacted, and distributed, as well as for the reproduction of gendered and class-based power relations. This section presents

frames that identify a number of implications, drawing from the three frames discussed in the previous section.

4.4 Implication 1: discursive disempowerment and delegitimization

One implication of this dominant framing is the discursive disempowerment of women, which delegitimizes their role as capable contributors to urban resilience. The importance of the media in determining who contributes to development agenda [11, 33] means that they can confer salience and legitimacy on issues and populations through their coverage. Thus, when they fail platform women or slums in urban resilience narratives, or frame them merely as passive recipients of aid, or present them as exemplars of the urban decay that characterizes cities in transition like Lagos, it indicates, at best, an indifference, or worst, a deliberate use of the media to perpetually animate tropes of gender subjugation and enfeeblement.

Stories like “Slum dwellers worst hit as COVID-19 exposes 'homelessness' in Nigeria” (BusinessDay), present a classic example of slum deceit, where instead of drawing attention to the public infrastructure deficits (including housing) that engender the proliferation of slums, frames like: “Many Nigerians are homeless; many sleep under bridges” present the perspective that this is not a government problem, as slum-dwellers are in the way of government’s efforts to ensure urban renewal. This delegitimization of slums and those who live there, especially women, works well to paint as counter-progress whatever empowering initiatives women in these areas look to implement to improve their lives, which further erodes identity, agency, and potential social contribution to resilience efforts.

Similarly, in “Report reveals over 20 m Lagos residents live in slums” (Ripple Effect), the point made that “Government assistance... reached only a fraction of people going hungry” goes on without any gendered analysis of the implications of this inability of the government to meet food security requirements during lockdowns, or how women’s burden of care increased during period. This gender-agnostic framing normalizes a male-centered perspective of resilience that is built around economic productivity and physical utilities, without recognizing the immense role played by women via the reproductive labor, communal care systems, and informal support infrastructures, which provide significant contributions to resilience and recovery, during and post-COVID-19 [2, 57].

4.5 Implication 2: entrenchment of power imbalance

The dominant frame afforded institutional actors, such as the government, NGOs, corporate organizations, etc., as rescuers while painting women and slum residents as submissive beneficiaries represents the media’s proclivity to continue to perpetuate existing power systems in society, which aligns with the position of literature on volume of media coverage given to marginalized and disenfranchised populations, especially women [39, 55]. Borah [10] makes the point that repeated exposure to particular frames influences how the public comprehend and make decisions on issues of social importance. The imbalanced, inordinate focus given to these institution actors in urban recovery and resilience coverage perpetuates the frame that they represent salvation for the vulnerable populations, which reinforces a self-fulfilling prophecy among these populations

about their capacity for self-progress, which in turn dampens the desire for participatory, home-grown development of these spaces.

Examples of foregrounding corporate benevolence such as “COVID-19: Air Peace donates food items to less-privileged in Lagos” (BusinessDay), and: “The airline’s officials visited Sabo, Makoko and Ajegunle areas of Lagos where they gave out edibles including bags of rice...” re-enact this power, influence and capacity imbalance, perpetuating it as long-held, hard-to-change descriptive norms and social expectancies. The implication of this is a top-down approach to resilience efforts, one that throws away principles of social marketing, and adopts a position where the politics of aid has zero contributions from the people who actually need it. Focus is paid more to charity and philanthropy, instead of a development agenda with local buy-in involving all parties, including women.

For women, especially those living in these worst-hit regions of media neglect, this is an example of deliberate dependency engenderment, which is corroborated by Ferguson’s [28] belief that some populations, traditionally women, the poor, etc., are usually considered to lack the efficacy required for self-determinism and would therefore need to be assisted by a benevolent higher power. This is reinforced by a pathology frame, which impairs the attractiveness of slums (and the women) actors to resources outside of the ones provided by these institutional actors. This sustains reliance on these actors, which further validates continued media focus on them and their ‘savior’ activities.

4.6 Implication 3: limiting self-deterministic efficacy

In outlining social reproduction, Ferguson [27] describes the twin-head of the hydra that feminists must contend with in ensuring designed objectives: an economic system (capitalism) and a social system (patriarchy). When one adds the influencing power of the media to mix, the outcome is not just the erasure of gendered narratives in favor of dominant frames of masculinist influence on resilience, but also an erosion of a sense of efficacy by women to provide solutions to the problem. Borah’s [10] selection and salience proposition of framing effect describes the mechanism by which this likely occurs: dominant frames shape considerations of social relevance, which inform descriptive and injunctive norms, which then determines social expectancies. In this case, the vicious cycles of dependency frames of women in the media, especially during COVID-19, perpetuate the normalization of the two aforementioned systems being at the dispensing end of aid, while women and other slum populations are at the receiving end, incapable of (or with limited capacity to) bringing themselves help.

While there may be instances of self-determinism where women engage in attempts at individual economic entrepreneurship, as was the case in the *Women who feed Lagos* story, resilience is presented as individualistic and limited to only a few, while the general collective remain incapable of coordinating conditions of transformation. The individual attempts are covered, but in a fashion that is reminiscent of a news story about an oddity, rather than as a concerted attempt to introduce framing effects that will bolster the collective’s contribution towards resilience.

In summary, these implications reflect the potential damning consequences in the event where the media continue to propagate these disempowering frames and narratives. Priming gendered stereotypes do little to help change Nigeria’s fortunes, as it robs development and resilience efforts of a key player, women, who constitute around 50% of

the total population. Limiting their capacity to contribute to positive change, including improving housing and environmental concerns perpetuating slums in urban landscapes across Nigeria, is tantamount to urban injustice. Delegitimizing women (in slums) efforts at urban renewal, tokenizing recognition of their resilience initiatives, limiting the recognition of their 'soft' support which provided the launchpad for family and community led recovery activities, shifting the blame for the sociostructural barriers that continue to engender their dependence on aid and benevolence, defending the decision to continue to proliferate their disempowering tropes under the guise of performing the surveillance (news reporting) function, are just a few of the instances of media framing's culpability in the maintaining the status quo.

5 Conclusion

The media's narratives of slum-dwelling women in Lagos State during COVID-19 is a scathing example of the failure of the media's expected therapeutic duty, per the development media theory's postulations. By foregrounding narratives on institutional altruism and gendered vulnerability and helplessness, the media draws attention away from the causal the socio-structural failures, such as the inequitable distribution of public infrastructure that necessitate aid in the first place. Instead, their "feminization of paupered helplessness" diminishes the perceived efficacy of women as influential community actors. To engender genuine urban slum women resilience during a pandemic or other public emergencies, a shift toward counter-hegemonic framing is critical. This demands that women be better recognized as primary narrators of their own experiences, and their contributions towards urban resilience, e.g. communal care systems; that media adopt the solutions journalism approach to causally link vulnerability as a product of structural injustice rather than as a function of gendered deficiencies. Also important is the need to challenge the delegitimizing of slum dwellers, especially women in these situations, through participatory and inclusive narratives that recognizes them as essential partners in navigating future urban crises.

Author contributions

ST wrote the introduction and literature review, as well as findings and discussions. AON reviewed the manuscript and contributed the theoretical framework. BF and OA collected data and did analysis. All authors reviewed the manuscript and approved it for submission.

Funding

Financial support was provided by the University of Oklahoma Libraries' Open Access Fund.

Data availability

The materials and data used for this study can be made available by the authors upon request.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Received: 1 May 2026 / Accepted: 21 August 2026



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