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## **African Women and Sport: An Analysis of the Western Press Coverage of 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup.**

### **Abstract**

This study examined the coverage of the 2015 FIFA women's world cup by newspapers in the United States, United Kingdom and Canada. It looked at how the news organizations represented African women footballers that played the game. Textual analysis was used to identify and analyze major themes in the coverage. The findings showed that western press described the African footballers in a way that discussed under-development of their continent by focusing on the players and continent's weaknesses. It also showed that the western newspapers displayed a level of supremacy in the coverage whereby they portrayed the western footballers better than the Africans. Keywords: 2015 FIFA women's world cup, Africa, Canada, western press, textual analysis.

### **Introduction**

The 2015 FIFA women's world cup was hosted by Canada and it featured twenty-four national teams that represented various parts of Africa, Europe, Australia, North America, South America and Asia. The international event took place between June 6, 2015 and July 5, 2015 and was the seventh FIFA women's world cup since the tournament started in 1991 (US Soccer, 2017). This event was not just an opportunity for women of different nations to come together under same umbrella- FIFA, but it was equally a chance for the different national teams to explore their talents in an international game. For African women, the involvement in football goes beyond finding a professional tract, but it also means breaking through social stereotypes and limitations that have defined them for a long time. It is going beyond that "skepticism, neglect and sometimes outright hostility" (Saavedra 2003, p.225) that have plagued African women in their continent. This is because football has been largely considered men's game in Africa (Saavedra, 2003) and so women's participation in such game has not gained much weight in social context.

Also, not only is that women participation in football is challenged by men hegemony, women are also not typically considered in administrative or coaching positions in football (Clark, 2011) because when women apply for such positions, they are required to possess "top national credentials" (Clark 2011, p.838) which are usually not required from the men. This discrimination against women in the African continent continues to challenge the social and professional lives of women who have chosen football as a career. This also makes the women's involvement in the international football game very important. This is because an international match creates platform that operates above national socio-cultural or political biases, thereby, providing equality for all the participants. Also, the international media coverage of African athletes can either help to challenge the stereotypes that surround these African athletes or contribute to the status quo. By having an international media coverage that shows a positive impression about the African women athletes, the women will not only gain popularity at international level and cutting through socio-cultural barriers, but such coverage can also create new perspectives for African women athletes in their respective countries.

Therefore, this study looks at how the US, UK and Canada covered the African athletes during the 2015 FIFA women's world Cup in Canada. These countries are described as western press henceforth. The media of these countries were chosen because they represent well the category of western countries that participated in the competition based on their development. Also, the media of

these countries enjoy developed political and economic, sociological advantages that make their reporting of international news weigh more to the international audience.

### **Sports, Women and Media Coverage in Africa**

Previous studies that have examined gender issues in the media coverage of sports events in Africa. The studies discuss their findings alongside other issues that affect women in Africa and why it might not be too surprising to see how women are underrepresented and misrepresented in sports and its media coverage.

Cooky, Dycus, and Dworkin (2013) carried out a comparative analysis of the media coverage of Caster Semenya, a South African “field star” who won the IAAF 2009 World Championships. Their study compared news coverage in South Africa and United States about Semenya’s “gender verification testing” that she was subjected to prior to her participation in the sport event. The authors used textual analysis to analyze media coverage on the controversy about the gender verification testing. The controversy was about Semenya’s physique if it was representative of how a woman’s build up should be and if she is qualified to “race as a woman” (p. 39). The findings from the study showed that the United States framed the controversy as related to Semenya’s “true” sex and focused on “medicalized” debates about sex testing. South African media discussed it in terms of a nationalistic way and “strategic essentialism” (p.31) to describe the athlete as an actual woman. Similarly, Goslin (2008) conducted a study on gender equity in South African sports. The study used content analysis to examine print media coverage of different sports in South Africa to see if certain sports had more coverage in terms of gender equality. The study was conducted to find out if women sports received good coverage in the country and if a type of sport received more coverage than the other. The findings from the study revealed that South African’s women’s sporting events was largely under-reported compared to men sports. The author argued that findings did not correspond to the country’s claim of gender equality in sport and mentioned that other underlying gender issues might be influencing such attitudes in South African print media.

About leadership in sport, Goslin and Kluka (2014) conducted a study on patrimonial structure in African families continue to limit Malawian women from holding sport leadership position in the country. Their study was done to investigate the perceived effect that sport leadership education has on Malawian women. The study used questionnaires and personal interviews to engage women who held sport leadership positions in Malawi and who had participated in the sport leadership educational program. The findings from the study showed that the program was not only beneficial to their career interests, but also empowered them socially by promoting their self-worth and also, instilled in the participants a sense of collectiveness among women sports leaders in Malawi. The subjects also felt empowered to become decision-makers in broader Malawian sports context.

*Ideological and socio-cultural constraints equally limit women’s participation in sports in Africa. Pelak (2005) examined how South African women who play nationally and in the western province navigate these limitations. The study revealed that the women tried to break through social beliefs, attitudes and perceptions, lack of material and non-material support and gender inequalities barrier to achieve their career dreams by creatively resisting any socio-cultural constraints that challenge their profession in their everyday lives.*

*Lastly, Anaza and McDowell (2013) discussed the limitations against urban Nigerian women’s participation in recreational sport. The study attempted to understand the factors that might constrain or encourage women from participating in leisure sport in an urban city in Nigeria. Through interview with nineteen women, the study showed that women experience different social constraints including interpersonal and structural, that limit their participation in leisure sport.*

*The study also found out that some of these women “negotiate” these constraints by “compromising and anticipating” (p.324) which they believed will benefit them immensely.*

*From the ongoing, we see a trend of how African women participation in sport is limited in terms of media coverage and public support. Some of the issues that the studies above have discussed have deep socio-cultural roots which, implement itself in the sport career of the women. If the society is limiting the women because of their gender, should the media also limit them? Also, how can African women participation in sport gain momentum amidst these socio-cultural challenges? These questions are beyond the scope of this study, but they are asked to raise awareness for the missing coverages of these women in sport. An option to promote women sport in Africa might mean looking towards media coverage in international arena. Unfortunately, a lot of studies are also lacking in this area of research.*

*Thus, this study fills the literature gap in the coverage of African women in sports, especially football, by examining the international news coverage of the 2015 FIFA women’s world cup. The study argues that international media often continue to display neo-colonial attitudes in their reportage of news about Africa. The study reflects the framework of cultural hegemony and ideology (Gramsci, 1971) which promotes the dominant class world view and shows how the wealthy or capitalist exploit culture to their own benefit. In this case, it shows how the west is portrayed as superpower and Africa as a site of naivety. This paper also, contends that international media, especially western media, are key players in positioning how news information are viewed and interpreted in international space. Their influence has been largely traced to their political, economic, technological and media advancement (Mishra, 2013) which accord them the power to define events globally and shape how many people around the world perceive such events. Thus, this study examines how the media in US, UK and Canada covered the African countries that participated in the 2015 FIFA Women World Cup*

### **Research Question**

*How was the 2015 FIFA women’s world cup covered in US, UK and Canada?*

### **Method**

This study uses textual analysis to analyze media coverage from newspapers from US, UK and Canada. Textual analysis is a qualitative method that allows the researcher to explore the “link between media and ideology” (Mishra 2013, p.873). It allows for the study of meanings that quantitative scholars are naturally not sensitive to. A sample of 15 news articles was selected through LexisUni database. The keyword “2015 FIFA Women World Cup” was used to search for the news articles. Articles that were interviews conducted with external persons about the game was not included in the analysis, thereby limiting the sample to only those that were directly from the news organizations. The newspapers chosen are *Washington Post*, *Ottawa Citizen* and *The Guardian*.

The choice of newspaper selection was largely because there was not enough coverage of the event by many newspapers, thereby limiting the choices. However, these newspapers were also chosen because they represent well newspapers that cover international events and have wide readership in their countries of domain. The articles were then read severally to identify themes in the stories. At every stage of the reading, Themes were deduced from words that the authors used, the implied meaning of certain words in the story, the structure of the text and patterns in the text. The timeline for this study was between May 6, 2015 and August 5, 2015. This timeline indicates a month before and a month after the world cup was played. The timeline was chosen to accommodate prior coverage of the world cup and coverage after it.

## Findings

The findings reveal that the African nations were represented quite inferior to the western nations and were stereotyped by their countries' economic and social conditions. Three main themes that appeared in the articles are lack of international expertise, generalization of the performance of the African teams and mentioning of past records to qualify current game.

### *Lack of international Expertise*

This theme explains why the performance of the African team was poor. It emphasized the lack of opportunities for the African players to participate in international matches prior to the world cup and that this affected their performance negatively. Some of examples of this theme can be in *The Guardian* below:

“Imagine going to a World Cup having never played a team outside of your own continent. Imagine the chequered preparation for players whose domestic league has been suspended for the past 18 months. Imagine that, despite being the highest-ranked nation from your continent, you have had only one unofficial friendly, on a training-ground pitch, as the sum of your tournament preparation. Welcome to women's football in Africa (*The Guardian*, June 19, 2015).

This example shows that good performance in international game like the world cup is predicated on having played outside one's country before and that lacking this qualification made the African team defeated. While this might be true, the way this statement is presented above shows more of ridicule than of objectivity.

Another example of lack of international expertise can be seen below:

“Nigeria are the undisputed champions of African women's football, which, unfortunately, isn't not saying a lot. They may have won all but two African Women's Championships, but they have barely won a game at the Women's World Cup” (*The Guardian*, June 2, 2015).

This statement equally downplays on the expertise and proficiency of the Nigerian players and implied that the only reason they are African champion is because they have not contended on world stage. That is, they have only won games within their continent therefore, they are more of a local champion. Lastly, a similar example is found in *Ottawa Citizen* where a comparison was made between the biblical David and Goliath, and Côte d'Ivoire and Germany. The statement from the newspaper showed that the defeat of the African team could be well anticipated and expected as they did not have the necessary skill to combat the Germans. The statement reads that:

“When David faced Goliath, he had better odds than Côte d'Ivoire has against Germany. We're talking Jamaican bobsled team territory here. They made it here following a shocking last-minute victory over South Africa in a battle for third place in the African championships last fall, as the continent was allowed three representatives in the World Cup. Côte d'Ivoire has limited international experience and there's deep respect for the world's dominant teams” (*Ottawa Citizen*, June 6, 2015). The emphasis on international skill made in these newspapers shows that the skills of the players were perceived as unmatchable with teams from other countries which are mostly western and so their exit from the world cup was predictable.

### *Generalization of the African team performance*

Another theme that emerged in the analysis of the coverage is the way the performance of one African team is used to describe other African teams or qualify their performance as well. By relating these African nations who are distinct in every aspect except maybe for color identity, the newspaper makes an implicit generalization of the performance of African teams. This kind of

generalization is not noticed in the coverage of other nations whereby for instance, the United States is singled out as a representative of North America. Examples from *The Guardian* and *Ottawa Citizen* can be seen below:

“Cameroon, which defeated Ecuador and upset Switzerland, became the first African qualifier for the knockout stage since Nigeria in 1999”. (*Ottawa Citizen*, June 19, 2015).

“Little wonder then that Nigeria, the highest-ranked African team at 33rd in the world, sit below representatives from every other continent in world football bar Oceania... A paucity of experience at youth and senior level then is holding African teams back just as the rest of the world move forward.”(*The Guardian*, June 19, 2015).

In the two examples above, Cameroon and Nigeria were represented as having some exceptional performance and ranking which is untypical of African nations. The contextualization of the two different teams within the larger continental setting, frames the two teams as the heroes or stars of Africa and other African nations far below them. Thus, emphasizing a general lack of expertise of the African teams.

### ***Mentioning of past records as a precursor for current game.***

Throughout the coverage of the African team, there were constant references to previous performances of the team and how that compares with where they are currently in the game. The continuous mentioning of past game records creates a context for which the performance of the team can be assessed. For instance, in the examples below, by continuously describing the potentials of the players alongside where they were “stuck” in 1999, the newspapers set a schema in the audiences on what to anticipate from the players in the current tournament. This could mean that the players do not have the necessary skill needed to advance beyond group stage or advancing beyond group stage will be untypical of the African players.

“Nigeria are the perfect example. Perennial African champions, experienced at World Cups - albeit having only once progressed past the group stages, in 1999” (The Guardian, June 19, 2015).

“The Americans have won all four meetings with Nigeria, three in group stages of the World Cup. During the 1999 championship run, the U.S. team yielded the opening goal and then scored seven in a row. In 2003, the margin was 5-0. Four years later, it was 1-0. The other encounter was at the 2000 Olympics, a 3-1 outcome” (Washington Post, June 16, 2015).

“In any other group, the Super Falcons would advance, a feat they haven't realized since 1999” (Washington Post, June 7, 2015).

### **Discussion**

From the findings above, we see how the coverage of the African women athletes can be damaging to their career, social image and gender. This is because many African women who played in the game have struggled to break through cultural stereotypes to represent their different countries in the competition. However, the way they have been represented by the international media is not only discouraging to the athletes but also to the wider African female audience who anticipates being in such career. The coverage sends a clear message of not only economic or political failure in the African nations that were represented in the game, but also a lack of requisite and skillful knowledge necessary for international games among African women. These women are made to feel as though they could never win an international match and need years of experience before they can ever compete with people from developed nations. This type of coverage continues to reinforce Africa/African women as an underdeveloped continent and people which needs help from international players.

## Conclusion

This paper has been able to discuss the need to examine the 2015 FIFA women's world cup with reference to African athletes that played the game. It states that there is a lack of enough scholarship on how African women have been represented in international media. It also discussed that the need for such scholarship is very important for the socio-cultural emancipation of women in Africa. The way international media portray the African women athletes is important to the local and global perception of the women athletes. In addition, because women participation in sport is still an upcoming area of women profession in Africa (Pelak 2005; Anaza&McDowell 2013), the representation of African women who participated in the world cup might either have a positive or negative effect on the women's football career and even upcoming African women footballers. Therefore, while this study does not mention that the coverage of the game should be devoid of facts from the competition, it does argue that the coverage should not include social prejudices and neo-colonialist portrayal of Africa. It strongly discusses the need for international media coverage of African women that is representative of the women's potentials and unbiased reportage of their performances in global events.

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