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Silenced and Framed: Women Journalists' Safety, Newsroom Access, and Gendered Media Representation as Barriers to SDG 5 in West Africa

Emma Ransom Smith

University of Memphis.

Abstract: This study examines how gendered barriers within journalism affect women's participation, safety, newsroom access, and representation in Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal. The study considers the implications for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) on gender equality. The study adopts a document-based conceptual research design which draws on existing literature, institutional reports, and policy documents published primarily between 2018 and 2026. The analysis is guided by the Feminist Standpoint Theory and connects women's experiences within news organizations with the ways women- and gender related issues are represented in public discourses. The findings show five interconnected challenges, which are gendered harassment and safety risks, informal newsroom gatekeeping, unequal access to influential assignments and leadership, underrepresentation of women as authoritative policy voices and experts, and limitations in conventional approaches to measuring press freedom. The evidence shows that women journalists experience sexual harassment and discriminatory assignment practices, online abuse, and limited institutional protection. The study argues that gender equality in journalism should be understood as a structural issue rather than simply a question of the number of women employed in media organizations. By integrating Feminist Standpoint Theory with Framing Theory, the study contributes a conceptual account of how newsroom conditions and media representation reinforce each other, showing that progress towards SDG 5 requires simultaneous attention to power, leadership opportunities, occupational access, and representation. The study concludes that gender-responsive institutional policies, stronger safety mechanisms, gender audits, mentorship, and workplace protection are essential for strengthening women's participation and supporting more inclusive media systems in West Africa.

Keywords: Gender equality, Women journalists, Press freedom, Gender media Representation.

INTRODUCTION

The expansion of broadcast, print, social media, and online media has considerably transformed the role of journalism in West African public life. Media organisations increasingly function as arenas in which political priorities are debated, social groups negotiate visibility and recognition, and public officials are scrutinized. Nonetheless, the expansion of media systems has not erased gender inequalities within journalism. Women are still disproportionately exposed to discriminatory newsroom practices, unequal career opportunities, sexual harassment, exclusion from influential editorial and leadership positions, as well as online abuse. These challenges and inequalities not only affect women working in the media but also affect the quality and diversity of public discourse. UNESCO (2025) observes that women journalists continue to suffer harassment and exclusion that limit their participation in public life. Evidence from Nigeria and Ghana underpins this observation, highlighting that gendered risks operate both during journalistic assignments and within newsrooms (UNESCO, 2025).

The challenge is particularly crucial because journalism does not simply report social reality; it also participates in its construction. Decisions about who is interviewed, which issues receive consecutive attention, whose expertise is considered authoritative, and how women are portrayed in the media can shape public understandings of leadership, gender, and political legitimacy.

Historically, journalism in West Africa has evolved within economic, political, and social institutions characterized by considerable gender asymmetries. Despite the increase in women's journalism in the sub-region, their entry into the profession has not inevitably translated into gaining equal access to decision-making positions, editorial authority, or prestigious reporting beats. Evidence from the groundbreaking research conducted by Sackey *et al.* (2021) documented that men continue to overshadow women in the journalism profession and that women experienced discrimination in remuneration and job roles, while gender stereotypes continued to influence perceptions of female journalists.

The difference between substantive access and numerical presence is significant. A newsroom may employ a significant number of women but may be simultaneously limiting their opportunities to cover security, politics, investigative, and economic affairs. Such occupational segmentation can revive the assumption that women are more suitable for so-called "soft" news while men are

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***Corresponding Author:** Emma Ransom Smith

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better suited to areas related to public power and political authority. Contemporary evidence from Nigeria similarly notes persistent patriarchal norms and newsroom discrimination as limitations on women's career advancement (Mohammed *et al.*, 2026).

Safety forms another dimension of this structural inequality (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2022). Women journalists may experience risks emanating from their professional activities as journalists and other risks related to gender. Studies involving female journalists covering or reporting elections in Nigeria documented sexual harassment as a prominent offline concern and stalking, as well as defamatory online comments as critical digital risks; the study also highlighted limited institutional support from media institutions (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2022). In the context of Ghana, Boateng & Lauk (2021), using interviews with 23 female journalists, revealed that several participants had experienced sexual harassment from influential men either while undertaking assignments or within the newsroom.

Additionally, digitisation has escalated rather than eroded these vulnerabilities. Online harassment can follow journalists beyond the physical newsroom, exposing them to reputational attacks, sustained intimidation, and pressures that can contribute to fatigue and self-censorship. Studies on Nigerian journalists identified that online harassment could become chronic and escalating, with investigative and political reporting connected with increased exposure (Uwalaka & Amadi, 2023). Also, UNESCO's recent evaluation further points out that online harassment is a particularly important form of violence against women journalists worldwide and that digital attacks can have consequences leading to physical spaces.

The Ghanaian, Nigerian, and Senegalese contexts are especially useful for understanding these dynamics since they highlight how gender, political communication, and journalism intersect in diverse national media environments. Nigeria has an influential and large media sector; however, the sector continues to experience critical gender disparities within journalism. Ghana, on the other hand, offers evidence of newsroom discrimination and sexual harassment irrespective of a relatively pluralistic media environment. Senegal, meanwhile, offers a substantial Francophone West African context in which subjects of women's participation, representation, and media access can be considered beyond Anglophone institutional experiences. Across these three contexts, women-led media initiatives and professional networks prove that women are not only passive recipients of structural exclusion. They also substantially constitute significant agents of institutional change, challenging established editorial practices and creating optional spaces for the voices of women.

The correlation between these newsroom conditions and SDG 5 is thus direct. SDG 5.1 advocates an end to discrimination against women [and girls]; Target 5.2 seeks to address violence against women; Target 5.5 requires the full and active participation of women and equal opportunities for leadership and decision-making; and Target 5B acknowledges technology as a mechanism for women's empowerment (United Nations, 2026). Current global evidence, however, shows that progress is slow or even stalled. A 2026 United Nations Sustainability Report states that women occupy about 30.5% of managerial positions globally, although women account for around 40% of global employment, and violence and harassment continue to discourage women's participation in public leadership. In effect, newsroom gender equality should be deemed part of institutional infrastructure requisite for achieving SDG 5 instead of considering it as a peripheral media-sector issue.

Irrespective of increasing recognition of gender equality in international development and increasing numbers of women going into journalism, significant limitations persist, constraining women's participation and influence within West African media. Current research has documented individual dimensions of the issue, including online abuse, sexual harassment, occupational discrimination, and inadequate representation. Regardless, these dimensions are often investigated or studied separately. Little attention has been given to how digital and physical safety, gendered editorial, and newsroom access framing interrelate as mutually reinforcing strategies of exclusion. This captures an important empirical and conceptual problem. When women journalists face threats, discrimination, or harassment practices, their ability to attract influential assignments and exercise editorial authority may be limited. Simultaneously, limited participation in news production can considerably impact whose perspectives are adopted or tabled at policy debates, as well as how women themselves are represented in news coverage. Contemporary

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Nigerian evidence, for instance, highlights that female political actors received comparatively limited coverage and were often represented through supportive or passive rather than leadership-oriented frames during the country's 2023 elections. The problem thus transcends whether women are present in newsrooms: it is about whether they have sufficient institutional power and security to impact what becomes visible within public discourse.

This study examines the gender barriers that affect women's participation and representation in journalism, the sexual, physical, and digital safety risks they experience, and how newsroom practices and structures influence their access to leadership roles and influential roles in Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal.

Theoretically, the study links feminist standpoint theory with framing theory to explore how women's position within media institutions can shape the interpretation and production of public knowledge. Feminist standpoint offers a foundation for understanding how marginalized professional experiences generate perspectives that may be excluded from prevailing institutional knowledge, while framing theory explains how editorial choices generate and shape meanings around women, policy issues, and leadership. Institutionally, the study can help media organizations, professional associations, editors, and policymakers in Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal identify gender inequality as a structural newsroom issue rather than a separate problem of individual misconduct.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Frameworks of Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) and Framing Theory

Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) emerged from feminist epistemological critiques of traditional knowledge production. Its central proposal is that knowledge is socially situated: what individuals can see, know, and interpret is shaped by their position within social structures. FST challenges the proposition that knowledge can always be produced from a supposedly universal or neutral perspective. For this study, the contemporary application of FST to journalism is particularly relevant. Steiner (2018) highlights that the claim of journalism to objectivity can be questioned through the question of whose knowledge and experiences have historically been treated as authoritative. Recent scholarship on journalism continues this development by applying FST epistemology to embodied journalistic experience. For instance, Velloso (2026) opines that journalists' lived experiences and identities can drive connection-based reporting, allowing reporters to develop trust, identify trust, and introduce greater diversity into news production. The implication is not that journalists should neglect ethics of verification and fairness. But FST challenges the assertion that professional objectivity requires the removal of positionality. The position of a journalist may impact what becomes visible without necessarily establishing whether the resulting journalism is accurate.

Applied to this study, FST proposes that the experiences of female journalists, including exclusion, uneven assignments, harassment, and limited authority, provide evidence about the operation of newsroom power. Proponents of the theory suggest that the experiences of female journalists are not merely personal narratives; they can uncover institutional processes. For instance, if women repeatedly report that political assignments are disproportionately allocated to men, this experience can be interpreted as evidence of a gendered institutional structure. If women report that harassment discourages them from covering specific beats, safety becomes an organizational condition influencing journalistic access. Recent African studies strengthen this application (Adjin-Tettey *et al.*, 2023; Ojo *et al.*, 2026; Owilla *et al.*, 2025). A study of Zimbabwean newsrooms used FST and intersectionality to analyse and debate the silencing of women's voices. The significance of this study for West Africa lies in its theoretical and methodological demonstration that everyday professional experiences can illuminate larger structures of power.

Irrespective of the theory's usefulness. FST has limitations. First, the theory of "women's standpoint" can become overly generalized if differences among women are neglected. West African female journalists do not comprise a homogeneous group. A senior urban television journalist, a freelance reporter in a rural area, and a young digital journalist may encounter newsroom power very differently. Second, the theory can risk romanticizing marginalized experience. Marginalization does not necessarily generate superior knowledge. Experience must still be critically evaluated, interpreted, and compared. Velloso's (2026) work is relevant because it does not regard identity as an automatic guarantee of

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better journalism; rather, it considers how embodied experience can produce particular reporting affordances. Lastly, FST focuses basically on social position and knowledge and thus requires supplementation when the study question issues the textual construction of meaning. Knowing that women are excluded from specific spaces does not, by itself, explain how news stories later represent women. This limitation offers the principal justification for the integration of Framing Theory.

Another theory useful to this study is Framing Theory, which conceptualizes media as active participants in the construction of meaning rather than neutral channels through which information passes (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Robert Entman's fundamental formulation defines framing as the selection and increased salience of particular aspects of perceived reality. Recent applications maintain this emphasis on exclusion, selection, emphasis, and interpretation. Contemporary African literature, for instance, specifically applies framing to assess how political actors and gender issues are constructed via media discourse. Framing operates at many levels. At the most fundamental level, journalists determine which events, actors, and issues attract attention. At the textual level, choices of headlines, language, quotations, photographs, and contextual information give specific interpretations greater attention and relevance. At the interpretive level, audiences may use these frames to assess social problems and political actors. For the current study, framing is particularly relevant because gender inequality can be regenerated through both meaning and visibility. Women may be underrepresented, absent, or present but framed in ways that erode their authority. The theory argues that the way information is presented – its "frame"- shapes how people perceive, understand, and react to it. Entman proposed that "effective frames perform four key functions in communication: define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest solutions" (Arowolo, 2017).

There is a gendered frame when news representation interprets issues or individuals through gender-specific assumptions. The media may frame women as mothers, victims, emotional actors, caregivers, sexualized subjects, or symbolic representatives of gender. Likewise, they may be framed as policy actors, political leaders, and agents of social change. The difference between these frames is not just semantic (Arowolo, 2017). Entman argued that frames can create moral assessments, causal explanations, and possible solutions. Arowolo (2017) cites some real-life examples of media framing, with particular focus on the case of Palestine. According to Arowolo (2017), the media frames the situation in Palestine in different ways, shaping how people perceive and understand the conflict. Arowolo (2017) says that "some news reports use the conflict frame, without explaining the power difference"; "others use the responsibility frame, blaming only the Palestinian side while ignoring the role of occupation and blockade"; "the human-interest frame is used when stories show the suffering of Palestinian families, especially women and children, to create empathy". These different frames can cause audiences to see Palestinians as either aggressors or victims, even when the facts remain the same. Applying this to this study, it can be deduced that reporting violence against women as a separate criminal event frames the issue differently from reporting it as a structural outcome of gender inequality. Contemporary studies on gender-based violence can ascertain whether violence is perceived as an individual event or a wider social problem. Again, depicting a female politician as "controversial" because of assertive behavior may generate a different interpretation from portraying the same behavior as evidence of leadership. The gendered nature of the frame lies in the standards against which behavior is assessed.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a document-based, conceptual research design to evaluate the correlation between women's safety, gendered media representation, and newsroom access in West Africa. Consistent with its conceptual dimension, the study does not produce primary empirical data through tools like questionnaires, interviews, or observation. It systematically identifies, evaluates, and synthesizes existing academic literature, monitoring datasets, institutional reports, and policy documents addressing journalism, gender, women's representation, and press freedom. A document-based approach is suitable for this study because the study aims to link evidence gathered across different national and institutional contexts rather than measure the experiences of a single population (Bowen, 2009).

The evidentiary base comprises contemporary sources, mainly between 2018 and 2026, supplemented only where necessary by

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foundational theoretical works. Specific attention is given to the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), including its *West Africa Freedom of Expression Monitor*, because its monitoring work offers regionally important evidence about attacks on journalists, digital rights, and limitations on expression (Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), 2024). Global evidence is used comparatively through the *World Press Freedom Index* produced by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), the Committee to Protect Journalists' documentation of journalist attacks (CPJ), and UNESCO's *World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development report*.

Gender-specific evidence is drawn from monitoring and studies conducted by UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists about online violence against female journalists, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) reporting on gender-based discrimination, and violence within the profession. These sources are critically evaluated rather than treated as equal forms of evidence because institutional reports are different in their geographical coverage, methodology, definitions of violations, and sampling.

Evidence about media representation is mainly drawn from the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) (Macharia, 2020), coordinated by the World Association for Christian Communication. GMMP is especially valuable because its longitudinal monitoring framework allows for comparison of women's visibility, representation across media systems, occupational roles, and sourcing (Macharia, 2020). Development and policy documents from UN Women, the African Union, UNDP, and ECOWAS offer the institutional context for evaluating journalism-related gender inequalities against the objectives of SDG 5.

The selected documents are subjected to thematic document analysis. The analysis highlights recurring themes about newsroom access, leadership exclusion, occupational segregation, harassment, digital and physical actors, peripheral subjects, or victims. These themes are then interpreted through Feminist Standpoint Theory and Framing Theory. FST underpins the examination of how women's situated professional experiences unveil institutional power. Framing Theory also allows for the analysis of how media selection, omission, and emphasis construct meanings about gender and women. The approach thus links the conditions of news production with the representational outcomes highlighted in existing evidence.

Framing and Women's Political Visibility

The Nigerian case offers particularly relevant evidence. The study of online coverage of the 2023 elections found that women political actors were not only underrepresented but also more often associated with supportive or passive roles (Ojo *et al*., 2026). This shows the difference between substantive visibility and descriptive visibility (De Vreese, 2005). A woman may appear in a news broadcast or article but still be framed as secondary to political decision-making. This difference is key to the present study. The study is concerned not merely with counting women in policy coverage but with assessing whether they are represented as authoritative participants in policy and decision-making processes. The important categories thus include women as policymakers, sources, experts, citizens, political actors, symbolic figures, and victims.

The major theoretical contribution of this study is in the combination of FST and Framing Theory. The two theories address different but interrelated stages of media power. FST addresses the production dimension of journalism. FST asks: "Who can enter impactful journalistic spaces?" "Whose experiences are acknowledged as legitimate?" "Who is assigned particular beats?" "Who has authority to make editorial decisions?" "Under what conditions can journalists safely exercise professional judgement?" Framing Theory, on the other hand, addresses the content dimension of journalism (Kabha, 2026). It asks: "How are women represented?" "Which aspects of women's experiences are made important?" "Which are omitted?" "Are women represented as authoritative policy actors or basically as victims and subjects of personal narratives?" "What causes are attributed to gender inequality, and what solutions are implied?"

The analytical value of combining the two theories lies in linking these questions and not treating them separately. If female journalists are systematically excluded from political reporting, this may impact the range of views available during the production of political news. If they encounter harassment while reporting contentious political issues, safety concerns may influence the subjects they pursue or the level of professional risk they can accommodate. If women are exempted editorial leadership, the capacity to

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challenge gendered frames may also be decreased. Nonetheless, the correlation should not be treated deterministically. It would be analytically weak to suggest that female journalists necessarily produce feminist news or that male journalists necessarily reproduce patriarchal representations. News production is influenced by organizational routines, professional norms, commercial pressures, audience expectations, and political contexts. Female journalists can reproduce gender stereotypes, while male journalists can challenge them. The importance of FST is thus not that gender identity necessarily establishes journalistic output, but that social position influences the conditions under which knowledge is produced and shaped.

Inequality in West African Journalism

The gender inequality in West African journalism cannot be limited to the numerical representation of women within news institutions. The challenge is multidimensional, consisting of women's access to influential reporting assignments, exposure to gender-specific forms of occupational insecurity, participation in editorial decision-making, and the subsequent representation of women and gender issues in news content. This chapter develops the argument above through a critical review of the relevant literature as well as the application of two contemporary theoretical theories: Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) and Framing Theory. This chapter is specifically concerned with the correlation between the conditions under which news is produced and the meanings communicated through news afterwards. Contemporary scholarship consistently shows that the modern newsroom is not a neutral professional environment. Its organisational schedules, definitions of journalistic authority, and occupational hierarchies can validate gender inequalities. Current debates in Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, and other West African countries highlight that women journalists still experience discriminatory assignment practices, precarious employment, sexual harassment, unequal access to leadership, and inadequate institutional protection (Adjin-Tettey *et al*., 2023; Anchirinah & Zirugo, 2026; Mohammed *et al*., 2026). Simultaneously, studies on media representation show that women are often less visible as political actors, authoritative sources, and experts, while gendered frames can confirm family roles, appearance, victimhood, or personality over policy competence (Owilla *et al*., 2025; Owilla *et al*., 2025).

The critical issue, thus, is not merely whether women enter journalism but whether they have the institutional security, epistemic legitimacy, and authority necessary to impact news production. This chapter posits that FST is especially relevant for exploring the production-side dimension of this problem since it treats situated experience as a source of knowledge about institutional power. Also, framing theory complements this perspective by explaining how editorial selection, omission, and emphasis influence the representation of women and gender issues. Their combination allows for an analysis of gender inequality that moves from the conditions of news production to the representational outcomes of these conditions.

Gender inequality in journalism should be considered as a structural rather than just numerical phenomenon. A narrow exploration and understanding of gender equality might evaluate the proportion of women employed in media institutions and interpret increased employment of women as evidence of progress. An approach like this is inadequate since numerical presence does not necessarily correspond to organisational influence. Although women may constitute a considerable proportion of reporters, while remaining concentrated in less prestigious beats, are neglected in senior editorial positions, or are subject to organisational cultures that privilege masculine professional norms. Current studies reveal this distinction. For instance, Assmann & Eckert (2024), assessing women journalists in leadership, pinpointed that the presence of women in managerial positions can impact newsroom culture and working conditions, yet leadership representation alone does not spontaneously remove established organisational practices. The importance of leadership is thus relational: women leaders may get opportunities to challenge institutional routines, but their capacity to change newsroom culture relies on wider institutional structures and organisational authority. This is especially significant for the present study because it argues that gender equality should be evaluated through access to decision-making power, instead of representation alone.

The difference is also glaring in African media systems. The study by Owilla *et al*. (2025) of East African media revealed that women were still underrepresented in news coverage and were disproportionately represented through traditional/normative gender roles, comprising victimhood and caregiving. The authors document

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that women were less visible in coverage regarding political participation and economic empowerment. Although the study is about East and not West Africa, its analytical significance lies in highlighting that women's employment in media does not automatically lead to gender-equitable media content. The representation and production dimensions of gender inequality must consequently be analysed simultaneously. The difference is particularly for West Africa since media institutions operate within societies where political authority, social expectations, and economic power are still gendered. The concept of newsroom access is thus key to this study. Access refers not just to entry into journalism but to purposeful participation in the occupational spaces where news values are established, and stories are edited, commissioned, and prioritized. A female journalist who is formally employed but repeatedly assigned lifestyle stories while male colleagues are assigned investigative, political, or economic stories may possess employment without equivalent professional access. Likewise, a journalist may have reporting responsibilities without possessing adequate editorial authority to determine how stories are framed.

Contemporary evidence from Ghana demonstrates precisely this problem. Reports on female journalists' experiences show that women journalists have been assigned "soft" news, whereas their male colleagues receive more prestigious assignments, along with experiences of wage inequality, as well as other forms of professional disadvantages. These patterns are crucial because assignments are structures through which journalists build up expertise, professional networks, visibility, and promotion opportunities. Thus, gendered assignment practices have cumulative consequences.

Women Journalists, Newsroom Power and Occupational Inequality

Newsroom inequality is sustained through both formal and informal mechanisms. Formal mechanisms consist of recruitment, remuneration, promotion, and organisational policy. Informal mechanisms consist of professional networks, everyday interactions, gender stereotypes, and assumptions about women's availability for specific assignments. The latter can be particularly difficult to identify since they may operate through apparently neutral professional judgements. Mohammed *et al.* (2026), for instance, highlight that female journalists in North Central Nigeria continue to experience patriarchal norms that influence their career advancement. Their study is important because it goes beyond a simple representation of women in the workforce and assesses the organisational processes through which patriarchal expectations become integrated in newsroom life. The authors identify factors like gendered beat allocation, dismissal of women's editorial contributions, and exclusion from decision-making as mechanisms through which women's professional voices can be restricted. Findings like these further complicate the traditional assumption that journalism's professional norms are inherently merit-based. Journalism often presents itself as a profession governed by verification, objectivity, and professional competence. Still, feminist scholarship challenges the notion that professional norms operate independently of social power. The criteria through which competence is acknowledged may themselves have evolved in historically male-dominated organizations.

Steiner's (2018) application of feminist epistemology to journalism is especially relevant for this study. Steiner (2018) argues that standpoint epistemology can explain journalism because objectivity, professional authority, and credibility are themselves influenced by experience and social position. Instead of considering experience as a barrier to professional knowledge, feminist standpoint asks how specific social locations shape what can be acknowledged, seen, and understood. This does not mean female journalists instinctively produce more accurate journalism than males. An interpretation like this would capture the essence of gender and would oppose the more sophisticated version of standpoint theory. Rather, the assertion is that marginalised positions can make institutional assumptions more visible. A woman repeatedly exempted from political assignments may notice the operation of gendered assignment practices in ways that her colleagues who benefit from them would recognise. Likewise, a female journalist subjected to gendered harassment may consider safety as an occupational condition rather than an individual inconvenience. This difference between essentialism and situated knowledge is critical. Feminist standpoint theory does not assume all women share a single standpoint. Women's experiences differ by age, class, language, ethnicity, marital status, religion, employment status, geographical location, and other social factors. Consequently, this study uses FST not to

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construct "the West African woman journalist" as a homogeneous subject but to examine how situated experiences highlight different configurations of institutional power.

Contemporary studies show the significance of this approach. A 2026 study of Ghanaian female journalists identified that prolonged unpaid labour, precarious employment, harassment, gender discrimination, and career stagnation interact to create economic vulnerability (Anchirinah & Zirugo, 2026). The importance of these findings transcends employment conditions because economic precarity can influence the ability of a journalist to resist discriminatory practices. An employee who faces job insecurity has fewer resources with which to challenge harassment or refuse unsafe assignments. Hence, newsroom inequality operates through an interrelation between dependence, power, and voice. Formal employment gives access to journalism; nevertheless, hierarchical authority and economic dependence can limit the ability to fully exercise that access meaningfully.

Safety as a Gendered Dimension of Network

Journalistic safety is frequently conceptualized in terms of risks common to all journalists: arrest, physical assault, surveillance, intimidation, or attacks by political actors. A gender-sensitive view shows that female journalists can experience additional forms of vulnerability, including gendered insults, sexualized threats, sexual harassment, and attacks directed at their personal identities. Research in Ghana pinpoints the multidimensional nature of this problem. Adjin-Tettey *et al*. (2023), based on interviews with female journalists working in rural and peri-urban Ghana, revealed that emotional and physical threats and poor working conditions constituted critical safety concerns. Also, the geographical dimension is crucial because discussions of media safety often privilege journalists operating in major metropolitan centres. Peri-urban and rural journalists may encounter additional vulnerabilities coming from limited organisational resources and weaker institutional protection.

Safety should thus be understood as an enabling condition of journalistic freedom. A journalist who anticipates physical attack, harassment, or institutional abandonment may change professional behaviour even when no explicit censorship exists. The consequences can be understood as anticipatory self-censorship. Instead of being directly prohibited from reporting a particular issue, journalists may avoid assignments, subjects, or sources since the anticipated cost of doing so is high. This becomes particularly important during elections. UNESCO and African Women in Media organised a 2024 workshop in Dakar specifically addressing the increased safety threats confronting female journalists during electoral periods. The workshop identified both offline and online gender-based attacks and newsroom biases as important concerns. UNESCO also documents that 73% of female journalists surveyed globally had suffered online violence. The relevance to West Africa is significant because elections are periods when political journalism becomes simultaneously more dangerous and visible. Female journalists covering elections may thus experience a contradiction: political reporting offers professional opportunities for career advancement and visibility, but it can also expose them to increased gendered hostility.

Online harassment further complicates the safety question. If harassment is theorized solely as a physical-security issue, digital violence may be considered secondary. Nonetheless, online attacks can erode professional credibility, extend intimidation, and bring psychological distress into the private lives of journalists. Also, studies among Nigerian journalists revealed that online harassment could be chronic, acute, or escalating and that it could lead to fatigue, self-censorship, and anxiety (Uwalaka & Amadi, 2023). A significant qualification is necessary. Not every study of online harassment reveals gender as the major trigger (Uwalaka & Amadi, 2023; Adjin-Tettey *et al*., 2023; Holton *et al*., 2023). For instance, Uwalaka & Amadi (2023) identified that investigative and political reporting were substantial drivers of online harassment and advised against assuming that gender alone explains all attacks – female journalists aren't always attacked due to their gender. Analytically, this matters because it prevents the study from limiting journalist harassment to gender. Rather, gender should be understood as interrelating with journalist role, political context, beat, and institutional position. Nevertheless, for female journalists, gendered and political vulnerability can overlap. A female investigating corruption may be targeted due to the political sensitivity of her work while simultaneously receiving gender-specific attacks aimed at undermining her credibility as a woman. The consequential risk is thus both gendered and occupational.

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Digital Harassment and the Transformation of Newsroom Boundaries

Digital journalism has increased opportunities for women to produce, disseminate, and own media content. Online platforms can decrease certain traditional boundaries to entry, allowing women to create independent platforms and develop professional networks beyond traditional media institutions. However, digitalisation has not automatically democratized gender relations. Examining online journalists in Nigeria, Nwaolikpe & Ajaegbu (2023) opine that digital technologies have created opportunities for women's participation while simultaneously exposing women journalists to online harassment. The coexistence of employment and vulnerability is key to exploring and understanding modern journalism. Technology changes the means through which women participate but does not necessarily change the power relations governing participation. By implication, digital platforms can increase the consequences of gendered attacks since personal and professional spheres become increasingly interrelated. The social media account of a journalist may simultaneously function as a professional communication tool, a site of personal expression, and an audience engagement mechanism. Eventually, attacks directed at the gender, appearance, sexuality, or family life of a journalist can become mechanisms for delegitimizing professional authority.

Gendered Representation in Policy and Political News

The second main dimension of the study is about media representation. News channels do not just decide which events become news; they also shape the meanings assigned to those events, as well as the social identities of the actors involved. Gendered representation consequently becomes a question of political power. Studies on Nigerian electoral media coverage offer an understanding of this problem. A recent study of online coverage of the 2023 Nigerian general elections identified that female politicians received significantly less coverage than their male counterparts and were often depicted in supportive, passive, or non-leadership roles (Ojo *et al*., 2026). The study specifically connects these patterns to framing and feminist views, contending that digital media can reproduce gender inequality through both representational and visibility choices. The challenge is not simply the amount of coverage, but how women are covered and represented can be equally consequential (Ojo *et al*., 2026). A female political leader framed basically through family relationships, emotionality, physical appearance, or personal morality is constructed differently from a male politician framed through institutional authority, competence, and political strategy. Such framing can implicitly portray masculine leadership as normal and feminine leadership as exceptional.

Contemporary African scholarship offers comparable evidence. Studies on gendered political framing have revealed patterns in which female candidates are associated with personal lives, appearance, and emotional attributes, while men are associated with policy and leadership competence. More contemporary studies in Africa similarly suggest that gendered media narratives can represent women leaders as deviations from specifically masculine models of political authority. This has implications for SDG 5 since representation impacts the symbolic boundaries of political participation. If women are frequently portrayed as victims, symbolic participants, or mothers and not decision-makers, media discussions may normalize the belief that political authority belongs fundamentally to men. Nevertheless, framing should not be considered a mechanical process in which journalists intentionally enforce stereotypes. Frames can come through source availability, institutional routines, editorial conventions, news values, and cultural assumptions. This difference is significant because it moves analysis away from blaming individual journalists towards assessing the organisational conditions under which specific representations become more likely.

FINDINGS

The document-based analysis identifies five interrelated themes regarding female journalists' safety, media representation, and newsroom access in West Africa. The evidence does not support considering these issues as separate forms of disadvantage. Instead, it highlights a relationship between gendered insecurity, representational inequality, and institutional gatekeeping. This correlation is particularly significant when interpreted through Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) and Framing Theory. FST directs attention to how women's situated experiences show the operation of institutional power, and Framing Theory explains how professional and institutional processes can influence the visibility and meaning attached to women in news conversation. The themes below thus move from the conditions of

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journalistic production to their implications for representation and press freedom.

Gendered Harassment, Safety, and the Chilling of Women's Journalism

The first recurring theme is the persistence of gender-specific danger against female journalists. Media Foundation for West Africa's (MFWA) West African research report covers physical attacks, threats, arrests, offline and online harassment, discriminatory newsroom practices, and sexual harassment across Guinea-Bissau, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, and Niger. Significantly, the evidence highlights that vulnerability exists both inside and outside the newsroom. In Nigeria, for instance, female journalists reported poor welfare, sexual harassment, gender discrimination, insecure employment, and weak institutional support as their major safety concerns (Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), 2023a; 2023b). This finding is analytically significant because it challenges a traditional conceptualization of press freedom as freedom from state interference alone. A journalist can formally have freedom of expression while also operating within an occupational environment in which gendered intimidation limits what she can safely report. The difference between substantive freedom and formal freedom is thus critical. Press freedom becomes incomplete when the right to report exists only in principle, but the conditions requisite to exercise that right are distributed unequally.

The global study by Posetti *et al*. (2022), supported by the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) and UNESCO, validates this interpretation. Among the female journalists surveyed by the authors, 73% reported experiencing online violence, with 20% reporting offline attacks linked to online abuse. The effects extended into professional behaviour: respondents retreated from public visibility, withdrew from online interaction, and, in some cases, left journalism or

employment (Posetti *et al*., 2022). These findings should not be mechanically generalized to West Africa since the survey was global. Nonetheless, they remain theoretically relevant when considered alongside MFWA's region-specific evidence. Through FST, harassment can thus be deciphered as more than interpersonal misconduct. It involves an institutional mechanism that influences whose knowledge is recognized in public debate. When threats encourage female journalists to stay away from particular assignments, investigative perspectives, and sources become less likely to enter the news agenda. A study by Ferrier (2018), supported by the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF), similarly identifies harassment and attacks as risks to both journalists and the stories they produce.

This theme hence points a chain of potential consequences: gendered harassment → perceived insecurity → reduced journalistic visibility → changed professional behaviour → narrower news agendas. This association should not be treated as deterministic, because journalists have and exercise agency and institutions can offer effective protection. Regardless, the consistency of the evidence proves that safety is a considerable dimension of women's participation in journalism rather than an ancillary welfare issue.

Informal Gatekeeping and Unequal Newsroom Access

The second theme is about informal editorial gatekeeping. The scholarship shows that gender inequality can persist even where organizations have formal commitments to equality. Gatekeeping often operates through everyday decisions about assignments, professional credibility, ethics, sources, and promotion. MFWA's study in West Africa records male dominance, limited opportunities for leadership, and discriminatory practices as persistent barriers (MFWA, 2023c). Its Guinea-Bissau report, for example, reveals male dominance and the lack of opportunities for women to occupy leadership positions as principal obstacles facing women media professionals. Similarly, evidence from Ghana shows that females occupy less than 30% of media leadership positions, irrespective of women's considerable entry into journalism (Gadzekpo, 2023). This suggests the principal challenge is not women's entry into journalism but their conversion to institutional authority. From a FST viewpoint, this distinction is crucial. If women can access the profession but face challenges as they move towards high-status reporting beats and senior editorial positions, the organization may replicate inequality without directly excluding women.

Informal gatekeeping is specifically consequential since hard news assignments offer professional capital. Economic, political, security, and investigative reporting can generate visibility, professional networks, specialist expertise, and opportunities for advancement. If women are

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disproportionately directed towards less impactful beats, their underrepresentation in the future in leadership can appear to be the result of individual career trajectories rather than the collective impact of institutional decisions. FST thus encourages the analysis of such experiences as evidence about institutional power. The significant question is not merely whether an editor intentionally discriminates against women but whether evidently routine editorial decisions systematically lead to gendered outcomes. Otherwise, the implication for Framing Theory is equally crucial. Editors decide which journalists get access to institutions, political actors, and policy debates. Accordingly, gatekeeping affects not only who becomes a journalist, but also which voices become available for the production of news. This creates a conceptual bridge between access to newsrooms and media representation.

Women's Underrepresentation as Policy Voice and Expert

Another dominant theme from the literature is the difference between being visible in media and being authoritative within media. Evidence documented by GMMP highlights that women remain considerably underrepresented among news sources and subjects (Macharia, 2020). The 2020 global monitoring data documented women as only approximately one-quarter of news sources and subjects overall, while African media revealed particularly slow progress over the monitoring period (Macharia, 2020). This collective finding becomes more analytically important when the type of representation is considered. Women are not just absent from news; their presence can be focused on particular representational roles. Women may be regarded as citizens who are offering personal experiences, subjects of human interest stories, or victims of social problems without being correspondingly represented as political authorities, policy experts, or institutional sources. This distinction is a reflection of the perspective of framing theory. Robert Entman's idea of framing emphasizes selection and salience: media do not just decide whether an actor appears; they also shape which dimensions of that actor become important. A female appearing as a violence victim signals a different social meaning from a woman appearing as an expert explaining the structural causes of that violence.

The evidence therefore suggests a form of hierarchical visibility. Women can be visible while remaining epistemically marginal. Their experiences may be judged newsworthy, but their expertise may be less often considered authoritative. This is particularly significant for SDG 5. Policy and political participation require not only being represented but being acknowledged as a legitimate contributor to public decision-making. If women are frequently positioned as recipients of policy instead of producers of policy knowledge, media discussion may support, rather than challenge, gendered hierarchies of authority. From an FST viewpoint, the absence of women as expert and authoritative sources is also a problem of knowledge production. Whose interpretation becomes expert and authoritative relies partly upon whose experience is acknowledged as legitimate. Framing Theory also explains how that uneven distribution of authority becomes integrated within news narratives.

Press Freedom and Gender Equity Are Related but Different

Another theme that emerged in the literature from cross-referencing general press-freedom evidence with gender-specific monitoring. The scholarship implies that strong formal protections for journalism do not spontaneously lead to gender-equitable newsrooms. This difference is theoretically significant. Press freedom indices commonly analyze state censorship, journalist killings, legal restrictions, political interference, imprisonment, and media pluralism. These are significant dimensions of democratic journalism (Waisbord, 2007). Regardless, gendered limitations often operate at another dimension. Sexual harassment by colleagues, leadership exclusion, uneven assignments, inadequate organisational protection, and online misogyny can limit women's journalistic freedom without essentially generating a measurable decline in the general press freedom of a country's ranking.

MFWA's Ghana evidence demonstrates this layered character of press freedom. Its evaluation identifies widespread safety issues among journalists and indicates that violations can happen internally within media institutions, while women are specifically exposed to online harassment or trolling. In the same vein, the 2025 Federation of African Journalists (IFJ) statement notes arbitrary arrest, physical violence, gender-based intimidation, and digital harassment as continuing risks to African female journalists. The implication of this is that gender equality and press freedom should be considered as interrelating but analytically different variables. A country can provide a strong legal environment or protection

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for journalists while allowing newsroom cultures that intimidate and disadvantage women.

Similarly, media organizations may make improvements in workplace environments for females to establish equality without necessarily resolving wider state censorship or political interference. FST makes this difference particularly visible since it directs attention inside the media organisation rather than just towards external challenges. Press freedom is not completed by the elimination of state censorship; it also requires conditions in which journalists can apply professional agency without gender-based intimidation.

The Limits of Traditional Press Freedom Measurement

This theme follows directly from the preceding analysis. Traditional press freedom measurement can unconsciously privilege external limitations on journalism while under-measuring limitations operating within journalism. This is not a debate that press freedom indices are insufficient in themselves. Political intimidation, state censorship, and legal repression are still primary threats. The scholarship rather shows that a gender-sensitive exploration of media freedom requires additional indicators concerning occupational safety, representation, harassment, and institutional power. The problem becomes particularly apparent when online violence is considered. Posetti *et al*. (2020) explain that evidence from ICFJ-UNESCO points out that online attacks can have discouraging effects on women's professional participation, including reduced audience engagement and withdrawal from visibility. Similarly, Ferrier (2018) says that the IWMF suggests that online violence can cause self-censorship and disproportionately affect female journalists. These are forms of repression, although they do not originate with governments.

FST helps explain why such suppression can stay invisible within traditional press freedom frameworks. The journalist may technically preserve the freedom to publish, yet institutional and social conditions can considerably change her capacity to exercise that freedom. The important difference is thus between substantive communicative capacity and formal communicative liberty. Framing Theory expands this debate to content. If the journalists most affected by gendered censorship are also less likely to participate in specific forms of reporting, the resulting news content may systematically remove opinions related to women's experiences. The outcome is not just fewer female journalists but potentially narrower public knowledge.

DISCUSSION

Implications of the Themes for SDG 5 in West Africa

The themes found in research show that access to formal institutions is not the only limitation on progress towards SDG 5 in West Africa; women's lack of access to formal institutions is complemented by a lack of access to safe and authoritative public knowledge production. Gender-sensitive policies in Ghana result in low participation of women in media leadership roles, as well as harassment, professional withdrawals, and self-censorship, according to MFWA. The Federation of African Journalists notes gender-based intimidation, digital harassment, and unequal pay, and the predominance of women in lower-profile beats in a similar report at regional level. Concern about the safety of journalists reporting politically charged, gender-related stories in Senegal again shows the dangers of insecurity affecting public discourse.

The patterns have a direct impact on SDG 5.5, which calls for full and effective participation and equal leadership opportunities. They also make SDG 5.1, about discrimination, more difficult, as formal equality is not possible when the institutional practices systematically limit women's progress. This means that media-specific indicators, such as women's representation in editorial roles, in political and investigative beats, and documented gender-based harassment, should be included in SDG monitoring.

The findings also call for institutional interventions. National press councils, journalism unions, and newsrooms should implement gender-responsive safety protocols for both online and offline harassment, and newsrooms should have a confidential reporting system and anti-harassment policies. Structural measures include gender audits, mentorship pathways, and greater workplace protection, which are already part of MFWA's Ghana strategy.

Lastly, donors and press freedom groups should break down training, safety, and funding interventions into gender-specific interventions, not targeting journalists as a single group. The evidence indicates that sustainable press freedom and SDG 5 go hand in hand – a media system that allows women to report formally, but not publicly,

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due to intimidation, exclusion or unequal authority cannot effectively serve its democratic accountability role.

CONCLUSION

The discussion illustrates that gender inequality in the field of journalism in West Africa is not only about the number of women in newsrooms but about the structural nature of it. Gendered harassment, occupational segregation, unequal access to influential assignments, and limited editorial authority and exclusion from leadership all work to restrict women's substantive involvement in public communication. These conditions also impact media coverage, in which women can be present but not present as experts, policy voices, and authoritative political leaders. Feminist Standpoint Theory elucidates the institutional environments that influence who can be included in news production, and Framing Theory offers insight into who can be included in those spaces and why and how. The overall results show that a gender-responsive model of press freedom addresses problems related to the safety of journalists, power in newsrooms, access to leadership, and media representation, all at once, and that this is important for achieving meaningful progress towards SDG 5. Future research should undertake comparative empirical investigations of newsroom practices and women's professional experiences in Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal, using interviews, newsroom ethnographies, and content analysis to examine how these practices and institutional protections vary across Anglophone and Francophone contexts, and to test empirically whether the links proposed in this paper between newsroom conditions and media representation hold.

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