

## Vulnerability of African Women to HIV/AIDS: The Prescriptive Role of the Media

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**Abstract:** The contributions of women generally in the family and in any development process cannot be overemphasized in every society. That is why Anan (2003) says that when women are fully involved in any development strategy, the benefits can be seen immediately; families are healthier and better fed, their income, savings and reinvestments go up. Yet African women are vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. This is a theoretical paper which analyzed in details why African women are vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, the impact of HIV/AIDS on them and the role of the media in fighting against HIV/AIDS among African women who are relegated to the background. This study is anchored on Agenda Building and Diffusion of Innovation Theories. The findings revealed that factors which make African women vulnerable to HIV/AIDS include gender inequality, economic pressure, rape, harmful traditional practices and violence against women, ignorance and biological factors. Based on the findings, some of the recommendations were made. Cultural, economic, social and biological factors that make African women vulnerable to HIV/AIDS should be given prominent news coverage by the media to enable the society make informed decision. There should be a multi-media approach added to inter-personal communication to ensure that HIV/AIDS messages get to the women and to the entire society.

**Key words:** Vulnerability · Women · HIV/AIDS · Media

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### INTRODUCTION

Biologically, women are strategic vehicles for nurturing life while also contributing to the socio economic and political development of the society, [1]. In line with this, Nsude [2], posits that women can rightly be described as the “engine of the house”, because of all important role they play in the home. Traditionally, a woman plays her basic roles in life as a daughter, sister, wife, mother and recently as a wage earner. No wonder the 19<sup>th</sup> century English poet, P.B. Shelly, says:

Win her and wear her if you can. She is the most delightful of  
God’s Creature Heavens best gifts, man’s joy and pride in  
prosperity and his support and comfort in affliction.

It is in her role as a compassionate lover, wife and mother that a woman has become most influential and indispensable in life and society. That was why the French historian Louis de Beaufort [3], points out that ‘the future of the society is in the hands of mothers’.

Similarly, the English dramatist, J.J. Seville (1783), characterized the highly penetrating presence and influential role of women in the following words. “Women have moral strength in their looks than we have in our laws and more power by their tears, than we have in our argument.”

There is no doubt that women have deep pervasive role to play in the life of men, children and in the society generally. They are the mainstay and strength of domestic circles, religious sector, educational institutions as well as cultural and social institutions. Imagine what would happen to all if women failed or refused to be devout, fertile, loving and inspiring. Many would have given up life and the society would grind to a halt [4].

Corroborating the importance of women in the society, Don Williams in his album entitled ‘my best friend’ avers:

1. You placed gold on my finger  
You brought love like I never knew.  
You gave life to our children  
And to me a reason to go on.

Chorus: You are my bread when I'm hungry  
You are my shelter from troubled wind  
You are my anchor in life's ocean  
But most of all, you are my best friend

On this note it has been revealed that African Women have always been active in agriculture, trade and other economic pursuits, but a majority of them are in the informal labour force. In 1985 for instance, women share in African labour forces ranged from 17 percent, in Mali to 49 percent in Mozambique and Tanzania. Most African women take care of their children's welfare. They are the house managers, providing food, nutrition, water, health, education to an extent greater than elsewhere in the developing world.

This places heavy burden on them despite development such as improved agriculture, technology and changes in women's socio economic states [5].

In line with this, a typical African woman bears heavy workload. She wakes up at six 0'clock and prepares breakfast after fetching water from nearby stream or river, she goes to the farm, which may be many kilometers away. Until about four 0'clock in the afternoon, she tills weeds or waters the land stopping briefly to eat her lunch. She uses the two remaining hours to cut firewood and to collect cassava or vegetables for the family. Usually, she arrives late very tired; but only to start preparing the supper – a task that may take two hours or more. Also in modern society, countless women make heroic sacrifices just to ensure that their husbands and children have enough to eat. Yet, despite their hard work in so many areas many African women rarely get credit for what they do. The reason is that we are still living in a male dominated society.

Supporting the important role of women, [6], opines that when women are fully involved in any development strategy, the benefits can be seen immediately; families are healthier and better fed, their income, savings and reinvestment go up. Those words underscore the importance of women generally in development, be it rural or urban developmental efforts, either as individuals or in groups.

Corroborating this point, Nnachi and Onoh [7], say that, 'where these responsibilities are neglected by the women, the agricultural output and harvest are usually poor'. Furthermore, in the Colonial era, notable African women such as Queen Amina of Zaria, Mrs Margaret Ekpo, Mrs Fumilayo Ransome Kuti and a host of others were in the forefront of the Nigerian women incursion into political awakening in the colonial era [7].

Similarly, many women of globally have made their marks in different areas of human endeavour. Yet globally, HIV/AIDS is the leading cause of death among women of productive age [8].

Going by the same report, the percentage of women living with HIV/AIDS varies significantly between different regions of the world. In areas such as Western and Central Europe, Eastern Europe and Oceania, women account for a relatively low percentage of HIV infected people. The report concludes that in regions such as sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean, the percentage is significantly higher.

Back here in Nigeria, a study carried out by Okoli [9], in Delta State on "Evolving Communication strategies toward combating HIV/AIDS in the society. A study of Delta State" revealed that 48.6 percent of infected persons in Delta State are women in their reproductive age between 15 and 49 years.

Also, Iyayi and Bardi [10], carried out a study in Edo State on "The Control of Nigerian women over their sexuality in an era of HIV/AIDS. A Study of Women in Edo State of Nigeria" and posit that 57% of people living with HIV/AIDS are women because of factors that make vulnerable to HIV/AIDS.

**Impact of HIV/AIDS on African Women:** In areas with few palliative care facilities, when a person becomes ill from AIDS the care is usually a women's responsibility. In Africa, for example, two third all caregivers for persons living with HIV and AIDS are women [11]. This caregiving is usually in addition to many other tasks that women perform within the household, such as cooking, cleaning and caring for the children and the elderly.

Caring for ill parents' children or husbands is unpaid and can increase a person's workload by up to a third. Women often struggle to bring in income while providing care and therefore many families affected by AIDS suffer from increasing poverty. In some areas of sub-Saharan African where a family's livelihood relies on growing and maintaining crops, the death of farmers can to famine [12].

The AIDS pandemic also affects young girls and elderly women. Often in households, where both parents are ill from AIDS, the responsibility of caring for both parents rests on the daughter; even if it means that she has to miss school, if both parents die then it tends to be the grandmothers, aunts or cousins who then look after the orphans [13]. Mother-to-child transmission (MTCT) is an issue that directly affects women and at the same time increases the spread of HIV. Mother-to-child transmission (MTCT) occurs, when HIV-positive woman passes the

virus to her baby, during pregnancy, labour and delivery, or breast feeding. According to the same record, there were estimated 2.5million children (under 15 years) living with HIV at the end 2009, most of who were infected by their mothers without treatment, a large number of these children will not live to adulthood [14].

The impact of gender inequality is yet another problem confronting the women. Around the world, women are increasingly at risk from HIV and bear the brunt of stigma and discrimination. Because women often lack freedom of choice, they sometimes find it harder to avoid HIV infection. Many women may be aware of what they should do to protect themselves, but are unable to take precautions because of powerlessness, economic dependence on their partners and fear of violence, if they refuse sex [15].

According to one Kenyan husband quoted in a book by the NGO Paris AIDS and Men: "I am the lion of the house and my wife does not have the right to say no" given such attitudes, women are at high risk of infection. However, a study conducted in Edo State by Iyayi and Bardi [10], revealed that Edo women have considerable level of control over their sexuality in their homes. They have a considerable level of ability to refuse sex from their husbands. These findings appear to be in consonance with Ogunjuyigbe and Adeyemi [16], findings on women in Lagos State. The study showed very importantly that women with improved socio-economic status tend to exhibit greater control over sexuality than their counterpart with lesser status. Hence, the importance of women education and empowerment.

Rape is also often a reality. Across the world between one fifth and half of the girls and women report that their first encounter was forced. Also, nearly 50% of young women in Caribbean countries said that their first sexual intercourse was forced, [17]. Other women, for whom violence is not a factor, may feel that it is simply their duty to please their husbands, even to the detriment of their own well being. Reversing rising HIV infection rates in women will require addressing these fundamental issues concerning how men and women relate to one another.

**Theoretical Framework:** There is no doubt that many theories exist in social and behavioural sciences which explain the appropriateness of research problems. On this note, this work is theoretically anchored on Agenda Building and Diffusion of Innovation theories.

Agenda Building Theory cannot be discussed in isolation of the popular Agenda Setting theory. Agenda Setting theory posits that by frequently covering and

giving prominence to issues in the media, the audience attaches importance to those issues more than others. The theory's main postulate is salience transfer. Salience transfer is the ability of the news media to transfer issues of importance from their mass media agenda to public agenda [18]. This theory was propounded by Maxwell Mc Combs and Donald Shaw in 1972. Although the theory was propounded in 1972, it has distant roots. No wonder Baran and Davis (2003), [19], say that with or without a label, the idea of agenda-setting has been with us since the days of the Penny press.

Severin and Tankard (1977), [20], have confirmed that the theory has distant root when they say that: Agenda setting was not new idea when Mc Combs and Shaw first presented it in 1972. The phrase has appeared in the literature of political science for some time. Some authors traced it back to Nwabueze, C. (2002), [21], which was a treatise on the role of mass communication in shaping the picture in our heads.

Through their day-to-day selection and display of the news, editors and news directors focus our attention and influence our perception of what are the most important issues of the day.

On his own part, Folarin [22], says that:

Agenda Setting theory does not ascribe to the media the power to determine what we actually think; but it does ascribe to them the power to determine what we are thinking about.

Agenda Setting theory says that the significance, which people ascribe to issues tend to be proportionate to the amount of attention given to the same issues in the media [18].

This means that the media set agenda for our general discussion. The media may not always determine what we want to think but surprisingly, we tend to think most of those things the media highlight as important. Throwing more light on the theory, Agbo and Ukozor (2000), [23], opine that though the media may not change a person's point of view on a particular issue but may change a person's perception of what is important.

Agenda Building theory is closely related to the popular Agenda Setting theory, but goes beyond Agenda Setting theory. Graber (1984), [24], who initiated this theory explains that, the theory focuses not only on how media audience perceive news stories but evaluates the appropriateness of the proposed policies.

Agenda-building theory is based on three steps: first the media capture and publish stories they consider too important to the mass media audience; second, they give a high degree of attention to the issue at stake thus

building into agenda and third, they provide the context under which such issues should be examined through creative use of language [25].

To further explain the concept of Agenda Building theory, Akpan and Ekwueme [25], posit that: the media should go beyond mere reportage of the story by digging up the facts of the matter and guiding media audience to make informed decision.

**Method of Study:** The analytical approach was adopted whereby empirical studies done by many scholars on the vulnerability of African women to HIV/AIDS were analyzed. A lot of literature from books, journals news reports concerning the subject matter were also analyzed. The researcher's personal observations also proved invaluable and inferences were drawn.

**Discrimination against African Women:** Instances abound, throughout history that dignity of women has suffered exploitation, humiliation and degradation. In the ancient and republican Rome for example, the family head had what was called 'ius vitae necisque', that is the right of life and death over his family members including his wife [26].

This is in line with what happens in most African societies, where women are relegated to the background and that is why any marriage that is not blessed with a male child is seen as a failure and most at times blamed on the women folk. There is a special ceremony when a male child is born. The male child is prepared right from infancy to assume the responsibilities of leadership and statesmanship while the baby girl is looked at as a second class citizen [27]. No wonder women are subjected to various harmful traditional practices. If a woman loses her husband, she is maltreated in various ways as though she killed him [28]. In some African cultures, women drink water used to bathe the corpse, her hair is shaved with pieces of bottle or infected old razor blade, she sits on hard surface for the period of time allowed by the culture and every morning she will be forced to cry for her dead husband.

Furthermore, a woman does not cultivate yam, which is the king of crops; instead she cultivates cassava, water yam, cocoa yam and vegetables or the specie of yam that is considered feminine such as water yam. Women therefore are considered dispensable in many lands in Africa while men are indispensable because a boy can continue the family line, inherit property and take care of parents when they get old. That is why an Asian says that "Raising a girl is like watering a plant in your

neighbor's garden". This implies that when she grows up, she will get married or may even be sold into prostitution. In Igboland a man that has ten daughters but has no male child is regarded as having no child.

It is pertinent to note the following:

- The bony part of chicken (the waist is meant for a woman while the soft and sweet part (gizzard) is meant for a man. To demonstrate his power, the man would always ask authoritatively for the gizzard even when he did not provide money for the chicken.
- Women are even regarded as minors in some cultures. This implies that women cannot even make decisions. That is why some men collect their wives salaries without even giving them pocket money on the ground that they cannot manage it. When I was carrying out this research, one of such women whose husband collects her salary every month refused to give her husband her salary for the first time and the man skeptically told her that it seems she has grown and added that she should not allow other women to deceive her.

Corroborating the above facts, researchers in one Asian country found that 14 percent of the girls were malnourished compared with only 5 percent of the boys. In some countries twice as many boys as girls are brought to health centres; so explains a report from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). "*There is a dreadful apartheid of gender going on in the developing world*", lamented the late Audrey Hepburn, former UNICEF Ambassador.

A onetime president of the World Bank once explained: "Women do two-thirds of the world's work; yet they earn only one-tenth of the world's income". According to a United Nations report, more than 70 percent of the 1.3 billion people of the world who live in dire poverty are women. The report added that "The number of rural women living in absolute poverty rose by nearly 50% over the past two decades. Increasingly poverty has a woman's face". If a man commits adultery, it is not news but if a woman commits adultery in some African cultures, she dies.

The United Nations publication- "*The World's Women*" (1995) states that there is still a long way to go. Too often, women and men live in different worlds. It reports "worlds that differ in access to education, work opportunities and in health, personal security and leisure time". "Tradition makes man believe that women should be used rather than loved, worked rather than cared for"

says a woman from the Middle East. She continues, “As a result, a woman has no voice, no rights and little chance to improve her situation”.

However, increased awareness has led nations to pass laws to protect rights of women. But worthy of note is the fact that laws cannot change hearts where the root of injustice and prejudice lie. Evidence reveals violence against females to “be a widespread global problem” states the Human Development Report (1995). “Most laws are inadequate for stopping such violence – unless the present cultural and social values change.

**Vulnerability of African women to HIV/AIDS:** It is pertinent to note that in Africa, the powerlessness of women does not allow them to demand for their rights including not questioning infidelity of their husbands. The patriarchal system in Africa affects women directly by legitimization of male dominance.

Supporting the powerlessness of women in African context, Austin Nwazunku in an interview opines that women are the weaker sex and so men lord it over them for instance a man can be in a polygamous relationship, so if he had contracted HIV/AIDS from one of his unfaithful wives, there is the tendency for the man to infect his innocent wives.

Yola [29], observed that denial of a woman’s inheritance and property rights can increase her vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. To buttress the above report, property is typically owned by men in African and most often when a husband dies, his property goes to his relatives and not to his wife [30]. This might lead the wife to prostitution in order to take care of both herself and her children, thereby contracting HIV/AIDS.

Also contributing to the vulnerability of African women to HIV/AIDS is sexual violence which is very common, including rape and defilement [31]. In some instances men who are infected with HIV believe that a virgin can “cleanse” them of HIV. It is pathetic to note that a number of young girls have been forced or coerced into sex by older sexual partners. Sexual violence can also occur at work places, even among educated women, during job hiring, promotion and to avoid dismissal.

Also, some university lecturers sexually abuse their female students for a pass mark. Fear of violence leads to acceptance of sex and lack of protection. Orphans and domestic workers are also abused sexually.

Similarly National Action Committee on AIDS (NACA) facts sheets (2011) report that “women are more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS because of violence against them, gender inequality powerlessness, women illiteracy,

harmful traditional practices such as polygamous marriages, female genital mutilation and early marriages other factors include poverty, rape and biological factors. Similarly, (UNAIDS, 2006v), [32], posits that the impact of HIV/AIDS on the lives of women is one of the most critical reproductive health concerns of our times.

Tigawalana [33], analyzes the role of gender in HIV/AIDS transmission and posits that the gender dimensions that are relevant to HIV/AIDS include economic, legal, cultural, religious, political and sexual status of women. He further states that some of the gender inequalities do not only increase vulnerability of women to HIV and AIDS but also become factors that fuel the spread of the pandemic.

On their own part, Ezeocha and Mojaye [34], posit that women and girls are particularly vulnerable to HIV/AIDS owing not only to their biological conditions, but also to economic and social inequalities and culturally accepted gender role. These roles according to the two scholars placed them in a subordinate position to men regarding decision relating to sexual relations.

They further postulate that series of information and knowledge on women’s HIV vulnerabilities, have contributed to the identification of other multiple factors like, illiteracy, poverty, conflict situations, lack of sexual autonomy, rape by intimate partners or strangers and multiple sexual partners. Added to the list are trafficking for sexual exploitation, genital mutilation and other harmful practices, prostitution and child marriage. All these factors account for the vulnerability of African women to HIV/AIDS.

Tigawalana [33], further opines that the subordination of African women creates vulnerability to HIV infection through economic dependency, lack of assets and lack of protection against abuse and exploitation. Most women in African societies are subjected to discrimination right from birth and they are denied access to education and gainful employment. Women end up being engaged in subsistence farming or low paying jobs like working in quarry industries where they are paid very little.

Furthermore, most women engage in vices like prostitution and transactional sex. In urban settings, cohabitation and temporary sexual relationships are common because women need support for items like house rent and feeding. At the times of this research, a young man contracted HIV and said he would not die alone. He rushed to the village and started having sex with as many young ladies as possible. What attracted the women was use just N5,000.00 which she gave to each person.

Uganda NACA Factsheets (2011) report that in Nigeria, about one third (33%) of married women are in polygamous union. The same report reveals that in Nigeria, men often have more than one sexual partner and it is common for older men to have sexual relationship with much younger women. Furthermore, parents might force their children to get married because their mates are getting married. In such a case, there might not be time to go for screening test.

Also wife inheritance, whereby a man can inherit his father's wife, can also contribute to the contracting of HIV/AIDS by the women if the man is positive. In some African traditions, wives are used for kola. For instance, if a man is visited by a good friend, in the night he offers his wife to him to make him comfortable.

Also in some African countries, a nursing mother gets a girl friend for her husband to ensure that she gets a good lady that will allow her husband to take care of her and her baby.

Additionally, a man can inherit his father's wife or his brother's wife and woman can marry fellow women and expect them to have children for her. This is common in a family that does not have a male child, to ensure the continuity of such family a female child is kept by other family members to procreate.

Another area that make African women vulnerable to HIV/AIDS is biological factor. Tigawalana [33], posits that during vaginal sex, which is commonly practiced in African, the chance is two to three times greater than transmission from woman to a man. This is due to the biological make up of the female genital tract.

Supporting the above, Jonathan, [35], opines that the natural sex role women play in procreation make them vulnerable to HIV/AIDS pandemic. Due to the position of their reproductive organ, they are always at the receiving end, the greater part of the vagina is exposed during sexual intercourse and it easily absorbs whatever that is deposited by men. He further posits that semen has a higher viral load than vaginal fluids and the semen stays longer in the female genital tract. Some women within the child-bearing age might have frequent pregnancies thereby exposing them to the higher rate of contracting HIV/AIDS because some might not see the need to attend ante natal.

**The Prescriptive Role of the Media:** UNAIDS [36], posits that Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) has led to the death of more than 25 million people since it was first diagnosed in 1981, making it one of the most destructive pandemic in recorded history. Around the

world, women are increasingly at risk from HIV because of inequality/powerlessness economic dependence on their partners and fear of violence if they refuse sex [37].

Buttressing the power of the media, Mc Quail (1961), [38], asserts that the media have the power and ability to shape our opinion and belief, change life habits and actually mould behaviour. He believes that media efforts could come inform of campaigns, definition and social reality and social norms, the immediate response or relation, institutional changes in culture and society. In line with these, the mass media involve processes that lead to opinion change and formation. The mass media reportage of violence and discrimination against women will help women to change opinions of themselves and subsequently fight their cause instead of accepting defeat.

Ezeocha and Mojayi (2011), [34], share the same view when they opine that good broadcast programmes and featurized news on violence against women have re-awakened the zeal and enthusiasm of the women to fight their cause.

The media are expected to report both issues of violence against women harmful traditional practices and how to tackle them. A typical example was the media campaign against female circumcision which was targeted at the opinion leaders who in turn informed their subjects of such implications and problems corroborating this view, Nwabueze (2005), [] opines that the mass media interpret issues and awaken the interest of people towards such issues.

Since the power of the media is tremendous, the media are expected to play crucial roles in repositioning the society to this problem, stating what the society is doing now and the ideal thing to be done in order to fight the vulnerability of African women to HIV/AIDS. Buttressing the above point, Idoko, J. (2015), [40], posit that "the focus point of argument for every feminist theorist is that the women is unique in her own way and such should be treated as equal with her male counter parts".

The media should therefore use the following to blow their trumpet in fighting the vulnerability of African women to HIV/AIDS

**Discussion Panel:** A panel of experts can discuss either on radio or television on how harmful traditional practices can contribute to HIV/AIDS and what the society can do. To make the discussion focused, the panelists can take one or two topics like, women empowerment which will make them to be economically independent and the issue

of gender equality whereby women depend totally on men and cannot refuse sex even when they know that their partners are HIV positive. Some men also refuse entirely to wear condom on the ground that they do not enjoy sex with condom.

**Phone-in Programme:** Closely related to discussion panel is the phone-in where in which mass media audience or listeners are invited to air their live comments by telephone, usually in respect of a specific topic selected for discussion on the day of the broadcast. In this case, topics like the physical abuse of women such as rape and the transmission of HIV/AIDS can be discussed.

- Handbills with captivating titles – stop violence against women and save women from HIV/AIDS. Are short and concise messages that appear on handbills and even billboards. These messages are sometimes supported with pictures that tell the story.
- The media should put the fight against harmful traditional practices on the news agenda and encouraging leaders to participate. The more the leaders hear about how harmful traditional practices against women make them vulnerable to HIV/AIDS the faster they make informed decision on how the society can tackle it.
- Documentaries can be used to show the devastating effects of HIV/AIDS on women and how factors that make women vulnerable can be addressed by the society at large.
- Feature articles on the factors that make women vulnerable to HIV/AIDS could help the literate women avoid being vulnerable to HIV/AIDS.
- Interface of the mass media and Traditional media in the fight against harmful traditional practices among women afford both the literate and non-literate African women to get mass media messages against HIV/AIDS right.

Furthermore, it is pertinent to note that:

- National surveys conducted in the United States revealed that 72% of Americans identify television, radio and newspaper as their primary source of information about HIV/AIDS, more than doctors, friends and family. Similar statistics have also been reported in the United Kingdom, India and elsewhere in the world.

Clearly, media organizations have an enormous influence in educating and empowering individuals to avoid contracting HIV. According to recent surveys from

over 40 countries, more than half of young people most at risk aged 15 – 24 have serious misconception, about how the virus is transmitted.

A study carried out in 21 African countries shows that 60% young women, have either never heard of the virus or have at least one major misconception about how it is spread. In Lesotho, a country with a very high HIV prevalence rate, only 2 out of 10 girls have sufficient knowledge about it. In Ukraine, most young women have heard of HIV/AIDS and only about 10% can correctly identify the three primary ways to avoid infection: abstinence, fidelity and consistent condom use.

Beyond lack of information, is also the problem of denial. Many people in all parts of the world have not yet accepted that the risk of contracting HIV applies to them. Many continue to believe that AIDS is an issue for others: Also, the belief that HIV/AIDS is contracted by people who are immoral or socially deviant.

**Other Strategies the Media Can Use Include:** Talking about it:

- Positive impact can be made when HIV/AIDS issues are discussed regularly on the media. Studies have shown that the Radio Tanzania soap opera *Twende an Wakati* (Let's Go with the Times), which was first broadcast in 1993, has greatly increased listeners' willingness to discuss issues related to the virus. The result was that 65% of respondents said they had spoken to someone about *Twende na Wakati* and more than 8 in 10 reported having adopted an HIV prevention measure as a result of listening to the show [41]. The radio and television discussion should be packaged in such a way that listeners can hear their peer discuss sex and relationships in a clear and straightforward manner, as well as how to keep themselves safe.
- Creating a supportive and enabling environment  
There is no doubt that media interventions have made positive changes in society. For instance, Lutsaan, turned its back on the dowry system after listening communally to a radio soap opera broadcast on All India Radio called *Tinka Tinka Sukh* (Little steps to a Better Life) [42].  
Similarly, the popular South African Soap Opera, *Soul City*, developed an NGO, the Soul City Institute of Health and Development Communication, has been aired by the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) since 1994. The series, which primarily deals with HIV/AIDS, also examined domestic violence in its fourth run, when one character, a respected

teacher, abused his wife. Domestic Violence Act was fully implemented. Government departments acknowledged that their actions were influenced by the media campaign.

It is noteworthy that in each of these examples, broadcasters broke new ground and challenged what had previously been socially acceptable. In the same vein, factors that pre-dispose women to HIV/AIDS like gender inequality and powerlessness of women can still be reversed through media campaigns.

- Promoting HIV/AIDS Services: The media can collaborate with grass-roots organizations, service providers and government agencies to provide counseling and testing, condom and even treatment and care. A typical example is the weekly award-winning television soap, *SIDA dans la Cite* (AIDS in the City), produced in Cote d' Ivoire as shown on Ivorian Radio and Television. A survey revealed that those who had seen 10 or more episodes of the show were significantly more likely to have used condom than were non-viewers [43].
- Educating and Entertaining  
The media should package programmes on HIV/AIDS to educate and at the same time to entertain. Viewers should be given information about the virus and how to protect themselves while watching an enjoyable programme at the same time. Women who are the focus of this study are expected to learn how to protect themselves from the pandemic.
- Mainstreaming:  
The media have acknowledged the fact that HIV/AIDS affects all sections of society and as such "Broadcasters are 'mainstreaming' the HIV issue across a number of programmes. This ensures that the message permeates a diverse range of output, not just outlets and public service messages dedicated specifically to the issue. "A coordinated, multifaceted campaign" has greater impact than a single programme. So, documentaries, news items, concerts, public service announcements, books and websites can all be linked together to reinforce awareness, information and messages about HIV- related attitude and behavior.
- Putting HIV/AIDS on the news agenda and encouraging leaders to take action  
In recent times, several leading broadcasters from around the world have found innovative ways to report on the epidemic. The BBC World Service launched a two-week season of programming,

including news reports, documentaries and online coverage of the epidemic to mark World AIDS Day 2003.

The Chinese national station, China Central Television (CCTV), broadcast some 230 news items on HIV/AIDS in the first 10 months of 2003.

Also, the Spain's Radio-Television Espanola (RTVE) has also worked to keep discussion of the virus in the public domain. In the U.S, the Time Warner network, HBO, broadcast a five-part documentary series in the summer of 2003 entitled *Pandemic: Facing AIDS*. African media however are doing their best in sensitizing the mass media audience on HIV/AIDS issues but they should do more by intensifying the awareness and moving from awareness stage to solution stage. The leaders are bound to invest in anti-AIDS strategies if they HIV in the news frequently.

Going by the reports of UNAIDS [44], three quarters of all Africans between the ages of 15 and 24, who are HIV positive are women. This corroborates earlier report of Geneva [45], which states that the impact of HIV and AIDS on the lives of women is one of the most critical reproductive health concerns of our times. In Sub-Saharan African, where the epidemic has spread to the general population mainly through sexual contact, women make up to 59 percent of adults living with HIV young women of ages 15 to 24 in that region are between two and six times as likely to be affected as young men of that age.

Women are especially at risk of contracting HIV because of the interplay of biological, economic and cultural factors. Physical differences, made it more likely that a woman will contract the virus from a man more than vice versa. Perhaps more importantly, powerlessness, dependence and poverty tend to diminish women's ability to protect themselves from unsafe sex. A woman's choices were often limited by her ability to negotiate when or with whom to have sex or whether to use a condom by society's acceptance of men having sex before or outside marriage; and by the need for economic support from men. In addition, because most infected women are of childbearing age, they risk infecting their children and thus face difficult choices about childbearing. And as in their immediate and extended families, women usually care for dying family members and for children orphaned by the pandemic. All of these factors make the empowerment of women a critical component of programs aiming to curb the epidemic and mitigate its consequences.



On his own part, Yamuna [46], posits that women are vulnerable to HIV/AIDS largely because of the behaviour of others, through their limited autonomy and external factors, including social and economic inequalities beyond their control. With respect to gender, women are particularly affected by the epidemic in Nigeria. In 2006, UNAIDS estimated that women accounted for 61% of all adults aged 15 and above living with HIV. The same report concluded that in Nigeria, the epidemic's disproportionate impact on women and girls rise to a startling new reality: the feminization of the epidemic rooted in their economic dependence, stigmatization and the denial of their rights. Also, UN News Service (2010) says that this epidemic unfortunately remains an epidemic of women. Furthermore, at the end of 2010, it was estimated that out of the 34million adults worldwide living with HIV and AIDS, half are women. The AIDS epidemic has had a unique impact on women, which has been exacerbated by their role within society and their biological vulnerability to HIV infection. Also, HIV/AIDS affects women's fertility, reducing it as much as 25 – 40%. This may be for a variety of reasons, from infection with other sexually transmitted infections to increase rates of spontaneous abortion.

## **DISCUSSION**

Analysis of empirical studies conducted by some scholars as contained in this paper revealed the status of African women, discrimination against them and factors that makes them more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. Such factors include gender inequality which make them powerless, economic pressure that make some of them to engage in prostitution, rape within and outside marriage, harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation and domestic violence against women. Also biological factors contribute to the vulnerability of women to HIV/AIDS. Surprisingly, some women engage in risky behavior that predisposes them to HIV/AIDS.

Going by the words of the former president of the Federation Republic of Nigeria, Goodluck Ebele Jonathan: "African must address the issue of women empowerment to improve human security. Securing women's future will secure Africa's future. Considering the enormous power of the media, this paper's stand is that the media can address the low status of African women that make them vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. Consequent upon this, the following recommendations are made.

- Cultural, Economic, social and biological factors that make African women vulnerable to HIV/AIDS as outlined in this paper should be given prominent news coverage by the media to enable the society to make informed decision.
- Phone-in programmes discussions on the radio and television should be regular features to create awareness and educate women on how to protect themselves against HIV/AIDS particularly in addressing the biological factors that make them vulnerable to HIV/AIDS.
- The media should dedicate airtime/space to HIV/AIDS public service messages. Emphasis should be laid on programmes to empower and educate women.
- There should be feature articles addressing why African women are pre-disposed to HIV/AIDS and the way forward.
- Our leaders should take the lead in educating others and that would equally motivate them to sponsor HIV/AIDS programmes.
- There should be a multi-media approach added to inter-personal communication to ensure that the HIV/AIDS messages get to women and to the entire society.

Pervasive Social, legal and economic barriers faced by women reduce their ability to protect themselves from HIV infection and limit access to essential HIV services. So if the media through different programmes like, drama, public service announcement, editorials, commentaries among others address the vulnerability of women to HIV/AIDS issues the entire society will fight collectively on behalf of women thereby reducing their vulnerability to the barest minimum.

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