



The Missing Perspectives of Women in COVID-19 News

A special report on women's
under-representation in news media

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Report background, objectives and approach

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation commissioned Luba Kassova, director of international audience strategy consultancy AKAS Ltd, to research the representation and portrayal of women in the specific context of news relating to coronavirus/COVID-19, in order to identify how well women's news needs are being met in the existing news coverage.

The **three key gender equality indicators** that the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation tasked Luba Kassova to examine were:

1. Women as sources of **news expertise** (newsgathering)
2. News stories leading with **women protagonists** (news outputs)
3. **Coverage of gender equality issues** in coronavirus/COVID-19 news stories (news outputs)

In addition to these, in order to understand women's behaviors and needs, the author evaluated women's (and men's) consumption of COVID-related news.

Drawing on their experience gained across a wide range of sectors including news, media, communications, international development, strategy and market research, Luba Kassova and the AKAS team adopted a multi-disciplinary and multi-perspective research approach to address the business objective. The research and insights have been focused on six countries: **India, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, the UK and the US.**

In addressing the business objective, the author relied on the **research methods set out below, which are summarized in Figure 1:**

- a. **News content analysis** of 11,913 publications and 1.9 million stories between 1st March 2020 and 15th April 2020 for the gender equality coverage indicator, and of 80 publications between the same dates for the protagonists and experts indicators. This content analysis was delivered by Media Ecosystems Analysis Group, a non-profit media analysis research group out of the MIT Media Lab.

- b. A **portrayal analysis** of 175 COVID-19 and coronavirus news stories from between 1st March and 15th April 2020, published by the five most viewed online news providers in each of the six countries. These stories were identified by AKAS using Google's news search engine as the three highest ranked COVID-19 and the three highest ranked coronavirus stories between the given dates.
- c. Analysis of eight public-facing surveys commissioned by AKAS using **Google Surveys** during May 2020.
- d. Analysis of **multi-country and single surveys** of the public including from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Ipsos, YouGov, GeoPoll and NOI Polls.
- e. A **pronoun analysis** of COVID-19 story headlines, to capture the ratio of headlines with "she" versus "he".
- f. **Frames analyses** using Google's news search engine, separately using the Internet TV News Archive in 2020 and finally using the GDELT project global online news archive for 2017 to 2020.
- g. Interrogation of UN, WHO, OECD, World Bank Group and ILO **statistical databases.**
- h. A **rapid literature review** of over 500 academic papers since 2000 which mentioned both "media framing" and "pandemics" in their text, identified using Google Scholar. These were then reduced down to the 34 most relevant papers.

For more detailed information on methodology, please see Appendix 1.

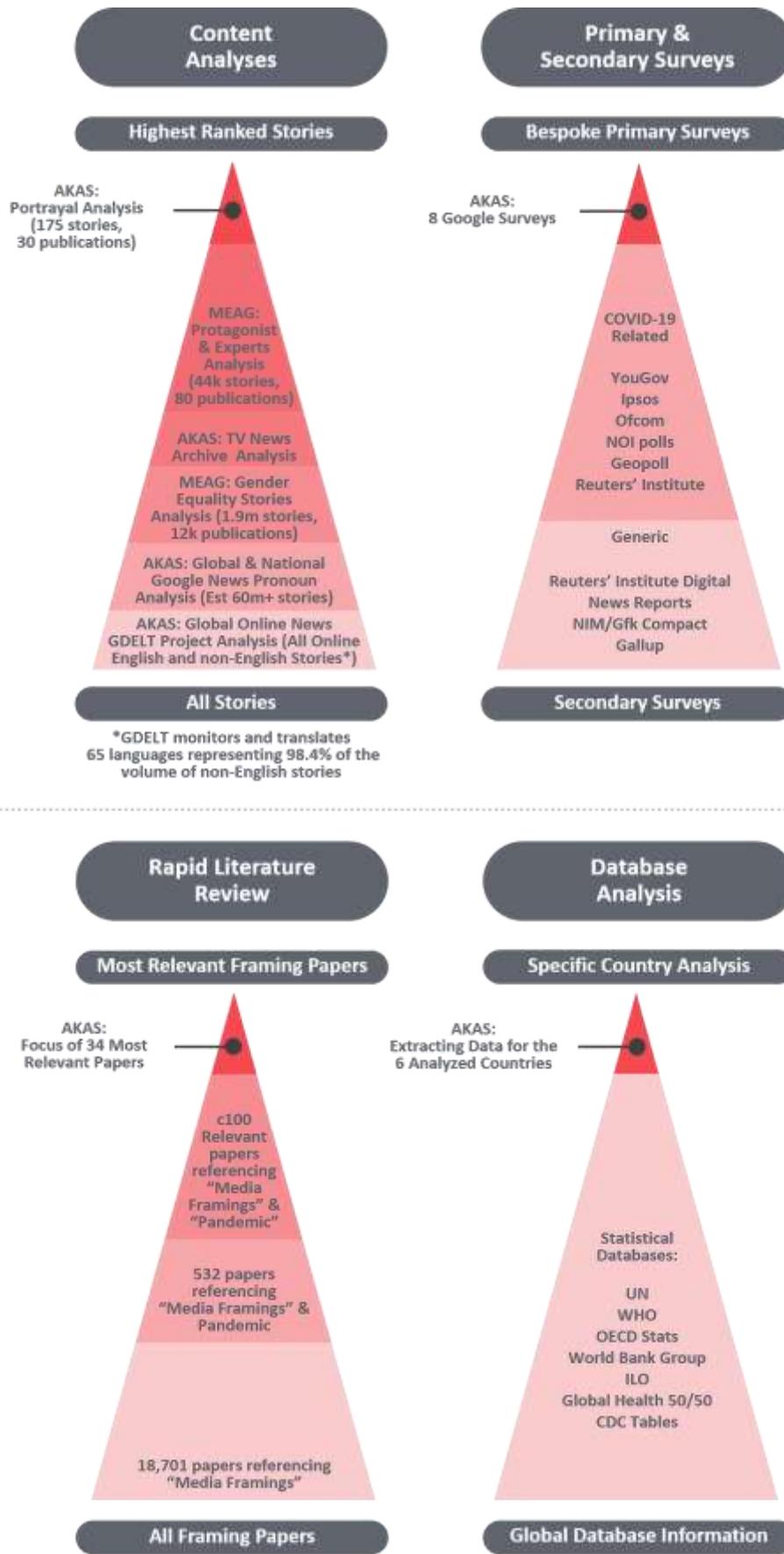
This report is the precursor of a much more expansive report titled "***The Missing Perspectives of Women in News***" which the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation commissioned Luba Kassova to produce in support of UN Women's Generation Equality Forum and to raise the profile of the issue of gender equality in news. While the current report builds a picture of women's representation in (and needs from) news coverage of coronavirus/COVID-19, the forthcoming report will take a much more forensic look across the whole news value chain into the causes driving the severe under-representation of women in news. In addition, it will also offer **tactical and strategic recommendations** and a **gender parity checklist for news providers** across the globe who aspire to improve the representation of women in their news organizations and to amplify women's muted voices in news.

Note:

For the purposes of this report, The Missing Perspectives of Women in COVID-19 News, the term 'gender balance' is used to refer to the balance between women and men. Luba Kassova and AKAS, however, understand that gender is non-binary, but is a spectrum. While this document focuses on the balance between women and men only, elements of the findings can be applied to the news' representation and portrayal of trans people and the LGBTQIA+ community more broadly. However, the representation and portrayal of trans people and the LGBTQIA+ community has been outside the scope of this report.

Throughout this report we have chosen to use the descriptor 'women' in place of the adjective 'female'. Only in cases where this would be inaccurate e.g. where both women and girls are being described have we used the term 'female'. We recognize this as a stylistic choice.

Figure 1: Research methods used in the report



Contributors

Luba Kassova is the main author of the report. She is a director and co-founder of AKAS, an international audience strategy consultancy (www.akas.london). Throughout her 20-year career to date, Luba has concentrated on unearthing insights into people and translating these into strategic solutions for organizations. Luba headed up market research, audience insight and strategic planning teams in media (BBC Journalism), telecommunications (BT Television) and not-for-profit organizations (CRUK) prior to setting up AKAS. In her work over the last two decades she has continuously analyzed the gender differences of audiences internationally, including key differences in their media and news consumption. She has also consulted for news providers on the development of their audience strategies for women. Luba holds an MA in Sociology from Sofia University, Bulgaria and an MA in Contemporary European Studies from Sussex University in the UK. She has also completed Behavioral Science modules at Warwick University and the London School of Economics (LSE).

Richard Addy is the primary quantitative research design and analysis lead as well as a key advisor on the frames explored in the report. He is also a director and co-founder of AKAS. Richard has nearly 30 years' experience working as a strategist and has advised CEOs, organizational leaders, and previously government ministers in his role as a government economist. Prior to setting up AKAS, Richard was the chief adviser on strategic and audience issues to the BBC's Deputy Director General who headed up BBC News locally, nationally and internationally. He is a Trustee at Mind, the UK's leading mental health charity. Richard has a BSc in Economics from Warwick University and an MSc in Economics from Birkbeck College, University of London.

Claire Cogan is a key contributor to AKAS' portrayal analysis. Claire holds an Executive MSc in Behavioral Science from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), with distinctions in research methods and in behavioral decision science. She has many years of experience in generating insights into human behavior in everyday contexts and in different countries, with an emphasis on consumer behavior. Claire is also experienced in leading successful organizational behavior change programs in corporate environments both in the UK and internationally.

Peter Todorov has made a contribution to the sourcing and analysis of the freely available secondary research referenced in the report. In his 20-year career Peter has held various analytical positions in telecommunications, consulting and other sectors in the USA, UK and Bulgaria. Peter holds an MBA from George Washington University and a Master's degree in Finance from London Business School.

Judy Nagle is the proofreader and copy editor of the report. She holds an MA in Modern Languages from Cambridge University, and has a broad-based experience in cultural sponsorship, creative education and business development built up over a 20-year career across the public, private and charitable sectors. Since establishing herself as a freelance proofreader and copy editor in 2015, Judy has developed a client base among European academics at universities in Italy, Switzerland and Spain as well as in the commercial sector.

AKAS is also indebted to the project team from **Media Ecosystems Analysis Group (MEAG)** and in particular **Emily Boardman Ndulue**, whose content analysis has been critical to the narrative developed in this report. Media Ecosystems Analysis Group Project Team:

- Project Lead: Emily Boardman Ndulue, MEAG's senior researcher
- Research Advisor: Fernando Bermejo, PhD., Executive Director of MEAG
- Technical Advisor: Rahul Bhargava, Researcher and technologist specializing in civic technology and data literacy
- Project Support: Aashka Dave, Researcher/community manager with MEAG.

AKAS is also grateful to **Ipsos** and the **Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism** for providing disaggregated versions of their survey datasets that we analyzed and report on in this study.

Executive summary

The objectives and essence of the report

This report was commissioned by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to examine women's representation in COVID-19/coronavirus newsgathering and news coverage in India, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, the UK, and the US¹. It is rooted in a computational news content analysis of 11,913 publications and 1.9 million stories between 1st March and 15th April 2020 undertaken by Media Ecosystems Analysis Group; an in-depth qualitative portrayal analysis of 175 highly ranked² COVID-19/coronavirus stories across the six countries; quantitative analysis of eight public-facing bespoke Google surveys, as well as multi-country secondary surveys; a pronoun content analysis of COVID-19 headlines; story frames analyses using Google's news search engine, the Internet TV News Archive in 2020 and the GDELT Project global online news archive for 2017 to 2020; and interrogation of a number of global statistical databases. This mix of quantitative and qualitative methodologies, including computational and manual content analyses, as well as survey and database analyses, has resulted in nuanced findings about women's representation in COVID-19/coronavirus newsgathering and news coverage, revealing not just how many women are represented in the news about COVID-19 but also how they are portrayed in the story.



The report has examined the news coverage of the COVID-19/coronavirus story through the lenses of three indicators of gender equality: *women as sources of news expertise*; *news stories leading with women protagonists*; and *coverage of gender equality issues*. The insights from the report have led to the creation of 21 recommendations which aim to support news providers who wish to amplify the substantially muted voices of women in news coverage of the COVID-19/coronavirus story.

The report has uncovered a substantial bias towards men's perspectives in the newsgathering and news coverage of this pandemic across both the global north (the UK and US) and the global south (India, Kenya,

Nigeria and South Africa). This bias operates against a backdrop of women's effective political invisibility within the COVID-19-related decision-making process in the countries analyzed and the unique socio-economic, health and psychological challenges that women face globally.

Every individual woman's voice in the news on COVID-19 is drowned out by the voices of at least three, four, or five men. The women who are given a platform in the COVID-19/coronavirus story are rarely portrayed as authoritative experts or as empowered individuals but more frequently as sources of personal opinion or as victims/people affected by the disease. The news coverage of COVID-19/coronavirus is mostly framed in hard factual terms, leaving little space for the human-centered journalistic approach that reflects women's news needs more closely. Given the deeply political nature of the COVID-19 crisis, women's structural marginalization in the political leadership roles established in response to the crisis locks in the suppression of women's voices in the story. This in turn is reflected in a smaller news share for women, which may be exacerbated by journalists' tendency in a time of crisis to revert back to 'established sources' who are significantly more likely to be men.

The absence of women's perspectives in COVID-19-related news coverage means that women have limited influence over the framing of the crisis in the news and consequently, limited influence over policy-making directions. As a result, women are at ever-greater risk of being further marginalized within different societies amid the most significant global health crisis of our lifetimes.

¹ It is the precursor of a much more substantial report titled "**The Missing Perspectives of Women in News**" commissioned by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to quantify and explain the issue of the lack of gender equality in the news.

² 175 articles with coronavirus or COVID-19 in the title, that were ranked in the top three Google news search engine returns for each term. The analysis was carried out for the 30 most consumed online news providers across the six countries.

Summary of Key Findings Evidenced in the Report

Part 1: The context

The burden of COVID-19/coronavirus on women

- 1. Political challenges:** Women in five of the six analyzed countries are largely locked out of COVID-19/coronavirus-related decision making at a national level (100% of the COVID-19 response decision-making group in the UK are men, 93% in the US, 92% in Nigeria, 86% in India, 80% in Kenya and 50% in South Africa).
- 2. Women face unique health-related challenges:** While men are more likely to die of COVID-19, women in some countries (such as the four nations of the UK, South Africa and 18 out of the 28 states in the US who have released COVID-cases data) have been found to be more likely to fall ill. Reports also suggest that in some socially conservative countries in Africa and Asia, women may be left out of testing, leading to a substantial under-reporting of COVID-19 cases among women. 69% of health professionals globally are women, therefore they are more exposed to the virus. Women's reproductive and sexual health are at heightened risk due to key services being scaled back and resources previously used to support women's reproductive and sexual health being redirected to the containment of COVID-19.
- 3. Socio-economic and psychological challenges linked to patriarchal social norms:** Women face unique socio-economic pressures resulting from patriarchal social norms - for example as victims of growing gender-based violence, as primary caregivers, as spouses of deceased men in control of family finances and property; as homemakers with informal jobs, as part-time employees with less secure jobs, as lower income earners, and as parents more likely to live in single-parent households with higher numbers of dependents. Women are more likely than men to feel worried, but they are also very resilient. They are more likely to see unity whereas men see division and to find meaning in the hardship of the COVID-19 story.

Women's differing consumption of news on COVID-19/coronavirus

- 4. Women have become heavier news consumers during the pandemic** while enduring higher than usual levels of anxiety and worry. TV and social media are the biggest platforms for the consumption of COVID-related news by women.

Part 2: The unheard and under-reported voices of women in news about COVID-19/coronavirus

- 5. Women's expert voices in COVID-19/coronavirus stories are worryingly marginalized (even more so than in non-COVID news stories):** Content analysis of 2,100 sampled quotes from 80 publications across six countries showed that men were quoted nearly three times more frequently in the news about COVID-19 than women in the UK, nearly four times more frequently in Kenya, more than four times more frequently in the US, nearly five times more frequently in South Africa and Nigeria and five times more frequently in India. In times of crisis, journalists may be falling back on well-established sources who tend to be men. Women were four times less likely to feature as experts and commentators in the 175 most highly ranked COVID-19 and coronavirus stories from the top five providers in each of the six countries, identified using Google's news search engine.
- 6. Women are more likely to be used as sources sharing subjective views than experts sharing authoritative expertise.** Women constituted 19% of experts vs. 77% men (4% were unidentified) in the 175 most highly ranked COVID-19 and coronavirus articles across the six countries, identified via Google's news search. While just under a quarter (23%) of all people quoted in these articles were politicians, only 13% of these were women which partly reflects women's disproportionate marginalization in COVID-related political decision-making and partly the extent to which they are overlooked as experts.
- 7. Women have been crowded out as protagonists in COVID-19/coronavirus news coverage (even more so than in non-COVID news coverage):** The computational content analysis of 44,164 sampled stories across the six countries showed that women were nearly five times less likely to feature as protagonists in news coverage headlines than men in the US, nearly four times less likely to do so

in South Africa and Nigeria, three times less likely in India and Kenya and nearly three times less likely in the UK. Politicians, who are significantly more likely to be men in all of the analyzed countries, are leading the coverage of COVID-19. This has resulted in the coverage of women protagonists in COVID-19/coronavirus stories being extruded. Women were less likely to feature as protagonists in COVID-19/coronavirus than in non-COVID-19 news coverage (26% vs. 33% in the UK; 19% vs. 24% in India; 15% vs. 25% in Kenya; 15% vs. 24% in South Africa; 15% vs. 27% in Nigeria and 14% vs. 21% in the US).

8. **The coverage of people is much more sporadic than the coverage of facts in COVID-19/coronavirus news.** Only 25% of the 175 most highly ranked COVID-19 and coronavirus stories across the six countries, identified via Google's news search, centered around people; 74% of the stories were centered around hard facts and only 9% contained an element of a human interest story which is more likely to draw women in, as evidenced in Part 4 of the report.
9. **Under one in four protagonists (23%) in the 175 stories analyzed in the six analyzed countries were women.** Moreover, of the protagonists portrayed as empowered in the COVID-19 news stories, only 17% were women while 83% were men.
10. **The gender equality dimension has been lacking from news coverage during the COVID-19 pandemic** with more than 99% of the coverage missing this dimension entirely in all analyzed countries.
11. **Unfortunately, even in the minimal gender equality coverage that does exist men feature more prominently than women** in all countries bar South Africa, where 56% of the 25 most frequently featured people were women. In Nigeria, only 24% of the 25 most frequently featured protagonists in gender equality stories were women, while in India and the US it was 28%, increasing to 32% in Kenya and 44% in the UK. On average across the six countries, women made up only approximately one-third (35%) of the 25 most frequently mentioned people in gender equality stories.

Part 3: Reflections on the dominant and emerging frames about coronavirus in the news

12. **The framing of the pandemic in the news has been shown by academics to be critical because it influences policy decision-making with respect to the COVID-19 response**

The dominant frames in the news focus on the COVID-19/coronavirus problem or its causes and are obscuring women's unique challenges. The most commonly used frames are the health severity, economic consequences, medical/scientific, globalization, attribution of responsibility and public action frames. Within these, there is little space for women's specific needs or for gender equality issues.

13. **The frames that are more likely to support policy making which is responsive to women's needs and are more focused on solutions are less dominant in the news**

The frames that are more likely to support women's needs in public policies are the human interest frame, the cooperation/solidarity frame, and the structural inequalities frame. All three remain niche.

Part 4: Amplifying women's voices in the COVID-19 news coverage: recommendations

14. **Cover the topics within the COVID-19 story that women are most worried about** such as unemployment/jobs, healthcare and poverty, as well as crime/gender violence (especially in the global south). Cover the local dimensions of the story to engage women further. Offer micro-angles anchored in human interest stories emphasizing the humanity in this crisis.
15. **Give voice to women protagonists and experts that most people in different countries trust:** doctors, scientists, nurses, schoolteachers and paramedics