

American Journal of Literature Studies (AJLS)



A Multimodal Discursive Analyses of Women's
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Article history

Submitted 28.02.2026 Revised Version Received 29.03.2026 Accepted 29.04.2026

Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to analyse multimodal (visual and written) contents of annual reports of four¹ NGOs (PLAN International, UN Women, UNICEF and WHO) to determine if their discourse empowers women/girls and ensures gender balance following the fifth Strategic Development Goal (SDG5). None of its nine indicators considers language and the way stakeholders frame women and their issues. This is despite the importance of language and framing emphasised in the Gender Responsive Guide for Communication of such umbrella organisations as UNDP.

Methodology: Multimodal qualitative data was purposively collected from 12 annual reports (2016 to 2018) of the above four NGOs and were analysed within Van Dijk's (1993, 2001) Critical Discourse Analysis, and Paltridge's (2012) Multimodal Discourse Analysis and Van Leeuwen's (1996, 2008) Social Actor Representation three parameters: inclusion/exclusion, activation/passivisation, and nomination/categorisation.

Findings: The findings suggest that the studied NGOs visually (pictures) empower women inclusively (85.8%) in their reports. While UN Women demonstrated complete

activation (100%), WHO (8%) and UNICEF (0%) passivized women. UNICEF, UN Women and WHO, largely categorised (weaken) women to the advantage of men who were nominalised (empowered). These findings indicate that, while the discourses of the four NGOs empowered women within women's groups, underlying gender biases persisted when women were juxtaposed with men, thereby limiting progress towards true gender equality following SDG5. The gender sensitive organisations studied, therefore inadvertently reproduced gender hierarchies in the framing of women's empowerment/gender equality.

Recommendation: Therefore, SDG5 stakeholders will need to be more conscious of, and uphold equal visibility in text and images of public related material in reporting women's issues as recommended by policy documents on responsive gender communication.

Keywords: *Multimodal, Discursive Representation, Development Ngos, Social Actor Representation, Empowerment, Gender Equality*

JEL Codes: J16, Z13, Z10

INTRODUCTION

Gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls is central to global development efforts as encapsulated in SDG5 of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda. This requires that gender equality should be built into policies, programmes and projects and that stake holders should consciously pursue the objectives of gender mainstreaming (Bericat & Jiménez-Rodrigo, 2019) to bridge the social gap between men and women. One of such areas of concern is how women's and girls' issues are presented (framed) in discourse.

Until recently, language and gender studies have focused only on the verbal and written forms of discourse. Yet, images and other visual elements also play an undeniable role in media outlets: newspaper, magazine, advertisements, books and films. Multimodality is, therefore, responsible for reproducing ideological implications, values and contributing to the overall meaning of texts (Van Leeuwen, 2007). This explains why Van Leeuwen (2015) recommends multimodality for discourse studies in which different semiotic modes (for instance written text and picture) are combined and integrated in each instance of discourse.

Framing is indispensable in development discourse, where strategic representations can support or obstruct policy outcomes. This is because it highlights how the selection and emphasis of certain discursive elements shape public perception (Reese, 2007). Bruyas & Perrin (2024), and UNDP Turkey (2021) observe that because language shapes gender roles, influences our perception of the world and consequently our actions, it carries great potential for establishing gender equality in societies and plays an important role in the formation of human thoughts and behaviours, hence the construction of human reality. No doubt, many documents and policies about gender mainstreaming always include a communication code.

Despite the existence of these communication codes, empirical evaluation of their alignment with SDG5 remains sparse in current scholarship. The 5th SDG is considered the pivot of accomplishing the other goals by 2030, yet of all the following 9 indicators, none focuses on how women and girls and their issues should be framed and represented in text and other forms of communication. The nine indicators are:

- 5.1 end discrimination against women and girls;
- 5.2 End all violence against and exploitation of women and girls;
- 5.3 Eliminate forced marriages and genital mutilation;
- 5.4 Value unpaid care and promote shared domestic responsibility;
- 5.5 Ensure full participation in leadership and decision making;
- 5.6 Universal access to reproductive rights and health;
- 5.7 Equal rights to economic resources, property ownership and financial services;
- 5.8 Promote empowerment of women through technology;
- 5.9 Adopt and strengthen policies and enforceable legislation for gender equality.

From the list above, none of these indicators focuses on language use and how the women and their issues should be framed (except on by implication). Unsurprisingly, Bruyas & Perrin (2024) observe that gender marking in language is often overlooked but it is one factor that contributes to the persistent gap between men and women. When the literature points to the limited extent to which the targets of SDG5 are being reached as the deadline of 2030 approaches, it is surprising that rampant cases of gender inequality are blamed only on institutional structures, social practices and actions (Atanga, 2010) while ignoring the fact that the aforesaid problems could as well be the result of how stakeholders themselves frame

women's /girls' issues in text and how power relations operate in and over text/language (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2001; Fairclough et al., 2004; Jessop, 2000 cited in Waller, 2006).

Development NGOs are at the forefront of the battle to end injustices against women. They are key actors in global development, humanitarianism, and gender advocacy. Beyond service provision, they also shape public discourse through campaigns, reports, and fundraising narratives. Among the most strategically represented subjects in these narratives are women, whose identities are often constructed through specific roles and attributes. Investigating women's representation by the organ that seeks to end discrimination against women is therefore important. This prompted the research question: How do Plan International, UN Women, WHO and UNICEF represent women discursively in their discourses, vis-à-vis SDG5 and, do the discourses of these NGOs empower women and girls thereby promoting gender equality?

The majority of the studies on women's rights have been done in relation to such matters as construction of gender identity and gender power relations (Atanga, 2010, Ndambuki, 2010; Mahfouz (2021); understandings of gender equality and education (Unterhalter & North, 2011); role of the law in addressing issues of gender inequality (Baraza, 2008); and women and political leadership (Atanga, 2010; Ndambuki, 2010; Walsh, 2005). This study seeks to fill the gap of the apparent absence of research in Language, Gender and Development, especially vis-à-vis SDG5.

This research, therefore, investigated how women were discursively constructed and represented (framed) in the visual (pictures) and written discourses from annual reports of Plan International, UN Women, WHO and UNICEF to determine whether their discourses empowered women and girls and achieved gender equality vis-à-vis SDG5 of women's empowerment and gender equality. These organisations are trusted worldwide, accessible, consistently publish multimodal reports and have publicly declared their commitment to SDG 5 in making youths thrive, promoting women to leadership and influence, protecting women's health and sponsoring children's wellbeing respectively. Their data is therefore suitable to decipher how women's/girl's issues are framed in compliance to SDG 5. This was done using two well-established discourse analytic frameworks: Social Actor Representation and Critical Discourse Analysis.

Problem Statement

Despite the crucial role of language and framing in gender mainstreaming, especially in gender balance and empowerment, no study has investigated to what extent stakeholders especially NGOs, use multimodal language in achieving SDG5. Investigations on rampant cases of gender inequality, gender-based violence are often blamed on institutional structures, social practices and actions. This is often oblivious of the language factor which can result in stakeholders themselves inadvertently promoting gender stereotypes in the ways they frame women's /girls' issues in text and how power relations operate in and over text/language. If these NGOs; the vanguard of equality; are misrepresenting women, they may be conceptually undermining the very goals they fund. The research questions therefore are: How do NGOs frame women in texts and pictures and how does this framing relate to the targets of SDG5?

The paper is structured as follows. After this introduction, §2 reviews relevant literature to expose the research gap and present the analytical framework, §3 presents the methodology while §4 presents the findings and discusses the findings and §5 concludes the article and makes recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews the main theoretical concepts underlying this research: multimodality, CDA, SAR, background of NGOs, in addition to a brief survey of previous similar studies.

Theoretical and Conceptual Reviews

The data analysis in this paper took into consideration insights of three sub theories of Discourse Analysis: Van Dijk's (1993, 2001, 2015) and Fairclough's (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis, Multimodal Discourse Analysis and Van Leeuwen's (1996, 2008) Social Actor Representation (three dichotomies).

Social Actor Representation Theory

Social Actor Representation theory, Van Leeuwen (2008), offers a robust framework to analyse how social groups are linguistically represented in discourse. It identifies key representational strategies: categorization (grouping), individualization (focusing on individuals), assimilation (integrating individuals into a group), and differentiation (distinguishing subgroups). These strategies reveal how agency, responsibility, and social roles are attributed, which in turn reflect underlying power relations (Van Leeuwen, 2008; Fowler, 1991).

This system originates from a socio-semantic perspective of discourse, rather than a merely linguistic one, and hence it brings together different components from both content and linguistic analyses (Koller, 2012). It comprises three main dichotomies: inclusion and exclusion, activation and passivation, and nomination and categorisation which, naturally, are of key relevance to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

The first binary opposition of inclusion and exclusion refers to whether the social actors are involved in an activity, space or phenomenon or left out. Exclusion of social actors in discourse is again divided into total exclusion (radical), and partial exclusion (less radical). In total exclusion, no traces of the cases are found. Both the social actors and their activities are completely left out (van Leeuwen, 1996). In partial exclusion, the social actor is not referenced anywhere in the text (suppression) and backgrounding where the excluded social actors are 'mentioned elsewhere in the text, and one can infer with reasonable (though never total) certainty who they are.

In activation, "social actors are represented as the active, dynamic forces in an activity" (van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 43) whereas in passivation, these social actors are presented as undergoing an activity through someone else.

In addition to these two sets, a third and last set of van Leeuwen's role allocation system is categorisation and nomination. According to van Leeuwen (2008), categorization can one of three forms: functionalization, identification, and appraisal. Functionalization is when social actors are represented in terms of activity, that is, something they do, for instance an occupation or role. Identification occurs when social actors are defined, not in terms of what they do, but in terms of what they, permanently, or unavoidably, are. Appraisal is when they are referred to in terms which evaluate them as good or bad, loved or hated, admired or pitied.

On the other hand, nomination occurs in four forms in van Leeuwen's framework (2008): formal, semi-formal, informal and honorific. Formalization uses surnames only, with or without honorific, semi-formalization uses a given name and a surname; informalisation uses given names only; Hart (2014) noted that informalisation does not signify a lack of respect or potentially refers to "less powerful actors". On the contrary, it connotes a sense of closeness, in-group membership, and being one-of-us. Therefore, Social Actor Representation parameter

is imperative in analysing the discursive representation of women (the main social actors) in development NGO reports vis-à-vis the SDG5. As stated above, this inventory extends deeply in role allocation. However, the current study focuses on these three sets: inclusion versus exclusion, activation versus passivation, and categorisation versus nomination. This is summarised in the fig 1.

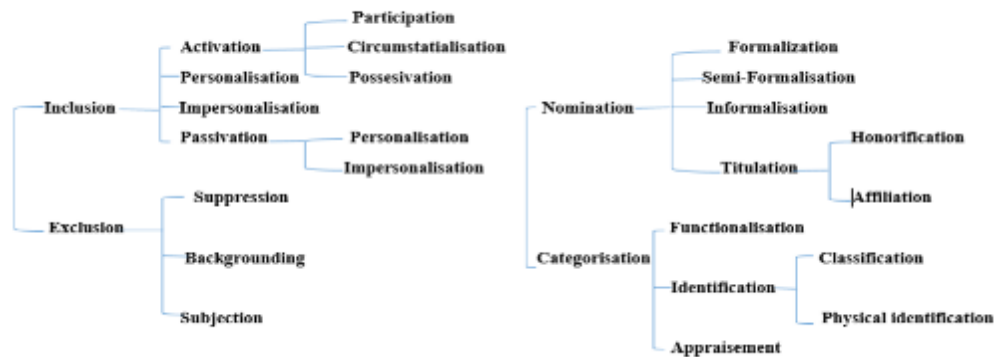


Figure 1: Analytical Framework

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) examines how language is used in social contexts to construct, maintain, and challenge power relations and social inequalities. It reinforces or contests ideologies in texts, speech, and multimodal media. The key aspects of CDA are: Social practice, Power and ideology (how power imbalances and ideologies are embedded in and reproduced through discourse in such areas as gender, race, or class) and Interconnected levels of analysis, one of which is Text: the specific linguistic or multimodal features of the communication (e.g., word choice, sentence structure, images). Fairclough and Wodak (1997) outlines the following principles for CDA:

- social and political issues are constructed and reflected in discourse,
- power relations are negotiated and performed through discourse,
- discourse both reflects and reproduces social relations,
- discourse produces and reflects ideologies.

This paper analyses multimodal features of NGO reports focusing on two elements only: word choice and images to uncover the embedded ideologies related to women’s/girls’ empowerment and gender equality.

Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Multimodal Discourse Analysts believe that meaning from text originates from a combination of film, images and sound with words (Machin, 2007; Kress, 2010; Paltridge, 2012). Multimodal Discourse Analysis examines print genres such as web pages, film, and televised programmes (Othman, 2017), how multimodal texts are designed and how colour, framing, focus and positioning elements contribute to the making of meaning in text. Multimodal DA takes inspiration from Halliday’s 2009 semiotic approach to language and takes into consideration, *mood* (e.g., eye contact), *point of view* or *perspective*, *layout* (e.g., Centrally placed, occupies the whole page), *Centrally framed* (with accompanying text showing how they belong together). This approach is appropriate in this paper because the data analysed are all multimodal texts (pictures and accompanying text). Paltridge (2012) cites Kress (2012) identifies the following concerns of the multimodal discourse analyst:

- What meaning is being made in a text?
- How is meaning being made in the text?
- What resources have been drawn on to make the meaning in the text?
- In what social environment is the meaning being made?
- Whose interest and agency are at work in the making of the meaning?

This paper analysed the collected data with these concerns in purview.

Activation always requires paying attention to intermodal dissonance. This occurs when modes convey conflicting or incongruent messages within the same communicative event. For example, when interpersonal meaning of image contradicts the propositional meaning of text (O'Halloran, 2011). In NGO fundraising, for instance, the contrast between a smiling donor narrative and a sad beneficiary image can produce tension that prompts action, but it can also undermine credibility (Machin & Mayr, 2012); in this case, it undermines the goal to present them as empowered even through the aid. In the context of visual essentialism and NGO campaigns, MDA would reveal how the verbal narrative of empowerment may be undercut by the visual mode's portrayal of victimhood. That clash is intermodal dissonance, and it often reinforces stereotypical power relations even when the intended message is solidarity (Machin, 2013). The analysis in this paper looked for inter-modal dissonance (where the picture says one thing and the text says another).

Empirical Review and Conceptual

This section reviews relevant concepts and works done on the topic to reveal the research gap. Special focus is given to gender representation in multimodal discourse as far as the empirical review is concerned.

Discursive Representation of Women in Development Discourse and Background of NGOs

Many studies on language, gender and development have examined how terminology has shaped perceptions. For example, Arturo, (1984) has demonstrated how colonial development discourse has shaped 'developing countries. Firstly, how the problem formulations created these countries as 'underdeveloped', and 'Other', and thus in need of aid. Secondly, the discourse's 'technification' allowed (Western) experts to extract the measures from the political realm and present them as positive and objective facts, i.e. for economic development. Thus, a field of knowledge of 'truth' and 'power' was created. Thirdly, institutions, such as NGO's and national departments, became the executioners of this development agenda. Nazneen, Hossain & Sultan (2011), for example, explored the uses of the term "empowerment" by selected women's organisations, donor agencies, political parties and development NGOs. They demonstrated that associated concepts such as power, dominance and processes of empowerment seem to be out of place in rural areas and patriarchy is upheld in urban areas. Similarly, Flanagan (2013) discussed how a nongovernmental organization in Senegal communicated globally and transnationally shared values surrounding gender equality and women's rights, and how they influenced community-based work.

In terms of how women are framed in text by NGOs, Pudrovska & Ferree (2004), demonstrate that the European Women's Lobby (EWL) placed itself less globally than it might and avoided using the term "feminist" but framed women as active and organized, and emphasized agency, politics, law, and global sisterhood. Ndambuki & Janks (2010), on their part, investigated the representation of women by women, politicians and leaders in NGOs using pronouns and modalities in Kenya. They concluded that both women and leaders constructed women's agency within deficit discourses which neither matched women's enacted practices, nor what

political and community leaders said they expect of women. Hansson & Henriksson (2013) collected data on how two Western women's NGOs represent women in the "Third World". This work adds to the views that NGO discourses play a vital role in framing women.

Besides the above perspective of investigating language and gender, one can find an enormous amount of research on women's rights in relation to such matters as: construction of gender identity and gender-power relations (Atanga, 2010; Ndambuki, 2010; Mahfouz, 2021); understandings of gender equality and education (Unterhalter & North, 2011); role of the law in addressing issues of gender inequality (Baraza, 2008); women and political leadership (Atanga, 2010; Ndambuki, 2010; Walsh, 2005). All the above works indicate that language use influences thought and action, and by extension, determines how effectively set goals are attained.

While this is evidence that a lot of research has been done on NGOs' gender discourse and language, there is very limited investigation on the representation of women by NGOs in relation to SDG5 and especially from a multimodal stance. This goal is key to any development endeavour and as mentioned above, none of its nine indicators refers to the use of language.

Extensive research has examined the limited extent to which the targets of SDG5 are being reached as the deadline of 2030 approaches. Many of these studies have largely blamed this ineffectiveness on structures, and social practices and actions (Atanga, 2010).

It is against this background that this study sought to fill the gap of the apparent absence of research in the area of textual and pictorial use of Language, Gender and Development in relation to the SDG5; not only on how social actors are discursively represented on development NGO webpages, but also to indicate whether the discourses empower women and advance gender balance.

Empowerment and Gender Equality

The concept of empowerment grew from critiques of the Women in Development (WID), Women and Development (WAD), and Gender and Development (GAD) models in the 1980s. It emphasized not only challenging patriarchy but also addressing intersecting structures of class and race. Sen (1993), Batliwala (1994), and Kabeer (2001) offer definitions focused on autonomy, control, and strategic life choices. Kabeer stresses that empowerment involves both access to and control over resources and the agency to make choices. Other scholars (e.g., Mason & Smith, 2000; Jejeebhoy, 2000) equate empowerment with autonomy, while others argue for distinctions. Common themes include choice, agency, and transformation. Most definitions, however, ignore the role of language in shaping empowerment, which this study addresses. Empowerment in this paper refers to Van Leeuwen's (2008) three binary dichotomies: inclusion/exclusion, activation/passivation, and nomination/categorisation. Inclusion, activation and nomination signify empowerment while exclusion, passivisation and categorisation denote disempowerment.

All the four NGOs aim to empower women, albeit with distinct operational definitions: PLAN International emphasizes helping girls thrive; UN Women targets rights-based empowerment; UNICEF promotes female participation in economic development; and WHO focuses on equitable access to health services. In highlighting the strategies of this women's empowerment, none emphasizes discourse—highlighting the need to investigate how gender sensitive and hence to what effect these NGOs use language in framing women in their discourse.

Framing

Framing refers to the construction of social reality through language during interpersonal interactions. These frames shape identities by defining personalities and characteristics within texts or social situations, thereby influencing public opinion. Druckman (2001) defines framing in communication or a media frame as the words, images, phrases, and presentation styles that a speaker, reporter or writer uses when relaying information about an issue or event to an audience and the chosen frame which reveals what the speaker sees as relevant and wants the audience to also see.

The discursive framing of women in institutional texts is particularly significant in the context of development and gender equality. This is because representations can reinforce or challenge dominant gender norms (Chilton, 2004). Research has demonstrated that international organizations often depict women either as vulnerable victims in need of protection or as empowered agents of change. This reflects different ideological positions and policy agendas (Mannell & Guta, 2018) and motivates the need to investigate how PLAN, UN Women, UNICEF and WHO frame women through multimodal text, to determine whether the frames empower women and align genders.

Multimodality

Multimodality involves senses and integrates different communicative resources such as verbal, visual and sounds. Until recently, language study focused on the written and verbal components of texts. This is surprising given that images and other visual elements play an undeniably important role in newspaper, magazine, advertisements, books, webpages and more. Van Leeuwen (2007) suggests that the verbal and visual modes work in cooperation. However, one mode either extends or elaborates on the meaning of the other mode. Multimodality explores how power relations and meanings are constructed through the interaction of multi-communication modes: verbal, visual, and aural (Jewitt, 2009; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Machin, 2007). All texts are inherently multimodal, yet many researchers seem to focus on one or the other (Kress & van Lueewen, 1998). Human communication often goes beyond just words, hence analysing data across multiple modes most often leads to the identification of new patterns and relationships. This is the inspiration for the choice of multimodal analyses in this study.

Multimodal analysis is becoming a trend to analyse text in various domains due to its numerous advantages. Analysing written, verbal, nonverbal, visual and acoustic elements of a particular text, gives a holistic view of the text and helps in the dissection of minute elements that one mode of analyses would naturally ignore or overlook. Secondly, multimodality strengthens the validity and reliability of research findings by providing multiple perspectives on the same phenomenon. Lastly, different modalities provide complementary information that allows researchers to address potential biases and because the data for this research was multimodal, it was necessary to analyse them using a multimodal framework that delves into different modes of analyses in order to have a complete view, multiple perspectives and address biases in the discursive representation of women vis-à-vis SDG5.

Visual Essentialism

Visual essentialism is important in multi-modality discourse, and it is important to consider it here. It refers to the reduction of complex identities and experiences to simplified, often stereotypical, visual representations which is a critical site of power, where dominant ideologies are reinforced or challenged (Hall, 2013). Research has shown that visual essentialism is prevalent in various media forms, including film (Mulvey, 1975), advertising

(Goffman, 1979), and social media (Nakamura, 2013). These representations often rely on simplistic, stereotypical portrayals of marginalized groups, reinforcing dominant narratives and limiting the complexity of representation (Dussel, 2013). NGOs work with marginalized groups and often employ emotional appeals like posting sad faces of women to solicit donations, leveraging visual essentialism to create a sense of urgency and moral obligation (Dussel, 2013). This approach can be seen in campaigns featuring images of suffering women, reinforcing dominant narratives of victimhood and helplessness (Kleinman & Kleinman, 1996). Such representations undermine women's agency, and reinforce systemic inequalities (Butler, 2011) as well as distract from nuanced understandings of complex issues, prioritizing emotional responses over informed engagement (Dussel, 2013). These could equally shift the focus of the organisations from enforcing and achieving the same set goals they seek donations for. Researchers have critiqued the use of emotional appeals in NGO campaigns, arguing for more nuanced representations that promote solidarity and empowerment and highlighting the need for NGOs to prioritize women's voices and agency in their campaigns (Kleinman & Kleinman, 1996; Mohanty, 2003). This paper considered visual essentialism in analysing the visual data collected.

Background of the Four NGOs

PLAN, UN Women, UNICEF, and WHO were selected for their global reach, multimodal annual reports, public commitment to SDG 5 and accessibility. Each organization uses different reporting styles: Table 1 provides details of their backgrounds.

Table 1: Background of Studied NGOs

NGO	Focus/Aim	Population	Reporting Style
PLAN	<i>A just world for vulnerable children</i>	Youths especially girls	More pictures with texts on them and scanty write ups outside picture frames
UN Women	<i>Empowerment of women and girls and gender equality</i>	Women and girls	Many pictures with written text both on and beside them and more text that does not refer to a picture but less than pictures
UNICEF	<i>Save lives of children and promote women/girls to participate in economic growth</i>	Children and women/girls	Much written text and few pictures. Written text mostly outside picture frames
WHO	<i>Promote a healthy world and provide equality for all genders in health</i>	Everybody especially mothers	Written text and pictures balance

Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) and SDG5 Targets

As mentioned above, none of the nine targets of SDG5 explicitly refers to language and communication. Yet, multimodal communication lies at the core of meeting most of the targets. For example, as far as targets 5.1 (end discrimination against women and girls) and 5.2 (End all violence against and exploitation of women and girls) are concerned, multimodal discourse analysis can reveal how images in advertisements and educational materials (e.g., textbooks) often portray women in domestic, passive roles, while men are shown in public, active leadership roles. By analysing colour, camera angles, and composition, researchers can show how these images perpetuate inequality and therefore call for appropriate action. To eliminate violence and objectification, through Critical Multimodal Discourse analysis, researchers can dissect sexist portrayals in advertising and media that objectify women's bodies, which directly relates to normalizing violence against women or better still it can be exploited in challenging "Hidden" Sexism uncovering how seemingly innocent, "banal" everyday communication—such as social media comments or photo sharing—can contain deeply embedded gendered violence and bias (Rahmadani, Sahiruddin & Lintangari, 2023).

Similarly, to enhance technology and Data Use (Target 5.b) MDA is essential for studying digital platforms (Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube) where women are sometimes depicted visually as superficial, helping activists and policymakers create counter-memes and digital content that challenges these biases. By **analysing** Gendered Technology Usage, MDA can analyse how mobile phone marketing and usage are gendered, addressing the gap in access to technology (Mahfouz, 2021).

Therefore, as Mafouz (2021) concludes Multimodal Discourse Analysis can act as an accountability mechanism, uncovering how multiple modes of communication are combined to reproduce patriarchy and highlighting where and how to intervene to promote gender equality.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The approach adopted for this study was qualitative, multimodal, and corpus based. This is because the research required a detailed description and interpretation of social practices (Jackson, 1995).

Population

The population of this study was all NGOs involved reporting on women and constitute stakeholders in the effort to meet the targets of SDG5.

Sample and Sampling

The sample of the study comprised four purposively selected developmental nongovernmental organisations (Plan International, UN Women, UNICEF and WHO). These NGOs were selected because of their active declaration of commitment to SDG 5, and their accessible and multimodal reporting style. Purposive sampling was adopted partly because it ensured accurate coverage of the variables thereby maximising effective gathering of rich and in-depth data. It also gave room for the 'use of texts which provided rich and varied insights into women's representation in text to discern how effective this representation was (Dornyei, 2008; Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Meanwhile, Maximum variation sampling was employed to select excerpts from the reports and random sampling was used to select the pictures analysed. So, of the 25 development NGOs that we found (both online and physically) in Buea (Cameroon) where this research was carried out, 4 met our inclusive criteria. Out of 343 excerpts (sentences and paragraphs), 14 were selected randomly and of 303 pictures, 34 were randomly selected to

ensure total coverage and saturation of the population chosen. Table 2 summarises our population and sample. The study period (2016–2018) corresponds with the initial implementation phase of the SDGs.

Table 2: Sample and Sampling

No.	Variable	Organization	Total	Sample	%	Total Sample	Technique
1.	NGO	-	24	4	16.7	4	purposive
2.	Reports	-	12	12	100	12	purposive
3.	Excerpts	PLAN	19	3	15.8	14	Random
		UN-Women	65	2	33		
		UNICEF	191	6	3		
		WHO	68	3	4		
4.	Pictures	PLAN	26	4	15	25	Random
		UN-Women	117	6	5		
		UNICEF	60	6	10		
		WHO	100	9	9		

Instruments

Qualitative data for this study was collected using an observation checklist and document analysis guide. Textual analysis (observation) accompanied by a checklist of themes, text (content) analysis was used to elicit corpus from the four sampled NGO reports under study. This was aimed to observe and discover the attitudes, behaviours, concerns, motivations and culture of the text producer from an expert point of view (Bauer et al, 2014). Qualitative research traditionally recognises three sources of data: interviewing, observing and documenting. The documents consulted mainly annual reports of the selected NGOs. Thus, we limited our scope of text analysis to the analysis of documents specifically annual reports that were published on the NGO websites and google. In this case, we generated a checklist of codes with the following extendable themes derived from the tenets of Van Leuween’s social actor representation: Nomination and categorisation, inclusion and exclusion and activation and passivation to interpret and analyse the discursive features from the corpora.

Data Collection Method

Annual Reports were obtained from NGO websites and online sources. They were read through repeatedly for general understanding and to select pictures and excerpts which were related to SDG5. For each NGO, we randomly analysed the texts until saturation (Dornyei, 2011) was attained. The pictures in the purposively selected reports were coded (assigned numbers) using the three dichotomies of nomination/categorisation, inclusion/exclusion and activation/passivisation and then the codes were subjected to random selection to avoid bias. This mix of purposive and random selection was aimed at quality assurance (credibility and validity) purposes. This was done to avoid any bias of selecting only excerpts or pictures which expressed a particular theme. Texts and images were reviewed multiple times to ensure

comprehensive understanding, thematic focus, and critical discourse relations. Relevant excerpts and images were categorized under three dichotomies. Themes such as *women as agents*, *juxtaposed with men* and *women in leadership*, emerged inductively and were analysed using grounded and content analysis (Elo & Kyngas 2008). Grounded and content analyses helped us to tackle emergent themes and systematically identify, code (coding was done only once and using observer’s judgement) and interpret patterns and themes to ensure depth and avoid researcher bias. Nvivo 11 and QDA Miner software generated data excerpts per NGO for efficiency and transparency. Though the softwares were helpful, we manually read through the reports, multiple times, and sometimes manually counted pictures. All this information was recorded in a code book for purposes of intracoder reliability.

Data Presentation and Analyses

The data collected and analysed displays various patterns in relation to the various variables of empowerment: inclusion/ exclusion, activation/ passivisation, and nomination/categorisation. This section presents data on how women were visually framed to determine if they were discursively empowered or otherwise. The findings are mainly presented based on the numerical representation of women from pictures based on Van Leuween’s (1996, 2008) Social Actor Representation parameters.

Table 3: Summary Statistics of Social Actor Representation of Women in Pictures

No	NGO	Total Pics	INC	EXC	NOM	CAT	ACT	PAS
1	PLAN	26	26 (100%)	0	19 (73%)	19	25 (96)	4
2	UN WOMEN	117	117(100%)	0	65(56%)	66	117 (100)	15
3	WHO	100	61 (61%)	49	8 (8%)	20	8 (8%)	53
4	UNICEF	60	56 (93.3%)	4	12 (2%)	7	0 (0%)	56
Total		303	260 (85.8%)	53	104 (34%)	112	150 (49.5%)	109

INC=Inclusion, EXC=Exclusion, NOM=Nomination, CAT=Categorisation, ACT=Activation, PAS=Passivation

The findings in table 3 indicate that women were included visually in 85.8% of pictures across the four NGOs, with WHO including women least frequently (61%). UN Women demonstrated full activation of women’s agency (100%), whereas WHO (8%) and UNICEF (0%) exhibited significant passivation. In other words, the findings show that all four NGOs included women (85.8%) in their reports although WHO was the least (61%). While UN WOMEN activates women most (100%), WHO (8%) and UNICEF (0%) were notable for passivizing women. WHO and UNICEF, while focusing, respectively, on health and children, they are less conscious of framing and empowering women. The following discussion highlights and illustrates the statistics in table 3.

Nomination and Categorisation

This dichotomy, as mentioned earlier, enhances an understanding of identity and roles of social actors, establishes social order, situates social actors within specific social contexts and

clarifies a writer's ideology and stance (see van Leeuwen's (2008) categorization parameters in section 2.1.1 and summarised in Fig 1). We used this dichotomy to interpret the data as follows.

PLAN International and UN Women predominantly used formal and given names, honorific titles, and specified women's functions and occupations, reporting their activities in the active voice as illustrated by the following text: "*Sophie 23... petitioner...UK/Uganda, Sunita Kashyap...founder...India... and Nicole Kidman Oscar winning UN Women Goodwill Ambassador.* They emphasise women's identity by mentioning their ages and location and appraising them as not in need of aid but as *founders, survivors, legends* and *pace setters* in particular fields, thereby representing them as ideal and plausible in every sphere. Therefore, PLAN and UN women identified women as assertive empowered agents and assign them social roles of inspirational leaders to be emulated among other women. However, when women are juxtaposed with men, they are disempowered through allocated inferior identities and social roles.

For example, in some of the pictures (see appendix) where women are juxtaposed with men, their functions and identities were, *Women Goodwill Ambassador Emma Watson (centre), Senior Chief Inkosi Kachindamoto (left) and Anne Birgitte Albrechtsen Chief executive and Joshua Liswood Chair.* As we note, women are *executive officers* and *ambassadors* while men are *Secretary General, Chair* and *Senior Chief.* The titles imply that men occupy positions within a decision-making system and engaging in policy whereas women follow their decisions and implement their policies. These distinctions in terminology suggest a gendered hierarchy, whereby men are framed as holding more powerful positions. Similarly, UNICEF projects women positively in single-gender images, comparable to the representations by PLAN and UN Women.

UNICEF mentions women's given and surnames outside picture frames with no honorifics and makes use of the first-person pronoun (I). For instance, on the picture *Madeleine Kabondia (left), a community health worker, goes door-to door to encourage prenatal care and raise awareness about malnutrition and HIV. "I walked through the front door of UNICEF headquarters in New York to take up my new role as Executive Director (Henrietta H. Fore, UNICEF Executive Director)".* (UNICEF Report 2018") This representation foregrounds women's agency and promotes individuality and independence but not inspirational as no honorifics are ascribed to them.

On the other hand, informal names are given to social actors within themes of sickness and suffering. For example, "*Zenaba, 26, and her son Issa, 6 months, are both HIV positive, Adaoula, When Saba arrived at a therapeutic feeding centre in Yemen, her life was in danger. She suffered from severe acute malnutrition and complications of fever and diarrhoea. Like the story of Fatima, a young girl I met at a psychosocial support centre in Aden, Yemen....* Well, one may attribute this to the fact that the discussion involves illnesses and identifying the characters is unethical. This mix-up seems to indicate that UNICEF does not consider framing as serious. All pictures of sex victims are females which may transmit the ideology the AIDS sufferers are largely women and girls.

WHO reports frequently juxtaposed women and men in visual depictions. While semi-formal names were used for both genders, honorifics were predominantly assigned to men, indicating a discursive asymmetry. For example, both Nevio Zagaria (male) and Elisabeth Hoff (female) are WHO representatives. But when their pictures are presented, only the male is given an honorific (*Dr Nevio Zagaria*) which appears at first mention. On the contrary, the woman is *Elisabeth* and her name only appears at the third mention outside the picture frame. This,

according to social actor representation theory, identifies women as weak and ascribes them secondary social roles.

Also, women's categories are mentioned in generic terms whereas men's are specific. To illustrate, the male is *Dr Samarji* as opposed to *female physician* as seen in the excerpt below. ("*Dr Nabil Samarji, a mental health specialist based in WHO's sub-office in Aleppo VS Om Abdo, a mother of five children, comes seeking family planning advice... Her female physician implants an intrauterine device and explains how to take care of it. She asks Om Abdo to come back the following week for a check-up.* This linguistic pattern weakens women's agency and trivializes their social roles, thereby undermining progress toward achieving SDG5 on gender equality and empowerment. Therefore, as we can see, the NGOs are largely categorising (weakening) women and nominalising (empowering) men. The cited examples may be sparing, but the ideologies according to Critical Discourse Analysis, these ideologies are likely to influence the readers of these reports negatively or positively.

Inclusion and Exclusion

As far as this dichotomy is concerned, we sought to find out how the four NGOs presented women and men in the pictures and associated texts. Recall that Van Leuween's (1996, 2008) Social Actor Representation dichotomy of inclusion/exclusion stipulates that a gender is empowered if it is included in the discussion either in text or in pictures. Social actors are sometimes omitted or backgrounded which weakens their agency.

In UN Women and PLAN International, all the women were included and actively carrying out activities by themselves for themselves and their respective communities. Both NGOs showcased women's achievements in the picture frames and still explained further in the text. The pictures below showcase the inclusion of women in UN Women and Plan International



T



Figure 2: Sample Pictures from UN Women and Plan international reports

From fig 2, women are included in activities such as construction, leadership, business and advocacy. Thus, UN Women and PLAN allocate assertive agentive roles through inclusion in both text and pictures in many spheres such as administration, construction, business, technology and advocacy. However, there is a bias against men as they are included in very few pictures and activities. Nevertheless, they are involved when women partner with government officials or seek approval/support to their advocacy endeavours which places them at the helm. The inclusion of women proves that women are empowered but the exclusion of men jeopardises the attainment of gender equality as stipulated by SDG5.

In WHO reports, women are included in many pictures and activities concerning mother and childcare, but they are backgrounded and subjected (totally excluded) medical outreaches. This can be seen in the pictures in fig 3 below.



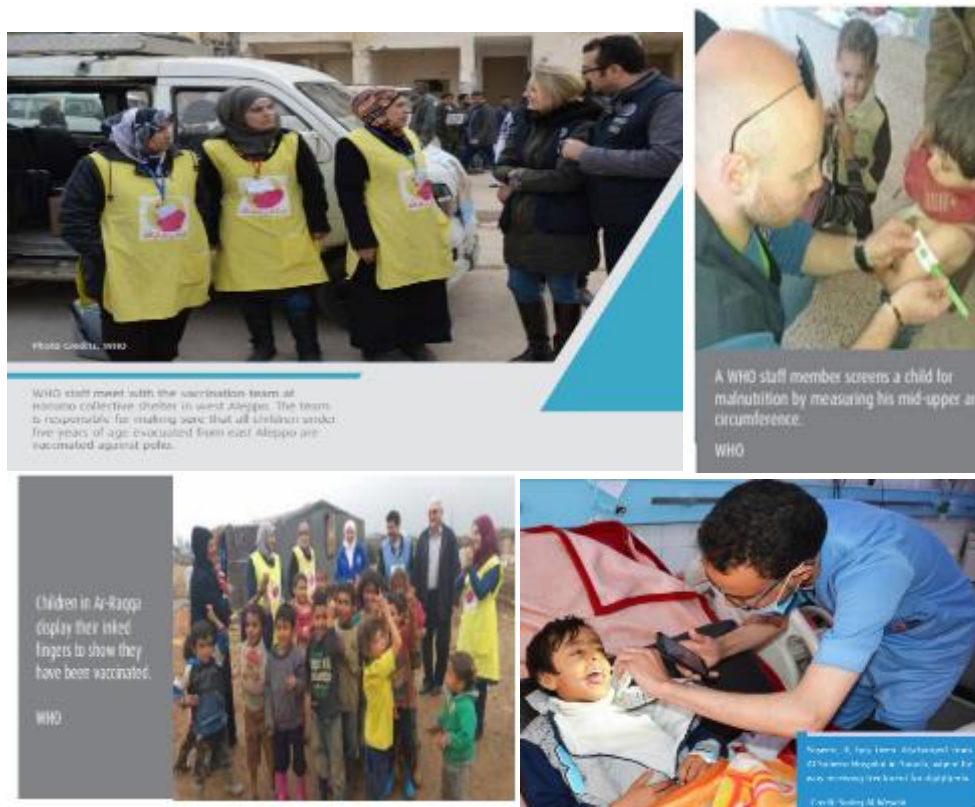


Figure 3: Sample Pictures from WHO Annual Reports

In the images of fig 3, women are totally excluded from images where chemicals, trauma, screening and discharging are concerned but included in all vaccination pictures as shown in fig 2. Men on the other hand, are included in images around children as well, but in varied activities as portrayed in words like “screens” and “discharged”. These imply that women cannot move, join “risky practises”, screen nor help patients get well. Although WHO demonstrated intention to collaborate with women, its discourses tended to disempower women, thereby jeopardizing the attainment of gender equality objectives.

UNICEF on its part, presents most of the women involved and active with very few excluded. Men on their part are included only in 3 pictures. Women are backgrounded because information about them is placed elsewhere in the various accompanying texts. Most of the women are recipients as illustrated in fig 4.





Figure 4: Sample Pictures from UNICEF Reports

Fig 4 presents both women and men as recipients, but women dominate. They are both backgrounded as information about their activities is placed outside the picture frames and expressed elsewhere in text. This suggests that both social actors, and especially women are less important and deemphasised thus endangering the accomplishment of both women's empowerment and gender equality.

Activation and Passivation

Presenting social actors as active assigns them agentive roles, emphasises influence and places them in a position of power and authority within discourse (Van Leeuwen, 2008). This is exactly what PLAN and UN Women do to women as individuals and as a group by representing them as actively carrying out activities by themselves, for themselves and for their community both in pictures and in written text. Though a few women were presented as passive agents when juxtaposed with men, they were aware of their ability and undertook their activities. The organisations stated what women had accomplished, reported their accomplishments in active voice whereas the activities of UN Women and PLAN are written in the passive. The excerpts below illustrate this.

Syar S. Alia is a young woman advocate for gender equality from Malaysia. Her journey as an advocate began with the first Young Women Making Change workshop for cis and transwomen in Malaysia, supported by UN Women Fund for Gender.

Sunita Kashyap is the secretary and founder of Mahila Umang Producers Company (Umang), an organization run by women farmers and producers in the Indian state of Uttarakhand. In 2017, Kashyap participated in the National Consultation held in New Delhi, India, organized by UN Women.

In the example above, Syar, Sunita and kashyap carryout activities by themselves and make strides like advocating for rights, founding and leading companies while UN women is in the by phrase thus, showcasing women as active empowered agents.

The examples below indicate active empowered assertive women from PLAN with the use of "we" and "I".

"The society says women are making noise. But I say no, women are speaking. We are having democratic conversations about the future of this country," Wahome says

“In 2013, I became instantly famous—or should I say infamous—when I published a blog post about the rape culture in Macedonia. My post was inspired by a trending twitter hashtag #TheyCalledHer (#JaBикале) which was packed with sexism and misogyny under the pretext of humour. After I wrote the blog, I became a target of online abuse and threats. They even started a hashtag with my name to insult me. I continued my activism, grounded by my belief in female solidarity and feminist practice.

“My hope for girls is to be as one,” said Nurfahada, 16, from the Philippines. “Even if we come from different countries, I want us all to tell the world we need to be listened to about our rights.”

These excerpts demonstrate that Plan and UN Women have attained part of the 5th SDG in their written discourses. The same applies to their discourses in pictures as illustrated in Fig 4.



Figure 5: Pictures of Men and Women in PLAN and UN Women Reports

Fig 5 showcases women and men actively performing duties that influence others and start up trends that others join. In other words, through participation in activities in all spheres, the discourses of PLAN and UN Women presents women as active assertive agents. Thus, while

UN Women and PLAN reports meet their goal of women’s empowerment, they neglect gender equality.

UNICEF mostly frame women as involved in activities but passive. The images below demonstrate this.



Adabula, 11, started her education again after more than three years out of school through an accelerated learning programme for children in conflict-affected areas of Mali as part of UNICEF’s Early Child Care campaign.

In 2018, we sharpened our focus on the second decade of life, when children make the transition to adolescence and young adulthood. Speaking with these young people – hearing their voices and being inspired by their

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vision – has been the best part of my job. But I have also heard their concerns about the future.

young people – even as these partners strive for greater corporate social responsibility and look for future talent.

BELOW: In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Madeleine Kabondia (left), a community health worker, goes door-to-door to encourage prenatal care and raise awareness about malnutrition and HIV.

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Figure 6: Sample Pictures from UNICEF Reports

Fig 6 shows women as active agents in health, education and administration. Unfortunately, it impersonalises them because it says nothing about them in the frames but elsewhere in text. Also, UNICEF impersonalises the women by projecting herself and refers to women in

brackets which weakens agency and presents women as passive recipients. This is explicit in the excerpts below:

Also in 2018, UNICEF became an implementing partner of the Spotlight Initiative, a joint effort by the United Nations and the European Union to end violence against women and girls.

UNICEF supported to reduce child marriage in Punjab and Sindh States, focusing on strengthening adolescents' rights to participation, promoting wellbeing, life-skills and dialogue. In the two states, more than 74,500 people were reached through these initiatives, including: 2,447 adolescents (50 per cent were girls) trained in four life-skills modules; 13,301 adolescents (32 per cent were girls) engaged as community role models...

These examples contradict their ideology of women's empowerment and gender equality. The realisation of SDG5 of women's empowerment is therefore at stake.

WHO present both women and men as active but the text frame them as passive. The images below showcase them in varied health activities.



WHO staff meet with the vaccination team at Hanano collective shelter in west Aleppo. The team is responsible for making sure that all children under five years of age evacuated from east Aleppo are vaccinated against polio.



Figure 7: Sample Pictures from WHO Reports

In fig 7, WHO discourses present both men and women as active agents carrying out varied health related activities. However, the text on the pictures impersonalises the social actors by using generic terms such as *WHO staff* and *vaccination team*. This leads to marginalisation and suppression of the social actors thereby endangering the fulfilment of the goal of women's empowerment and gender equality.

Findings and Discussion

The analyses in both pictures and texts reveal that women are the major social actors represented in the discourses of Plan International, UN Women, UNICEF and WHO. The results on Nomination and Categorisation in subsection 3.2.1 show that PLAN and UN Women emphasize formal naming, honorifics, and active social roles for women. From their names, categories, and inclusion in every activity and picture, women are discursively assigned active, assertive, agentive and leadership roles among women. They are therefore framed as empowered agents embodying leadership and inspiration. However, this empowerment is comparatively undermined when women appear alongside men. Here, women are often assigned less prestigious roles, frequently categorized generically or linked with suffering and vulnerability, whereas men receive nominalization through professional titles and institutional authority, reinforcing a gendered hierarchy.

This finding aligns with Van Leeuwen's (2008) Social Actor Representation theory highlighting how nomination strengthens agency whereas categorisation tends to diminish it. Following critical discourse analyses and multimodal analyses this pictorial representation risks conveying gender inequality and stereotypical ideologies to readers of the reports. This finding also resonates with Kabeer (2001) who recognises that the choices open to women are often limited compared to men of the same community – a manifestation of gender inequality and that women can internalise their lesser status in society. Secondly, Gauntlett (2002) reports that men in the past were portrayed as being more active, intelligent, resourceful and able to take decisions faster than women. This research affirms that representing women as stereotypical, powerless and unequal to men, and men as more active and intelligent, still occurs in present day, even by those who speak against stereotypes. Furthermore, it aligns with Ndambuki & Janks' (2010) view that dependence on NGOs erases women's sense of agency. This is true of UNICEF and WHO, who project activities that background women. This finding however deviates from their claim that women's agency is constructed within deficit discourse; rather women's agency is constructed within positive discourse though downplayed when juxtaposed with men. Lastly, this is in tandem with Atanga (2021) who explains that language has been identified as the vehicle of disempowering gendered ideologies in academia. The results from this work lead to the recommendation that NGOs mainstreaming gender equality and women's empowerment need to be more conscious in language use, otherwise they will be going against their mission.

Regarding inclusion and exclusion (3.2.2), the data demonstrate that PLAN and UN Women include women visibly and prominently across diverse social practices, actively constructing empowerment by foregrounding women's participation in politics, business, and technology. Conversely, WHO and UNICEF show patterns of partial inclusion, where women's visibility is often restricted to stereotypically gendered domains such as maternal and childcare, with significant exclusion from 'risky' or decision-making activities. These spatial and thematic exclusions resonate with Fairclough's (1992) concept of hegemonic discourse, wherein institutional practices silently marginalize certain social actors; here, women, by restricting the scope of their represented agency. This selective exclusion undermines the ideals of gender equality advocated by SDG 5, particularly as men, though less frequently pictured, are discursively allocated more powerful roles.

The activation versus passivation analysis (3.2.3) further elucidates how agency is discursively attributed. PLAN and UN Women construct women as active agents through assertive verbal and visual material, utilizing active voice and direct speech that emphasize women's initiative and leadership. Contrastingly, UNICEF and WHO often depict women in passive roles or

obscure agency through impersonal references such as “WHO staff” or generic group labels. This reinforces Van Leeuwen’s framework, where passivation disempowers social actors by removing them from the causal sequence and downplaying their role in shaping outcomes. Such discursive strategies risk perpetuating the “deficit discourse” criticized by Ndambuki and Janks (2010), whereby women’s agency is systematically minimized in institutional narratives.

Theoretically, these findings underscore how language and multimodal resources operate as mechanisms of power, enacting and reproducing gendered social relations in line with Bourdieu’s (1991) notion of symbolic power. The NGOs, despite their overt commitments to gender equality, inadvertently encode patriarchal hierarchies within their communicative practices. This mirrors Kabeer’s (2001) argument that empowerment is both a resource-based and discursive process, influenced not only by material conditions but also by communicative acts that shape social realities and individual subjectivities.

Moreover, the persistent juxtaposition of women’s empowerment against men’s decision-making roles signals an ongoing negotiation of gendered agency in global development discourse, as identified by Fairclough et al. (2004) and Atanaga (2021). The positive representations of women contained within women-only spaces seem insufficient to disrupt dominant gender orders that privilege masculine authority. This dialectic reflects the challenges inherent in operationalizing the transformative goals of SDG 5, pointing to the need for NGOs to critically reflect on their multimodal communication strategies.

This study advocates for a heightened awareness and intentionality in the use of language and images by NGOs seeking to advance gender equality. Beyond programmatic interventions, discursive empowerment must be integral to advocacy and reporting practices to ensure that representations do not merely affirm women’s empowerment rhetorically but substantively challenge and transform gender inequalities.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper investigated how women were discursively represented in Plan International, UN Women, WHO and UNICEF annual reports vis-à-vis SDG5 on women’s empowerment and gender equality. These organisations were purposively selected. The findings revealed that the discourses of these NGOs in pictures and accompanying written text (multimodal), frame women as empowered, assertive, active and independent agents and leaders, within themes of leadership/agency, advocacy, and within female-only contexts. However, these same organisations whose discourses represent women as empowered leaders, discursively disempower women when juxtaposed with men. That is, the discourses present both men and women juxtaposed in pictures and written form, still within themes of leadership, agency, advocacy and empowering others but women are framed as subordinate passive leaders and agents executing agenda from men.

Conclusion

From the findings and discussions, NGO multimodal reports remain an indispensable source of information on the representation of women in relation to SDG5. However, the language they use in framing women empowers women to a certain extent but disempowers them when juxtaposed with men. Therefore, while NGOs partially achieve SDG 5 through inclusive and active portrayals, the unequal power dynamics conveyed when men are involved suggest limited progress toward gender parity. These could have implications on the goal; if these representational imbalances persist, SDG5 may remain unattained by 2030. Also, women may internalise their restrictive lesser status and society may accept inequality as a norm not injustice. Lastly, NGOs may lose credibility and sponsored projects concerning SDG 5.

Recommendations

Some of the issues raised in this paper (e.g. multimodal framing), if considered, could be useful to both NGOs and UN policy makers to accomplish the goal by following recommendations from City of Vienna, (2025; 27):

‘Texts referring to or addressing both women and men must make women and men equally visible. This applies to... forms, documents, telephone directories, texts on the intranet and the internet, advertising for events, folders, posters and films. Attention must also be paid to a gender-sensitive choice of images when preparing public relations material’.

This research opens several avenues for further inquiry. Future studies could investigate the perspectives of women beneficiaries on their own representation which would enrich understandings of empowerment as a negotiated social practice. Future studies could examine how these discursive strategies evolve over time and vary across cultural and regional contexts within NGOs’ global operations. There is also a critical need to explore how internal language ideologies within NGOs influence gendered representations and the extent to which such discourses align with or subvert dominant power relations.

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Acknowledgments

We thank Professor Eunice Fombebe, Professor Justine Ayuk, Professor Walter Nkwi and Professor Evangeline Seino, for reading drafts of this paper and making very useful suggestions which have strengthened it.

Our hearty thanks also go an anonymous AJPO Journals reviewer for making very insightful comments which have strengthened this paper. All residual lapses are entirely our responsibility.

Conflicts of Interest Declaration

No conflict of interest is declared.

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