

## **A Corpus-Based Critical Discourse Analysis of Women's Plight in the Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines how the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report, published in the aftermath of Liberia's civil conflicts (1989–2003), represents the experiences of women. It interrogates whether the report's lexical choices amplify or marginalise the voices of female survivors and explores how gendered narratives are constructed within post-conflict discourse. Anchored in framing theory and lexicalisation, and employing critical discourse analysis, the study conducts a corpus-based Critical Discourse investigation of Liberia's Volumes one to three Truth and Reconciliation Commission Reports. Utilising Wordsmith and N-gram analytical tools, the study identifies lexical patterns, collocations, and frames that shape the narrative of women's experiences. The analysis reveals that, although the TRC acknowledges women's suffering such as rape, forced labour, and displacement as the real issues women faced, the report used framing to isolate incidents from the structural and cultural systems that enabled gendered violence, thereby diluting the potential for transformative justice. This study concludes that the Liberian TRC made strides in documenting wartime atrocities women experienced, but its language and framing strategies often failed to meaningfully engage with the structural injustices faced by women.

**Keywords:** Corpus-Based, Critical Discourse Analysis, Gender, Truth Reconciliation Commission Report

### **Introduction**

Language plays a crucial role in conflict resolution and the framing of gender perception. This is because language is the primary medium of communication, negotiation, conflict resolution, opinion moulding, reinforcing or frustrating inclusivity (Khori, 2024). Its influence can be seen across different levels of human interaction, such as interpersonal relationships and international diplomacy, as it serves as a medium for dialogue on issues critical to resolving misunderstandings and disputes, helping to bridge the divide by letting individuals, groups, and organisations clearly articulate their perspectives and emotions. In the same vein, language is an instrumental tool for maintaining the intellectual richness of humanity, which ultimately redounds back to peace maintenance, because human beings use language

intelligibly in a way that helps foster peace in society (Coleman, 2012; Crystal, 1999; Deutsch, 2012).

In the aftermath of Liberia's protracted civil conflicts, establishing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 2003 marked a pivotal step towards national healing and justice. Tasked with investigating human rights violations between 1979 and 2003, the TRC aimed to provide a comprehensive account of the atrocities committed and recommend reconciliation and reform measures. Central to its mandate was the inclusion of women, children, and other vulnerable groups, acknowledging the unique and often disproportionate impact of the conflict on these populations (Dhizaala, 2018).

The plight of women in post-conflict societies has been a significant concern in transitional justice mechanisms, particularly in Truth and Reconciliation Commission Reports; however, the experiences and struggles of women during the conflict have been a critical yet often marginalised aspect of transitional justice discourse (Hill, 2024). While the TRC report acknowledges the specific forms of violence women endured, such as sexual violence, forced labour, and displacement, its discourse and recommendations reveal deeper structural inequalities that continue to shape the socio-political status of women in Liberia (Shulika, 2022).

Therefore, this study interrogates the extent to which the TRC report amplifies or diminishes the voices of women survivors, how it constructs narratives around justice and accountability, and whether its policy recommendations meaningfully address the systemic injustices that women continue to face. By analysing the lexical choice and the plight of women in post-conflict Liberia, this study illuminates the discourse of gender imbalance in post-conflict societies and advances gender-sensitive reparations and long-term societal transformation. It contributes to broader discussions on the role of discourse in shaping memory, policy, and the lived realities of post-war societies (Stella, 2018).

This study highlights the importance of nuanced and equitable representations of women in transitional justice mechanisms. By critically assessing the TRC's discourse, the paper contributes to broader discussions on gender, justice, and the role of language in post-conflict reconciliation processes.

### **Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report**

Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established in 2005 as a key mechanism of transitional justice following two devastating civil wars that occurred between 1989–1997 and 1999–2003. The conflicts were characterised by widespread human rights abuses, ethnic violence, child soldier recruitment, sexual violence, and severe institutional breakdowns. The TRC emerged out of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement and was tasked with investigating the root causes and atrocities of the wars,

documenting human rights violations, facilitating national healing, and recommending pathways for reconciliation.

As a formal, state-sanctioned body, the TRC collected over 20,000 statements and produced a report that sought to foster accountability and national unity. While the report provided an important historical account and proposed bold recommendations, including political lustrations, it was met with political resistance and failed to secure a unanimous endorsement from commissioners. Criticisms of the TRC report have included its inadequate gender sensitivity, limited engagement with local justice systems, and problematic lexical framing, which scholars argue marginalised women's voices and underrepresented their experiences of wartime sexual violence.

Despite these shortcomings, the Liberian TRC stands as a significant yet contested model of post-conflict justice. Comparative analyses of TRC experiences in South Africa and Sierra Leone reveal shared tensions between restorative justice goals and political realities. Growing interdisciplinary research continues to interrogate the effectiveness of TRC reports, particularly their treatment of memory, justice, and victim representation. This study, therefore, seeks to explore the representation of women in Liberia's TRC report, examining how their narratives were framed and the extent to which their experiences were meaningfully addressed.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study employs Critical Discourse Analysis- a method of studying language concerning power, ideology, and society. CDA goes beyond the description of just language structures to also involve the way discourse influences and reflects social inequalities, political agendas, and cultural values. Hence, Critical Discourse Analysis is not neutral; it seeks to unearth the hidden power relations in texts and speech. Also, it deploys an interdisciplinary approach as it borrows from linguistics, sociology, political science, and media studies. Similarly, it examines the way dominant groups deploy language to maintain control and how marginalised groups resist them with discourse. In Critical Discourse Analysis, context plays a pivotal role, as it analyses language within historical, social, and political contexts (Blommaert, 2000; Dijk, 2015).

The theory emerged in the late 20th century. It was developed by scholars such as Fairclough 1992, Dijk 2015, Wodak 1997, and Leeuwen 1987. These theorists built upon earlier works in critical linguistics and social theory to examine how language functions within societal contexts to maintain or challenge power relations. CDA has been applied across various fields, including media studies, education, and political science, to uncover how language perpetuates social inequalities. In the context of gender studies, CDA has been instrumental in revealing how discourse

constructs and reinforces gender stereotypes and power relations. For example, analyses of political media discourse have demonstrated how language can perpetuate gender stereotypes, influencing public perception and policy.

Fairclough introduced a three-dimensional model of discourse analysis, which encompasses textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice. Fairclough emphasises that language is both socially shaped and socially shaping, highlighting how discourse contributes to the construction and maintenance of social identities, relations, and systems of knowledge and belief. Dijk (2015) developed the socio-cognitive approach, focusing on the interplay between discourse, cognition, and society. He posited that ideologies are shared social cognitions that influence the production and comprehension of discourse. Dijk's model examines how elite groups use discourse to reproduce dominance and how such discourse structures can manipulate public opinion and perpetuate social inequalities.

Wodak (1997) formulated the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), which integrates historical context into discourse analysis. Wodak's method involves analysing the evolution of discourses over time, considering the socio-political and historical circumstances that shape and are shaped by discourse. This approach is particularly effective in examining how past events and narratives influence present discursive practices and power relations.

A critical discourse analysis (CDA) of Liberia's TRC report provides an essential lens through which to examine how language, power, and ideology influence the representation of women's suffering and agency in post-conflict narratives. CDA, as a methodological tool, allows scholars to deconstruct the text of the TRC report to uncover implicit biases, silences, and power dynamics embedded in its framing of gendered violence and justice. This approach is particularly pertinent, given that transitional justice mechanisms often operate within male-dominated frameworks that may inadvertently reinforce patriarchal structures.

Ultimately, this critical discourse analysis will not only expose the strengths and weaknesses of the TRC's engagement with women's issues but also highlight the necessity of integrating inclusive, feminist-oriented perspectives in truth commissions worldwide. The findings will have implications for how post-conflict societies construct narratives of healing, justice, and gender equity in their efforts to move forward from legacies of violence and oppression.

### **Framing Theory**

The framing theory of language, which originates from cognitive psychology and sociology, particularly in Goffman's (1974) *Frame Analysis*, is a theory of language that examines the way information is presented influences perception, interpretation, and decision-making. Kuypers (2009) observes framing to be the process whereby communicators act consciously to construct a particular point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be viewed in a particular manner, with some details

given more or less prominence than others or even ignored. Kuypers explores the framing theory in the light of agenda-setting theory. According to him, it is an intentional act of using language manipulatively to set an agenda. He argues that it is like language as used in the media, where the media determines which issues are salient and should be brought to the fore in public discussion. Hence, he argues that the media are not telling people what to think directly, but are telling people what to think about by the way they highlight topics. Also, he argues that the media not only decides what issues are important, but they also decide how they ought to be perceived by the people because they highlight some strong attributes of the topic they are discussing and, in the process, give it prominence.

Chong and Druckman (2008) argue that:

The major premise of framing theory is that an issue can be viewed from a variety of perspectives and be construed as having implications for multiple values or considerations. Framing refers to the process by which people develop a particular conceptualisation of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue (p.104).

Hanglli and Kriesi (2010) in their work on framing strategies, explore the way political actors, media, and interest groups compete to establish dominant narratives in public discourse. They highlight the way framing deliberately and strategically shapes public perception, influences policy decisions, and controls political debates. According to them, when a particular issue is framed in a certain way, actors can define problems, assign blame, evaluate moral dimensions, and propose solutions that align with their interests.

A core aspect of their approach is strategic issue framing, whereby different actors present the same issue through conflicting points of view. For instance, immigration may be framed from the perspectives of economic importance and threat to security, and may be viewed as a humanitarian need, depending on the way the framers intend to ideologically frame their narratives. In the same vein, climate change may be framed as a scientific fact, a political agenda, or an economic burden. The ability to control the frame of perspectives that is dominant in public discourse is critical in shaping policy and public opinion.

Hanglli and Kriesi (2010) outline four key framing strategies that are deployed by actors in politics. They are problem definition, where actors strategically define an issue to emphasise its urgency and significance; casual attribution, where frames assign responsibility for a problem and set the tone for who is to be blamed or discredited; moral evaluation, where issues are framed by the use of ethical or emotional appeals; policy solution framing, where actors shape public perception of

proposed solutions such as framing climate policies as either a necessary step or as economic burdens. In the context of TRC reports, these strategies play a key role in shaping historical narratives. The framing of victims, perpetrators, and reconciliation can influence national healing, legal accountability, and historical memory. Iyengar (1991) also argues that the way the news media frame political reportage hugely influences the way audiences attribute responsibility for social and political problems. Iyengar distinguished between episodic and thematic frames, which are two key types of framing in the media that significantly influence public perception and policy attitudes.

According to him, episodic framing presents issues through specific events or cases, and it focuses on personal experiences and isolated events. This method of framing encourages the audience to give responsibilities to individuals and specific cases, rather than a broader systemic factor. To put it into context, the media portraying a single family that is struggling may condition the viewers to believe that poverty is a result of personal failure or unwillingness to work, instead of it being a problem that is attributable to failed economic policies.

On the other hand, Iyengar argues that thematic framing presents issues in a much broader context, and emphasizes the trends, policies, as well as systemic factors. Reportage on poverty, according to Iyengar, might harp on government policies and economic structures, which might lead the public to perceive poverty as a societal issue that requires the institutions to find solutions to it. All in all, Iyengar highlights the power of media framing to shape attitudes to politics and public discourse. His work remains hugely influential in media studies, especially in the understanding of how news narratives influence democratic accountability and policymaking. His arguments on episodic and thematic frames serve as a guide to contemporary research on the effects of the media on the formation of public opinion.

While commenting on Iyengar's framing theory, Matthes (2009) formulates two hypotheses. He argued that:

While episodic framing leads to dispositional attributions and thematic framing leads to less dispositional, external attributions, these effects may be hampered or reinforced by the general attributional preference of an individual. Thus, the following two hypotheses were formulated: Hypothesis 1: Episodic framing of a news item leads to stronger dispositional attributions of responsibility compared to thematic framing. Hypothesis 2: When reading a news article, individuals with a general dispositional attributional style tend to prefer individual causes over external causes for the problem or issue at hand. (p. 3)

Similarly, Chi (2019) cites four key framing strategies. They are: make-believe, where events are acknowledged to be an imitation of the real event and have no practical

consequences by the participants; contests, which are got from the display of fighting and the dominance that are however controlled to mitigate aggressive behaviours; ceremonials, which act to function to constrict, and technical re-doings, which are activities carried out for utilitarian functions. Understanding the framing strategies allows a robust exploration of how the TRC reports of Liberia construct or perceive the plight of women in their post-conflict narrative.

Finally, framing theory highlights the tremendous role of the media and communication in shaping the perception of the audience and understanding events. Giving prominence and attention to some parts of discourse and relegating some to the background frames influence the way audiences interpret and respond to information. The framing theory is very crucial in media studies, politics, and public discourse because it shows the way narratives are constructed to regulate and influence the opinions and behaviours of the audience. Understanding framing techniques allows the understanding of how power structures could construct a discourse to shape the public perception to suit the power structures. In the context of TRC reports, these strategies play a key role in shaping historical narratives. The framing of victims, perpetrators, and reconciliation can influence national healing, legal accountability, and historical memory.

### **Analytical Framework**

#### *Qualitative Analysis: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)*

The method of analysis employed for this study is CDA, which draws insights from the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) developed by Reisigl and Wodak. This approach emphasizes the importance of historical context in understanding how discourses are constructed and how they perpetuate power relations and ideologies. The analysis focuses on identifying linguistic and discursive patterns that reflect power dynamics and ideological positions related to gender. By examining lexical choices, thematic structures, and narrative strategies, the study seeks to uncover how women's experiences are portrayed and the implications of these portrayals for gender justice in post-conflict Liberia.

#### *Quantitative Analysis: Corpus Linguistics*

The quantitative component employs corpus linguistics methods, utilising WordSmith Tools to analyse the frequency and patterns of lexical items and phrases related to women's experiences. This software facilitates the identification of keywords, collocations, and concordance lines, providing empirical data on how certain terms are used and the contexts in which they appear. By quantifying these linguistic features, the study detects patterns that indicate underlying biases or framing techniques in the TRC report. This data-driven approach complements the qualitative analysis, offering a more robust understanding of the text's discourse structures.

## **Methodology**

This study adopts a transformative mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative techniques within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine gendered narratives in Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report. By combining corpus linguistics tools with critical feminist discourse analysis, the research uncovers how women's experiences are represented and framed in Liberia's Truth Reconciliation Report. The corpus for this study comprises selected sections from Volumes I and II of Liberia's TRC report, focusing specifically on content that addresses women's experiences during the civil conflict. Key sections include Volume I, Part III: Women (under Part IV, number 9), and Volume II: Consolidated Final Reports, particularly sections 9.2 (Women Survivors) and 10.3 (Women, the TRC, and Conflicts). These sections collectively amount to approximately 3,000 words. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select these texts, ensuring thematic relevance to the study's focus on gender representation. Additionally, other relevant subsections discussing women's roles and experiences were examined to provide comprehensive analysis. The data were sourced from the official website of Liberia's TRC (<https://www.trcofliberia.org>), ensuring authenticity and accessibility. The selected texts were compiled into a corpus for analysis, focusing on narratives that detail women's experiences, including instances of gender-based violence, displacement, and participation in peace-building efforts.

## Data Analysis

**Table 4.1: Key Word Analysis of the Plight of Women in Liberia’s TRC Report**

<b>Keyword</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Relative Frequency (%)</b>
rights	404	0.2471
women	272	0.1664
justice	100	0.0612
violence	99	0.0605
gender	56	0.0342
rape	46	0.0281
female	33	0.0202
victim	33	0.0202
abuse	30	0.0183
exploitation	23	0.0141
oppression	16	0.0098
discrimination	15	0.0092
assault	12	0.0073
harassment	6	0.0037
marginalization	6	0.0037
inequality	4	0.0024
coercion	3	0.0018
stigma	1	0.0006

**Figure 4.2: Graphical Representation of the Keyword Analysis of Plight of Women in the TRC Report**

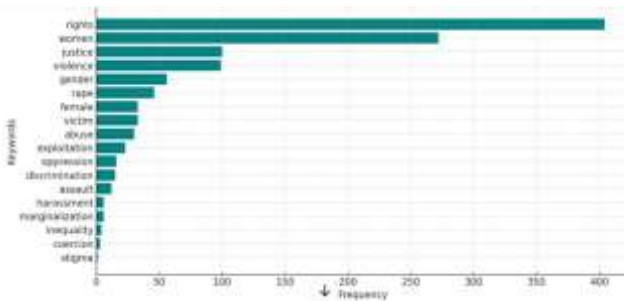


Table 4.1 reveals the Keyword analysis of Plight of Women in Liberia’s TRC Report. The analysis reveals keywords such as—*violence, rape, abuse, victim, and survivor*—appear frequently in the document, indicating the centrality of gender-based suffering during the conflict. Among these, "violence" is the most prominent, occurring 99 times with a relative frequency of 0.0605%. This suggests that the discourse on women’s experiences is largely framed around the overarching theme of violence, encompassing both physical and sexual aggression. The term "rape" appears 46 times (0.0281%), highlighting the pervasiveness of sexual violence as a tool of war. The high occurrence of this term alongside "violence" indicates that rape was systematically used against women, making it a key focus in the TRC’s documentation. Similarly, "victim" and "abuse" occur 33 times (0.0202%) and 30 times (0.0183%), respectively, reinforcing the narrative of women as primary casualties of war-related atrocities. The presence of these terms suggests that the report recognises women’s suffering but largely frames them in passive roles as victims rather than active agents of change.

Interestingly, "survivor" does not appear in the extracted text, reflecting a potential linguistic bias in the report’s framing of women’s experiences. The absence of this term suggests that the discourse may emphasise victimhood over resilience, highlighting the need for a more balanced narrative that acknowledges women’s agency in post-war recovery. This linguistic pattern underscores how transitional justice mechanisms often portray women primarily as victims rather than contributors to peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts. Table 4.1 and Figure 4.2 illustrate that keyword focus analysis of Liberia’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)

Report reveals five major linguistic constructions that shape the narrative around women's plight. The constructions are discussed below:

### **Construction of Traumatic Experiences**

The prominence of terms such as *violence*, *rape*, *abuse*, *victim*, and *survivor* underscores the systemic and widespread nature of gender-based violence during the Liberian civil war. These words frequently co-occur, highlighting the traumatic experiences of women, particularly in the context of sexual violence and exploitation. The repeated mention of *justice and rights* further suggests that while women suffered immensely, there is also a discourse around legal redress and accountability.

### **Construction of Marginalisation and Discrimination**

The construct of marginalisation and discrimination is evident through terms like *inequality*, *oppression*, and *exclusion*, which indicate the deep-seated societal disadvantages that women faced before, during, and after the conflict. The report's linguistic structure portrays women not only as direct victims of war but also as individuals systematically deprived of opportunities and protection. The phrase *lack of justice* appears frequently in proximity to *women's rights*, suggesting that the legal system often fails to address or recognise the gendered dimensions of wartime atrocities.

### **Construction of Resilience and Agency**

The construction of resilience and agency emerges through words like *advocate*, *reconciliation*, and *empowerment*, which are frequently linked to women's roles in peacebuilding. Despite being victims, women are also depicted as active participants in fostering post-war recovery and advocating for transitional justice. The TRC reports acknowledge women's contributions to mediation, community rebuilding, and policy-making, reflecting a dual narrative of both suffering and strength. However, the tension between victimisation and empowerment in the linguistic representation suggests an ongoing struggle for recognition and participation in governance structures.

### **Construct of Societal Stigma and Psychological Trauma**

The construct of societal stigma and psychological trauma is reflected in the recurrent use of *stigma*, *coercion*, and *trauma*, which highlight the long-term consequences of war-related gender violence. Many women who endured sexual violence faced rejection from their communities, as indicated by the collocations of *victim* and *exclusion*. This linguistic framing emphasises the double burden women carry—not only as survivors of violence but also as individuals forced to navigate a society that often ostracises them. The TRC report's language, therefore, serves as both a record of past injustices and a call for systemic change, emphasising the need for gender-sensitive reconciliation processes.

## Conclusion

The analysis of Liberia's TRC reports reveals a linguistic bias that centres on physical violence while overlooking structural oppression and psychological trauma. Women's agency is largely absent, reinforcing a narrative of victimhood rather than resilience or justice-seeking. Lexical patterns show a dominance of suffering-related terms, with little attention to empowerment or structural issues. This study underscores the marginalisation of women's voices and calls for gender-sensitive language in future TRC efforts to ensure a more inclusive and accurate account of post-conflict experiences.

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