



## **Gendered Portrayal of Political Actors in Nigerian Print Media: What Impact on Women’s Political Participation?**

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### **Abstract**

The objective of this paper is to investigate the gendered portrayal of political actors in Nigerian print media and its impact on women’s political participation based on an empirical study. The study adopted a combination of methods – content analysis and cross-sectional survey. A case study of the coverage of the corruption charges of two former Speakers of the lower legislature (male and female, respectively) during the 2007-2011 administration was conducted on two purposely selected daily newspapers – *The Punch* and *The Guardian*. To complement the findings of the content analysis, a cross-sectional survey was conducted on a sample size of 100 respondents on their perception of media portrayal of female politicians. Findings of the content analyses revealed that the coverage of the cases was gendered, with the female Speaker’s case being sensationalised, hyped and trivialised. However, the findings of the survey indicate that a majority of the respondents saw the coverage as justifiable, believing the media simply reported the truth about the female Speaker.

### **Résumé**

Cet article se propose d’explorer la représentation sexospécifique des acteurs politiques dans la presse écrite nigérienne et son impact sur la participation politique des femmes, en se fondant sur une étude empirique. L’étude a adopté une combinaison de méthodes – analyse de contenu et enquête transversale. Une étude de cas sur la couverture médiatique des accusations de corruption à l’encontre de deux anciens Orateurs de la chambre basse de la législature (un homme et une femme, respectivement), au cours du gouvernement de 2007-2011) a été réalisée sur deux quotidiens

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choisis expressément – le *Punch* et le *Guardian*. Pour compléter les résultats de l'analyse de contenu, une enquête transversale a été réalisée auprès d'un échantillon de 100 répondants, sur leur perception de la représentation des femmes politiciennes dans les médias. Il ressort des analyses de contenu que la couverture des affaires comportait une dimension sexospécifique, celle concernant l'Oratrice ayant été traitée de manière sensationnelle, exagérée et banalisée. Toutefois, la plupart des répondants ont considéré que la couverture était justifiée, étant convaincus que les médias n'ont fait que rapporter la vérité en ce qui concerne l'Oratrice.

## **Introduction**

The media as an institution plays a pivotal role in creating awareness and shaping attitudes in society. Also, the media constitute the real public space through which citizens understand politics. This role makes the media a veritable tool for either altering or further entrenching the negative gender stereotypes that exclude women from politics. In Nigeria, women constitute a minority in the political scene. Despite several years of democratic rule, no female has occupied any of the highest political offices – president, vice president, governor, senate president, etc. In recent times, female representation in national government has further decreased from 9 per cent in the 2007 administration to 6 percent in the 2011 administration. The questions arise, why the decrease in representation? What role has the media, as a pivotal instrument of creating awareness and shaping attitudes, played in enhancing women's political participation? How do the print media portray male and female political actors? These are some of the contending issues that the study seeks to unravel.

## **The Media and Politics**

In today's globalised world where information communication technology has become more sophisticated, the media has become even more important as a tool of information dissemination. In politics, the media constitutes the real public through which citizens understand the 'political' (Corner 2003:75). In fact, the media have become the 'playing field' for political actors in the twenty-first century as voters' perception of political figures and issues are shaped principally through the news media. Lawrence (2004) observes that the media have considerable power to shape individuals' understanding of public life, to set the agenda on key issues and to influence the political process. Other studies, for example, Schmitt-Beck's (1996) study of the 1990 German national elections, show the power of the media to influence people who are less informed about politics or who have weak party identification. The study

revealed that the media and opinion poll information about the perceived electoral strengths of the competing parties had a measurable effect on the vote, sufficient in a tight contest to decide the outcome.

### **Gender and Media Portrayal of Political Actors**

The media constitutes one of the key institutions that can shape and change attitudes regarding gender stereotypes within the political sphere. Therefore, the ways in which women and men are portrayed; their access to the media; and their visibility as political agents in the media, certainly impact on their political career (Mervi 2006). Despite this obviously important role of the media in enhancing political careers, women do not have a fair representation vis-a-vis men. Statistics show that women have poor access to the media. According to Media and Gender Monitor (2011), women constituted the focus of only 19 per cent of news stories in politics and government in 2010, while only 24 per cent of news stories were reported about women globally. Similarly, the Global Media Monitoring Project (2010) report observes that of the 84 news websites monitored by the project in 2010, only 23 per cent of newsmakers were women. These statistics show that men dominate the news and this has been the situation over the years. An earlier study by Norris (1997) on the media coverage of women heads of state globally lends credence to this. The study reveals that measured by the standardised measure of daily stories per leader, women leaders were covered in fewer stories.

In instances where women are the focus of the news, they are often misrepresented. Media reports on them are often negative, reflecting widely held stereotypes in society, which have nothing to do with their political aspirations (Mervi 2006; Jenkins 2002). Thus, Lawrence (2004) observes that the media exercises significant effects on the formation of public opinion about women politicians, which differs from that about men. In recognition of this negative role of the media on women's political careers, the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing 1995 admonished the media to develop strategies to increase women's participation in decision-making through promoting a less stereotyped image of women and offering them equal access to the media (Mervi 2006). Decades have gone by since this appeal and there is yet to be a remarkable improvement in women's participation in decision-making globally. Women still hold only 20 per cent of parliamentary seats globally. Although this is a remarkable increase from the 11.3 per cent in 1995, the progress is still very slow and there are wide variations among countries (FORBES 2012).

The media often frames women politicians through stereotypes and traditional societal values. Kahn (1994) observes that there are differential expectations in the media and the wider community about the interests and competencies of female and male politicians. For example, the media tends to stress the compassionate and nurturing qualities of women, while competencies are emphasised in men. In a similar vein Lawrence (2004) observes that in the past, the media's starting point was that women belonged at home and they were expected to marry and raise a family. Braden's (1996) account of the media portrayal of the first United States congresswoman (Jeannette Rankin) lends credence to this. The account reveals that the press made her an instant celebrity as she was regarded as an anomaly and an oddity that had strayed too far from the cultural norm. There are still elements of this in the treatment of contemporary female politicians.

Lawrence (2004) observes that the relatively rarity of women in the political world sometimes means that the few women in politics attract more attention from the media and are equally perceived as being more newsworthy by the media, albeit in a trivialising sense. Jenkins' (2002) analysis of the biographical accounts of female politicians by the Australian press reveals that such accounts focused on gender-based evaluations. Emphasis is placed on age, marital status, looks, fashion sense and domestic and family lives, rather than on the substance of decisions and actions. Similarly, a study of British women parliamentarians by Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross (1996) reveals that their outward appearance was the subject of considerably more attention than that of their male counterparts.

Women politicians are also framed by the media as being 'outsiders'. Their representation further reinforces societal perception that women are outsiders in politics. They are frequently portrayed as exceptions and 'diversions from the serious male game of politics'. Motion's (1996) study of women's politicians in New Zealand buttresses this fact. The study reveals that successful women politicians were often portrayed as lacking feminine characteristics and resembling their male counterparts. Alternatively, they were depicted as lonely outsiders, unable to adjust to the world of politics. Similarly, Media Monitoring Project's (1999:9) report of a survey of the portrayal of women politicians in the South African media reveals that they were represented as unfeminine, 'iron women', ruthless, belligerent and doggedly determined. These, the report observes, are attributes which are positively correlated with strong leadership by the media when men display them. However, when women

politicians display such attributes, the media criticises and vilifies them. In the same vein, Norris's (1997) study of media portrayal of international women leaders reveals that many of the stories focused on the 'first woman' status (being the first woman to hold such a position) of the leaders as well as on 'the breakthrough for women' (a woman attaining such a position constitutes a breakthrough for women).

The media also portrays women politicians as the agents of change who will clean up corruption in politics. Thus, the entrance of women into politics is commonly perceived by the media and in fact the entire society as a breath of fresh air. Therefore, female politicians are expected to behave better than their male counterparts. When these high expectations are not met, Haines (1992) observes that the condemnation is all the greater. However, Lake (1994) observes that this softer, more caring image is often cultivated by the female politicians themselves, as a means of making themselves more attractive to the electorate. Lawrence (2004) argues there are dangers associated with these exaggerated, saintly images of female politicians, as such inflated expectations are almost certain to be disappointed. This places women politicians between a rock and a hard place. If they dare to be different, they are seen as a problem, and if they fit into the bill, they are equally seen as a problem. So either way, women politicians are criticised and vilified by the media.

The media also belittles female politicians by portraying them as sexual objects. They are portrayed as passive creatures that are being wooed and won over by powerful male politicians and their political positions are represented as tokens in exchange for sexual favours. Jenkins' (2002) analysis of the press in Australia shows that one of the female politicians (Cheryl Kernot) who was touted as a possible future Prime Minister was portrayed by the media as a sexual object of some top and powerful political leaders, whom the media presumed were the ones enhancing her political career.

This discriminative coverage of female and male politicians may translate into electoral disadvantages for women. This is because perception of social reality often corresponds with media 'realities'. Media images are often internalised and accepted as accurate representations of reality by media audiences. Thus, differential treatment of female and male politicians may influence voting decisions in favour of the men. This may be a contributing factor to the low participation of women in politics globally and in countries such as Nigeria. It also buttresses Tuchman's (1978) argument that the media have attempted to banish women to hearth and home.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The agenda-setting theory of the media constitutes the theoretical framework of this study. The theory states that media content sets the agenda for public discussion. Thus, agenda setting illustrates the powerful influence of the media in shaping the public's view of what issues are important. The theory was first put forth by McCombs and Shaw (1972) who argue that although the media may not exactly tell us what to think, they may tell us what to think about. According to them, in choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality. Readers learn not only about a given issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position. Thus, once headlines, special news features, discussions, and expert opinions are focused on an issue in the media every day, the issue will continue to be a subject of discussion among the public.

This was the case with the female Speaker's corruption scandal in Nigeria. The story made the front page headlines everyday in a row from the day of the first report until the Speaker eventually relinquished her position. Similarly, special news features, discussions and expert opinions on the scam, were frequent stories in the media.

However, the coverage of the male Speaker corruption charge was not this sensational. The story made fewer headlines with few special news features on it. In fact, discussions and expert opinions on it were toned down. This correspondingly elicited limited public reaction. Thus, the male Speaker was not forced to vacate his seat as was the case with the female Speaker. Yet, at the expiration of his tenure as a Speaker, he was immediately arrested, detained and charged to court by the Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC – the organ of government in charge of fighting financial crimes), for corrupt practices, while in office. The female Speaker, whose corruption case was sensationalised, had no case to answer with the Economic and Financial Crime Commission at the expiration of her tenure.

## **Research Methods**

The study used a combination of research methods – content analysis and a cross-sectional survey of women's 'perception of media portrayal of women politicians'. A content analysis of the coverage of the corruption charges of two former Speakers of the lower legislature (male and female, respectively) during the 2007 – 2011 administration was conducted on

two purposely selected daily newspapers – *The Punch* and *the Guardian*. These newspapers were chosen because of their wide coverage, as they rank among the leading daily newspapers in Nigeria. The content analysis covered a period of 72 days (21 August 2007 to 31 October 2007), when the corruption scam against the female Speaker was reported; and 84 days (20 October 2008 to 18 February 2009), when that of her successor, the male Speaker was reported, respectively. Both Speakers were accused of corruption with regards to the award of contracts. While the female Speaker was accused of a N628 million contract scam for the renovation of the official residence of the house leadership (Speaker and Deputy Speaker), the male Speaker was similarly accused of a scam in a N2.3 billion contract for the purchase of cars for the house leadership and standing committees. The content analysis assesses the quantum of stories, number of editorials, and number of paragraphs and headlines written on each case. Secondly, the contents of the reports of each case were qualitatively studied, in terms of the manner in which the respective cases were framed by the newspapers and the implication this had for the image of the respective Speakers before the public. To complement the findings of the content analysis, a cross-sectional survey was also conducted on women's perception of media portrayal of female politicians. A structured interview schedule was used to elicit responses from a hundred randomly selected female respondents in the Lagos metropolis of Lagos State. The interview sought to unravel their perception of media portrayal of female and male political actors, and if such portrayal is gendered, especially in relation to the corruption reports of the subjects of our case study.

## Findings

The analysis reveals that a total of 198 and 155 stories were written by *The Punch* and *Guardian* newspapers, respectively, within a timeframe of 72 days, on the female Speaker as compared with 31 and 15 stories, in *The Punch* and *Guardian*, respectively, for the male Speaker within 84 days. At least, a story was written on the scam every day with regards to the female Speaker in *The Punch* newspaper. In terms of paragraphing, the female Speaker's story has 3,660 and 2,844 paragraphs in the two dailies, respectively, as compared to 588 and 266 paragraphs for the male Speaker (see Table 1).

With regard to editorial, the female Speaker's story attracted three editorials in each of the newspapers as compared to only one editorial in *The Punch* and none in the *Guardian* for the male Speaker. Similarly, the female Speaker's story has 58 and 53 (sometimes extremely bold)

headlines in each of the respective dailies, while the male Speaker has only eight and six headlines, respectively (see Table 1).

This disproportionate amount of coverage on the scandal involving the female Speaker confirms observations from scholars such as Lawrence (2004) that the relatively rarity of women in politics means they attract more attention from the media, as well as findings from the Media Monitoring Project (1999) indicating that South African women politicians were more prone to criticism than their male counterparts. The female Speaker was the first ever in Nigeria, hence the huge attention that her corruption scam attracted.

**Table 1**

Content Analysis	Female Speaker		Male Speaker	
	<i>Punch</i> Newspaper	<i>Guardian</i> Newspaper	<i>Punch</i> Newspaper	<i>Guardian</i> Newspaper
Length of coverage	72days	72days	84days	84days
Quantum of articles	198	155	31	15
Number of paragraphs	3,660	2,844	588	266
Number of editorials	3	3	1	0
Front page headlines	58	53	8	6

However, the ordeal of the female Speaker should not be blamed on the media alone. Perhaps the greater blame should go to her colleagues in the same and rival political parties within the legislature, who took advantage of the media's agenda-setting role to ensure that the issue remained in the public domain through incessant negative press interviews and conferences. These reports from the observations of some of the pro female Speaker legislators, who lamented about the incessant press interviews by fellow colleagues, buttress this point:

'in all the media in the country... newspaper, televisions, magazine or whatever, the crisis at the house has formed the major news' (*Punch* 18 October 2007:43). [Reports often based on negative press interviews by fellow legislators].



‘Chairman of the House Committee on media and publicity expressed concern over the allegation, which has gained currency in the media (*Guardian* 24 August 2007: cover page). [Reports often based on negative press interviews and conferences by fellow legislators],

This action of the legislators of appropriating the agenda-setting role of the media to keep the issue in the public domain of course elicited the expected public response. There was outcry from all spheres of the society, calling for the immediate resignation of the Speaker. In the male Speaker’s case, the opposition from political colleagues was weak; the media coverage was similarly not hyped, hence, there was only an insignificant public outcry for his removal or resignation.

The qualitative analysis of the contents of the coverage in terms of the manner in which the respective cases were framed shows that the frames reflected the widely held stereotypes about women and men in the Nigerian society. The female Speaker’s case attracted more stories and sensationalism because she had failed to live up to the unrealistic expectations of the media (and society) that female politicians are ‘outsiders’ and ‘agents of change’. Her entanglement in corruption charges was seen as an unpardonable transgression. Hence, the issue attracted three editorials in each of the dailies. In fact, one of the editorials questioned her leadership capabilities, despite the fact that she had had three consecutive tenures as a legislator and she was one of the principal officers in the previous administration. Another of the editorials admonished her to resign immediately. These excerpts illustrate the disappointment of the media on her fall from grace.

‘I find it rather sad that the first woman Speaker would engage in the act. We are disappointed and embarrassed by that. The expectation that a woman will bring a motherly instinct to management of our resources is shattered’ (*Punch* 9 September 2007:43).

‘the attempt by Mrs Etteh (Speaker) to pass the blame to her subordinates portrays her as weak and incapable of providing the kind of purposeful leadership and direction that the house requires to deliver results’ (*Punch* 25 September 2007:14, Editorial).

Similarly, many of the stories showed her as the ‘other’ who has transgressed into the male’s political space. Her ‘first woman’ status was constantly reported as well as the disappointment that her action had brought to the ‘breakthrough for women’. She was commonly referred to as a ‘disgrace to womanhood’. Equally, some stories portrayed her first as a woman before being a politician. She was constantly referred to as

‘Madam Speaker’. The stories on her male counterpart simply reported him as Speaker.

Her educational qualification was downplayed. She has a Diploma in Law and Beauty Therapy, respectively. She was also an undergraduate student, studying Political Science at the University of Abuja. However, she was ridiculed as an inept and naive hairdresser that is lacking in political expertise, as these excerpts illustrate –

‘the mere fact that we have this crisis shows that she does not have any managerial capacity, (and) lacks political skill’ (*Punch* 22 September 2007:A3).

‘when she was elected, the members were fully aware that her highest educational attainment was that of a hairdresser’ (*Punch* 25 September 2007:9).

‘to make the transition from a beauty shop to the No 4 position in the country is no easy feat’ (*Guardian* 30 September 2007:54).

She was portrayed as undeserving of being a Speaker. Her ascendancy to Speakership was portrayed as a reward from political godfathers as depicted by these excerpts:

‘she has some very powerful sponsors who anointed her and imposed her on us’ (*Punch* 20 October 2007:9).

‘her election as a Speaker was a rare and spectacular reward of loyalty by a party famous for its treachery’ (*Punch* 2 October 2007:13).

‘a hairdresser became the Speaker only because of her relationship with the oga (former Nigerian President) of the previous administration’ (*Punch* 27 October 2007:A5).

The issue was trivialised and stereotyped along gender-based evaluations. This finding supports Jenkins’ (2002) and Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross’s (1996) observations in Australia and Britain, respectively, which reveal media reports of female politicians as focusing on gender-based evaluations such as outward appearance and fashion sense.

‘the Speaker cannot understand that it is not about money, godfather or about twisting the system around her fancy nails’ (*Punch* 2 October 2007:13).

‘Etteh (Speaker) should be recalled so that she can return to her beauty salon and resume work as a hairdresser’ (*Punch* 30 September 2007:7).

‘what would it profit Etteh (Speaker) ...to shrug off this debilitating scandal and continue in office as Speaker with a handbag full of cracked mirrors, facial masks and mascara?’ (*Guardian* 28 September 2007:51).

She was also represented as ruthless, belligerent and doggedly determined as illustrated by these excerpts – ‘*a congenital liar and brazen manipulator of the levers of power*’ (*Punch* 2 October 2007:13); [who did not demonstrate] ‘*an iota of remorse, before, during and after at the panel*’ (*Punch* 25 September 2007:9) [and whose appearance while at the panel set up to investigate the scam] ‘*looked like a champion boxer determined to defend her title*’ (*Guardian* 28 September 2007:51) [and was also] ‘*ividly ill at ease*’ (*Guardian* 28 September 2007:51). Her response to the accusation was represented as ‘*emotional and sentimental comments*’ (*Punch* 27 September 2007:14).

On the other hand, the media construction of the male Speaker’s case was issue based. The case was neither hyped nor trivialised by either daily. Stories focused on the core issues involving the scam as demonstrated by the excerpts below. Hence, the scam elicited minimal attention from the public.

‘The crisis in the House of Representatives over the purchase of 380 committee vehicles worth N2.3 billion worsened on Thursday. The leadership of the house under Speaker Bankole has been accused of profiting from the contract’ (*Punch* 7 November 2008:6).

‘House referred the controversy surrounding the purchase of 380 cars for committee duties to its committee on Ethics and Privileges for investigation. Keyamo alleged a fraud of overpayment or misappropriation of about N42.5 million in the deal’ (*Punch* 21 October 2008:8).

‘Keyamo had accused the House leadership of short-changing the Nigerian tax payers of over N500million when it purchased cars from PAN’ (*Guardian* 31 October 2008:9).

Comparison between the two newspapers reveals that the *Guardian* newspaper was more issue-based in its style of reporting than *The Punch*. Similarly, the quantum of stories, front page headlines and the number of paragraphs on both issues were less in the *Guardian* newspaper than in *The Punch* (see Table 1).

To further buttress the findings from the content analysis, a cross-sectional survey was conducted on a sample of 100 randomly selected females in the Lagos metropolis, using a structured interview schedule. The interview sought to unravel their perception of media portrayal of female and male political actors [in light of the corruption scandals] and if as women they considered such portrayal as gendered?

The socio-economic background of respondents as revealed by the analysis show that a majority of them were middle aged (40-49 years – 35.4%); married (56.0%); and educated with about 40 per cent being first

degree holders. About 48.0 per cent were engaged in the public sector, while only 10 per cent were self-employed. Also, a majority (52.3%) of them earned monthly incomes of less than N100, 000.00.

An analysis of their political orientation shows that a majority of the respondents (80%) were interested in politics and of those interested in politics, 51.0 per cent were members of political parties. For party members, only 21.6 per cent held executive positions in parties and among this, the leader position constitutes 63.6 per cent of positions held.

Respondents' assessment of women's representation in politics shows that a majority (70%) acknowledged women's low representation in politics and attributed this to the marginalisation of women within the political space, due to the commonly held notion that politics is for men.

An analysis of the corruption scams of the female and male Speakers reveals that a majority (more than 90.0%) of the respondents had paid attention to the scandal involving the female speaker as compared to 61 per cent who had followed the case of the male Speaker. A majority (80%) had followed the story on television, although a good number (41%) had read it in print. The remainder had followed the issue on the radio (34%) or via social media (21%).

In terms of the nature of coverage, a majority (61%) of the respondents admitted the female Speaker's case was not hyped, arguing that the media simply reported the truth. However, 39.0 per cent of them admitted the coverage was biased and sensationalised because of the 'woman' factor. Similarly, 58.5 per cent of them did not consider the media coverage had influenced the outcome of the case (the removal of the Speaker). For them, the Speaker's removal was just. In fact, they commended the media for exposing the Speaker who was a 'disgrace to womanhood'. However, 41.5 per cent saw her as a victim of negative media coverage and attributed her forceful removal to the sensationalism that the media created about the case. They argue that for simply being a 'woman', who dared to tread upon a strange terrain that is an exclusive preserve of men, her mistake was seen as an unpardonable sin, hence the intense media coverage. However, for the male Speaker, being in politics was a natural domain and a man being involved in corruption was nothing strange, hence his case did not generate as much interest in the media as that of the female Speaker.

An analysis of respondents' general assessment of media coverage of female politicians reveals that about 57.0 per cent believed the media was gendered in its coverage of female politicians, as women politicians were often portrayed negatively. However, about 43.0 per cent said there was

no biased reporting. With regard to the medium most culpable of negative coverage of women's politician, findings reveal the television (52%) as the most culpable, followed by the print media (26.0%) and then radio (22%). However, respondents did not attribute the low participation of women in politics to the negative media portrayal of female politicians. About 68.0 per cent said the media portrayal of female politicians is not the reason for the low participation of women in politics but rather the marginalisation of women within the political space.

## **Conclusion**

The media is an important tool for changing attitudes and creating new perceptions. In today's world, the media has become even more important in providing knowledge and shaping attitudes, especially with regard to political behaviour. This study has shown that the portrayal of political actors in Nigeria by the print media is gendered. This finding corroborates the findings of other studies (Braden 1996; Motion 1996; Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross 1996; Media Monitoring Project 1999; Lawrence 2004; Jenkins 2002) in other parts of the world. The study has further revealed that public perception including those of women is in support of this gendered portrayal. The reason for this is not far-fetched. Women being products of their cultural environment do have images that are in consonance with prevailing cultural perceptions of women. These images are further reinforced by the stories in the media as Mervi (2006) observes that media reports on female politicians are often negative, reflecting widely held stereotypes in society. This probably informs the findings of the study that the gendered media portrayal has not influenced the low participation of women in politics in Nigeria. However, it is my opinion that the media can help ameliorate the low participation of women in politics in Nigeria, due to its enormous power in shaping political behaviour as evidenced by empirical data (see Kahn 1994; Schmitt-Beck 1996). Therefore, the Nigerian media report of female politicians should be issue-based, devoid of trivialisation and sensationalism, as was the case of the female Speaker's corruption charge. The media should sensitise the public to the idea that women's participation in political life is an essential part of democracy. Probably with the assistance of the media, more women will encroach upon the political terrain, thus increasing women's representation from the present paltry 6 per cent.

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