VISUAL & PERFORMING ARTS | RESEARCH ARTICLE

On new voices in Nollywood: female agency and value in selected Nigerian movies

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Abstract: In recent times female Nigerian filmmakers have integrated an array of counter-interventionist measures in their movies in a bid to undercut patriarchy’s narrative primacy. This study investigates feminist responses to toxic masculinity in critical and commercially acclaimed Nigerian films, revealing how three female Nigerian directors leveraged their authentic experiences to demonstrate women’s social capacity without threatening patriarchy directly. The study analyzes how young female moviemakers deploy art as a narrative of struggle against a limiting sexist frame. Based on findings culled from visual research and dramaturgical analysis, the paper explores how three Nigerian movies, Omoni Oboli’s Wives on Strike, Stephanie Okereke Linus’s Dry, and Remi Vaughan-Richard’s Unspoken, pioneer social change through the stories of young people battling to survive in a sexist space. The study focuses on blockbuster Nollywood movies challenging misogynistic narratives, and contextualizes the process through which Nigerian movies construct the identity of the “Other” within dominant discourse.

Subjects: Art & Gender; Visual Culture; Filmmaking and Postproduction; Media Communication; Theatre & Performance Studies

Keywords: Feminism; discourse; identity; representation; youth; Nollywood

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

An examination of women’s portrayal in Nigerian movies reveals that women have suffered negative characterization as wicked step mothers, prostitutes, gold diggers, etc. Nollywood has often shown women as sex objects and findings show the mass media could influence audience’s social behavior through the manner gender is depicted on screen. In recent times female Nigerian filmmakers have challenged prejudice through their movies by using humour and non-confrontational strategies to discuss social issues affecting women. This study investigates feminist responses to oppression in selected popular Nigerian movies. The study emphasizes how three female Nigerian directors utilized their experiences to demonstrate women’s social capacity without confronting the establishment directly. The paper explores how three Nigerian movies, Omoni Oboli’s Wives on Strike, Stephanie Okereke Linus’s Dry, and Remi Vaughan-Richard’s Unspoken, pioneer social change through the plots of young people battling to survive in a sexist space.
1. Introduction

In recent times stereotypical representations of women in Nigerian films have received renewed criticism from an increasingly liberal viewership led by feminists demanding change in women’s portrayal. Human rights groups and gender activists have decried the high negative representation of women in the entertainment media and currently a great shift in image is spawning towards more nuanced cinematic depictions of fragility and inclusiveness (Alola & Alola, 2020; Azeez, 2010; Uchendu, 2007). Recognizing that Nollywood’s projections to the audience tend to be received as truth, women groups have adopted various media platforms to protest the negative representation of women in the media, especially film, television and advertisements (Ibbi, 2017: 50). With the growth of a social media driven audience largely comprising young viewers, the discussion about feminism and values in story telling has become more spirited (Chittal, 2015). In Nigeria’s male dominated creative industry, young female film makers are carving out spaces, increasingly appropriating cultural power, albeit disproportionally, to their demography. Adetusi (2007) averts that discussions on social justice and the marginalization of young women in Nigeria have most often focused on the past rather than the present. However, as more idealist young female producers mobilize creative content to reflect contemporary realities and diversities, many people are learning for the first time the plight of women around them.

In a conservative space with much of its citizenry avowing faith-based affiliations, dominant narratives of literary and visual nature have traditionally manipulated structures of gender representation for misogynist ends. As agitations mount for the advancement of feminism, a conservative society like Nigeria evidently faces a major cultural shift as women’s potentials become more visible. Gender norms and power relations limit—and try to shape—children and young people before they have a chance to explore their unique gifts, abilities and preferences. Gender norms reinforce stereotypes of what children and young people are expected to become—and how they are expected to behave and define themselves (UNICEF, 2021: 3). Ajegbo et al. (2007) suggests that key to moving the conversation forward is the need to help children “understand their identities and feel a sense of belonging as pupils construct their own interpretations of the world around them and their place within that world” (25, 29). Across cultures and societies, the role of young people in nation building has been widely acknowledged and has become a relevant issue in academic discourse.

In her study of feminine portrayals in Nigerian films Okunna (1996) found that central female characters are most often portrayed as single, invisible, helpless, vicious, and subordinate. Feminists argue vehemently that the image of women has been consistently exploited, abused and trivialized in the media particularly in the spheres of advertising and motion pictures (Nsereka & Enyindah, 2018:536). Nsereka and Enyindah (2018) note that women are usually represented as wayward, of low moral standing, materialistic, lazy, subservient to and dependent on men, causes of family problems, fit for domestic rather than professional and career roles, etc. (536). Although female characters are present in higher number than males, over the last 20 years Nollywood narratives have continued to portray women less frequently in central roles than men. Another conclusion is that most films depict women in traditional female occupations, most often as subordinates to men without status or power (Onyenonkeya et al., 2019:86). Lately, women have moved from the marginal lines of invisibility to become visible forces for good, focused on using their voices to make change happen in a space where cultural tensions exist. Television programming is a potential source of gender stereotypes for children (Wille et al., 2018). The mass media have the power to influence people’s thinking and for that reason, certain stereotype representation of women have the tendency of encouraging some of the stereotype representations of women to thrive in the society (Ibbi, 2017: 52).
A close examination of gender representation in Nigerian movies reveals that women have suffered from stereotype representations ranging from prostitutes, to witches, to gold diggers, to husband killers and so on. Ibbi (2017) concludes that considering the fact that the media offer positive and supportive as well as negative role models, the society stands the risk of having its youth copying how the media are portraying women (53). However, what some Nigerian young female movie makers have accomplished recently through their creative platforms make it possible for oppressed women to exist in new liberated spaces free from inhibitive social constructs. Young Nigerian female movie makers like Stephanie Okereke Linus, Remi Vaughan-Richard and Omoni Oboli have weaponized their cinematography to interrogate social attitudes, leveraging marginalized gender positions to produce creative content socially relevant to their needs. The images of women portrayed by these committed artists in their movies represent ideals of resilience grafted from a marginalized demography in need of empathy and empowerment. Their positive depictions convey the importance of rendering women authentically, not as sexualized objects bound to male lords, but as real women that are complex, beautiful, strong and capable of existing on their own terms. The analyzed female movie makers have created identities not centered on sexual subservience but on intellectual and biological resilience highlighted through creative focus on sexual and general health.

As Abah (2008) observes, the celebration of Nigerian women in Nollywood movies comes with riders admonishing women to adjust their dreams to cultural provisos. Value-based portrayals cultivate realistic perceptions and are relevant in comprehending gender and identity. The language for demanding social action and resisting complacency has evidently evolved in current global identity politics. This paper probes the intellectual contributions of three female Nigerian film makers to the growing narrative of new feminism, a sexual movement utilizing comedy and vibrant female heroines to tell women’s stories. Traditional feminism, with its concerns about how much of what society construes as inherently female traits are culturally and socially constructed, has posed a friction for Nigerian female film makers and other creative artists who tend to deny any affiliation to the feminist movement although their works reflect such feminist aspirations. In Nigeria there have been several misconceptions about “feminism” a term deemed to be anti-male, anti-culture and anti-religion in its ideology, warranting the subtle move by young female Nigerian directors to re-strategize a non confrontational approach to hegemony. In this exploration of how female moviemakers deploy art as narratives of struggle and celebration, the paper shines a light on how women with authentic experiences against all odds succeed in making their voices heard. The study critically analyses Okereke (2014), Remi Vaughan–Richard’s Ukudalo (2015) and Omoni Oboli’s Wives on Strike (2016), focusing on the female voices telling their stories in Nollywood movies challenging valorized narratives. As linear narrative films form essential components of the cultural kaleidoscope for assessing socio-cultural trends, the study contextualizes counter narratives and the process through which the entertainment media frames and situates the “Other” within discourse.

2. Literature review
Alola and Alola (2020) examines the pros and cons of representing African womanhood through Nigerian films and potential anti-cultural stereotypes. “Scholars, especially feminists are of the opinion that the film industry has continued to adopt the patriarchal Nigerian society where the woman must be a submissive housewife to her husband, irrespective of whatever way he chooses to behave in society” (Ibbi, 2017:60). Okunna (1996), Ogunleye (2003), Ezeigbo (1996), and Azeez (2010) affirm that Nigerian films portray and position Nigerian women stereotypically and negatively. As Ibbi (2017) observes “though the women have made a name for themselves in the Nigerian film industry, there have been lamentations from media scholars over the stereotype representation of women in Nigerian films” (61). Nollywood has shown no genuine deviation from the trite pattern of portraying woman as sex objects whose main, if not only goal in life, is to attract and gratify men. This is manifested in the depiction of women as sex objects and the use of young and attractive females in the videos (Onyenankaneya et al., 2019:86–87). Recent
developments however show this sexist characterization innovatively re-imagined by female directors who have transformed this vulnerable gender to power agents.

In his evaluation of the Nigerian film industry’s contribution to women’s rights, A.T. Kenneth (2009) established that Nigerian films have contributed modestly in the campaign against girl child abuse. Films could serve the purpose of child rights advancement when properly designed as exemplified by the five films in focus. For one, the films were able to project the characteristic rights abuses suffered by the Nigerian girl child and made a case for a new cultural attitude. Films present a veritable tool for the realization of the rights of the Nigerian child which stands out as one of the leading human rights issues in the contemporary world (Onwe & Ihiaeme, 2018:1034) Nigerians’ patronage of Nigerian films is not only limited to films on child sexual abuse but also films about contemporary issues as drug addiction, idolatry, violence, corruption, etc. Supporting the view that such popular movies imprint violence, Onwubere (2012) blames Nollywood for much exposure of violence to the child. The quest to curb child abuse could be successful if the Nigerian film industry reduces the level of violence in their films and educate young audiences about abuse (Ejiofor, Ojokor & Nwazor 79). To Fairclough and Wodak (1997) such discourse is partly realized using language such as visual semiosis. Discourses are a kind of concrete realization of abstracts, forms of knowledge which at the same time are interactive and influenced by sociolinguistic factors. Oboli, Linus and Vaughan-Richards’ feminist movies form part of a cultural movement; a remarkable phase in Nigeria’s history when young women emerged from the back seat to creatively demand more visibility and voice in the socio-political scheme of things. Postman (1985) observes that whenever language is the principal medium of communication, an idea, a fact, a claim is the inevitable result (1). Postman (1985) suggests that visual depictions have made entertainment the natural format for the representation of such an experience.

Michel Foucault (1972) describes discourses as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (49). Van-Leeuwen (2009) adds that discourse involves social cognitive boundaries that serve the interests of particular historical and or social contexts. The anti-sexist plots of the selected movies: Dry (2014), Ukudalo (2015) and Wives on Strike (2017), highlight a toxic masculinity emblematic of a morally insolvent society. Through a strategic narrative methodology utilizing deceptively entertaining allegories, the subject feminist film makers subtly weave new discourse challenging power asymmetries, sexism and gender exploitation. Their novel style espouses the goals of traditional feminism although in a less aggressive manner that emphasises the ideas of cultural identity and highlights power differentials.

In her psychoanalytical study of sexual abuse of women in Nigerian movies, Ukoha (June 2021) observes that the humiliation and shame experienced by rape victims in such narratives result in the total loss of control of their bodies and minds. Onwe and Ihiaeme (2018) Inform that in Linus’s Dry, cultural prejudice privileges the male child over the female child who becomes a less preferred species. Emmanuel Ukudalo (2015) describes Vaughan-Richards’ Unspoken as a film dealing with the cultural issue of underage marriage and failure of parents to discuss issues relating to a child’s sexuality. He identifies government’s failure in funding the healthcare sector as an important aspect contributing to the many cases of death and health challenges for young girls, averring that Unspoken knocks on religious cum cultural malformations. Onwe and Ihiaeme (2018) assert that in Oboli’s Wives on Strike, the culture of child marriage is rooted in the belief that the girl child is a less important species to be conveniently auctioned to any bidding male suitor. Ebekue (2017) contrasts this conservative attitude with Mama Amina’s progressive attitude in Oboli’s Wives on Strike. Faced with a very similar situation, Mama Amina fails to dissuade Alhaji, her husband, from giving the teenage Amina in marriage to an old suitor but convinces her neighbours to intervene in the matter. Ebekue believes this singular act ignited the revolution that saved Amina and other young girls facing the same fate.
In their review of women’s portrayal in Nigerian movies, Okunna (2002), Ibhi (2017), Onyenankanaya et al. (2019) established that central female characters were portrayed as single, helpless, vicious, and subordinate but did not capture how dominant narratives strategically manipulate structures of representation. Agbese’s (2010) description of Nigerian movies as powerful tools of transmitting social values and beliefs does not fully delineate how portrayals of complex female characters reflect their centrality in contemporary society or diminish patriarchal power. Some studies have either wholly or partly supported these assumptions. For example, Nkemakonam Aniukwu (2019) observes that Linus’s Dry recognizes the important role of illiteracy and naivety on the part of Nigerian mothers who maintain the obnoxious practice of early marriage by preparing such “girl” children as wives for older husbands. Ebekue (2017) states that in Dry there is women on women subjugation exemplifying the intra-gender subjugation in the relationship between the female characters, i.e.,: Halima and her mother, and Halima and her mother in-law. On the other hand, Ebekue’s (2017) study positively characterizes the educational role of women as gate keepers and adroit managers of gender relations in Oboli’s Wives on Strike. He identifies this as a necessary critical aspect to successfully counteract the effects of marginalization politics.

Scholars, commentators and policy makers have tended to support the argument that youth occupy pivotal position within the structure of any society and are important players in national development and nation building (Okofor, 2011; Onyido & Brambaifa, 2019. Owing to certain socio-cultural variables found in human societies, the girl child has been most vulnerable to her human rights violation. Although this phenomenon is global in nature, it is most common in the developing world. Venatus (2014) observes that “in rural areas, a girl has no value. This is due to some social cultural practices which expose a girl to forced marriage, female circumcision, no freedom of expression, no right of inheritance and possession” (25). Postman (1985) notes that “although culture is a creation of speech, it is recreated anew by every medium of communication” (120). With the rising popularity of women helmed Nigerian movies with assertive female protagonists, female movie makers appear to have boldly taken charge of their destinies without waiting for the government to lead the drive for social change. They have rather implemented the change women are making happen. Young people, especially girls, are most directly affected by globalization and therefore central to current debates on identity and human agency. They are experiencing globalization on an everyday basis through employment patterns, the groups they belong to, their usage of the internet (particularly for social networking) and wider cultural influences on their lifestyles (Burdubles & Torres, 2007; Edwards & Usher, 2008; Kenway & Bullen, 2008). Agbese (2010) describes Nigerian movies as powerful media components in the transmission of social values and beliefs across generations. The feminist portrayal of complex female characters in the three study movies is a strategic movement reflecting their centrality in contemporary society, the prolonged threat of gender insecurity and the diminishing power of patriarchy. Noting the remarkable disconnection between young women and Nigeria’s oppressive political system, the study elucidates the authentic experiences of women utilizing the cinematic art to challenge prevalent sexist bias. The study provides an overview of the history of marginalized gender in Nigerian cinema highlighting how young feminist film makers’ blockbusters connect tradition, innovation, and contemporary experience in entertaining plots that reveal the process of gender discrimination.

3. Theoretical framework
The sampled movies in this study are analyzed through Mulvey’s (Autumn 1975) Feminist Film Theory to illustrate how the male gaze perpetuates abuse through the male primacy institution. Gender implies all the attributes comprised in the process of socialization such as self-group identity, notion of appropriate roles and values and acceptable level of interaction in the relationship between men and women. Femininity as a socially constructed gender identity is complicated by inequality and social expectation. Laura Mulvey shifted the attention of feminist film criticism from how women are used in films to how they are viewed in films. Mulvey’s belief that women in fact are “the bearer of meaning and not the maker of meaning” implies that women rather than
being made subjects in a scene are used as complimentary objects just to convey meanings. Mulvey submits that there is an imbalance in gender portrayals in most movies. The analyzed Nigerian female filmmakers are circumspect of this disproportionate measure and correct the imbalance in their movie directions. Mulvey’s Feminist Film Theory is applied in the study to reveal how the anti-sexist plots of the selected movies highlight a toxic masculinity emblematic of a morally bust society. The outlined theoretical framework helps establish how female directors deploy metaphorical language to create consistent reality, and elucidate their authentic experiences as women. Norman Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis is highlighted in the research to show how narrative methodology, through deceptively entertaining allegories, subtly challenges social power asymmetries, structural inequalities, sexism and exploitation. Critical Discourse Analysis emphasizes how the important concepts of power relationships and gender constructions are reinforced through narrative methodology.

4. Methodology
Critical Discourse Analysis was used in this research as a relevant research method providing adequate definition for the problem of the study. CDA provides theoretical explanations for the gender abuse phenomenon and female agency. Furthermore, the study argues the importance of analyzing performances directed by Nigerian women through a theoretical perspective essential for comprehending sexism and its social impact from the entertainment prism. Additionally, the relative nature of Feminist Film Theory informs its application in the critical analysis of sexism and the visual representation of women. Expectedly, the applied theories will lend substantial credence, and elicit scholarly rationales for the findings at the end of this research while creating a pool of valuable information for scholars, content creators and movie audiences.

The specific methods used in the research include, observation, archival research and specific theoretical perspectives employed in the analysis and explanation of performance and content. The selected movies were critically analyzed to yield meaning to the reader. The study emphasizes how anti-sexist plots of the selected movies highlight a toxic masculinity emblematic of a morally insolvent society and also the ways authentic experiences of Nigerian women are transformed creatively against sexism.

5. Scope of the study
The scope of this research is limited to three movies: Omoni Oboli’s Wives on Strike, Stephanie Okereke Linus’s Dry, and Remi Vaughan-Richard’s Unspoken. However, there were relevant references made to other movies helmed by Nigerian women.

6. Discussion

6.1. Gender nation
With Nigeria’s demography fast transforming, an urban population rising exponentially, and young people below the age of thirty years constituting more than sixty percent of the populace, the influence of the internet and social media have become more pronounced as allies in interrogating sexist social practices (National Youth Development Policy, 2001). Gender roles are based on different expectations that individuals, groups, and societies have of individuals based on their sex and each society’s values and beliefs about sexes (Butler, 1999). Gender roles emanate from the interactions between individuals and their environments, and suggest to individuals the standard behavior for that sexual category. Appropriate gender roles are determined in line with a society’s beliefs about sexual differences. Ann Oakley, one of the first social scientists to distinguish gender from the sexual concept, defines gender as paralleling the biological division of sex into male and female, but involving the division and social valuation of masculinity and femininity. Oakley (1972) emphasizes that gender is a concept that humans create socially through interactions with one another in their environment yet relying heavily upon biological differences between males and females. Canice Nwosu (2003) traces the root of male dominance over the female to primitive times “when the pregnant female, heavy and tired was left in the cave
by the male to look after the young ones. The male was usually out to hunt, provide food and needed protection for the woman and her children” (39). Although culture refers to the way of life for a group of people within the same geographical location, it has sadly become a tool of oppression against women in anachronistic societies that oppress such vulnerable entities.

Omoni Oboli’s Wives on Strike showcases a local market women revolution. A group of market women decide to deny their husbands sex in order to impel them to stamp out child bride practices. Mama Ngozi, the protagonist (played by Omoni Oboli), is at the forefront of the campaign for domestication of the Child Rights Act in all Nigerian states to ensure the future of the girl child. At the play’s close the establishment acquiesces to the women’s demands which parallel the reality of contemporary Nigerian society. After acquiring her basic education in Benin City, Nigeria, Omoni Oboli graduated with a Bachelor’s Degree in French at the University of Benin before proceeding to the New York Film Academy for further studies in digital editing. Unspoken was written, produced and directed by Oboli, who had box office successes with her movies, Being Mrs. Elliot (2014), The First Lady (2015), and Okafor’s Law (2016). In 2009, Oboli started producing her own movies and screenplays and won the prize for Best International Drama at the New York International Independent Film & Video Festival. Oboli utilizes glamour and feminist assertiveness to address women’s response to cultural expectations about marriage and family bonds by creatively depicting the intersecting identities of her heroine and other advocates challenging normative structures. Arguing that young women’s identities could be enhanced in a safe space with more open dialogue for social progress, Oboli’s heroines represent the traumatized in a deeply polarized society where sexism drives meaning and defines identity.

Ikenna Molobe (2016) informs that certain societies believe “early marriage will protect young girls from sexual attacks and violence and see it as a way to protect their daughter” (5). The marriage event in most parts of the world is regarded as a moment of celebration and a remarkable phase in an adult’s life. Unfortunately, the practice of early child marriage gives no such joy to the girl child-bride who otherwise should be making a life-changing decision like marriage on an informed maturity basis. Paul Nwachukwu (2010) restates that “marriage is designed to bring happiness and not misery” (5), but in most cases the girls forced into such “marriages” end up depressed with serious health conditions. UNICEF (2001) informs that early marriage is a powerful disincentive to the educational opportunities of young women and a threat to their reproductive and mental health (19). The need to escape the sexist echo chamber represented by early marriage is what Linus’s Dry primarily aims to establish. Stephanie Okereke Linus, one of the leading names in Nollywood, has been active in the industry for over two decades. She graduated with a degree in English and Literary Studies from the University of Calabar, Nigeria before proceeding to New York Film Academy for a film making program. She is an award-winning actress and activist known for her passion for women’s rights and health, and founding the Extended Hands Foundation; a non-profit organization that facilitates free treatment for women and girls living with Obstetric Fistula. Speaking on the inspiration for her art to the Vanguard Newspaper (2014), Linus stressed that as a student she heard stories of young girls forced into early marriage suffering the debilitating effects of VVF. She reveals that the traumatic episode was imprinted in her psyche and inspired her to recount it in her movie to raise awareness about the condition.

Vesicovaginal fistula, a disease mainly suffered by child brides in Nigeria due to early exposure to sex and pregnancy, is the central message in Linus’s Dry, a story of a mother and child separated by the forces of domestic abuse. Zara, an abused female child, is adopted by an American medical doctor visiting Nigeria as a medical volunteer. Zara eventually becomes a renowned medical doctor in the United States still traumatized by her childhood memory. Resolved to confront the ghosts of her past Zara embarks for Nigeria as a replacement volunteer for her mother who is bed ridden. Upon arrival, Zara is faced with the humongous challenge of finding a sustainable way to render medical help to child brides imperiled by obstetric fistula. Halima, a teenager brought to Zara’s hospital at the point of death, eventually dies due to her adverse medical condition.
prompting Zara to take up the gauntlet and lobby the Nigerian Senate to pass legislation against early marriage. Linus’s Dry addresses the male gaze, the controversial issue of child marriage, its social and health repercussions and the role of female victims in sustaining and perpetuating their marginalization. The movie takes a provocative look at the life-threatening reality of adolescents’ reproductive health revealing the girl child’s struggles with non consensual sex, abortion, failed aspiration, and fear.

Although feminist criticism’s easiest feature appears to be its focus on overt prejudice, the new feminist approaches of Oboli, Linus and Vaughan-Richards actually apply more subtle and nuanced interpretations. One of the most notable aspects of social phenomena relates to the way an individual’s observable behavior influences another individual in that communal space. As Chukuezi (2009) observes, Nigeria youths in their creative spaces have been prime agents of change as they have been most affected by such changes. Remi Vaughan-Richard’s Unspoken narrates the experiences of two teenage Nigerian girls from different backgrounds. Eleven year old child-bride Halima and 13 year old Grace Olowere are rushed to a Lagos area hospital in critical condition during a general hospital strike having experienced sex recently for the first time leading to grave health complications. Through several flashbacks, the movie reveals the girls’ failed aspirations, methodically exploring the life-threatening effect of adolescent pregnancy and abortion. Remi Vaughan-Richards studied Textile Design at the Royal College of Art, London and also obtained a Post Graduate Diploma in Film and Television at Kingston University, London. A recipient of numerous awards including the Africa Magic Viewers Choice Awards for her documentary, “Faaji Agba”, her feature films include: “The Department”, as well as Unspoken produced for Ford Foundation. Beginning from 1990 she worked in the Art Department of the Sylvester Stallone featured Judge Dredd and Stanley Kubrick’s helmed Eyes Wide Shut. Commenting on The Guardian, Vaughan-Richards declares her mission to create a slate of cutting edge feature films and documentaries that will focus a sharp lens onto contemporary Africa. She describes Unspoken as a film made for entertainment purposes and also as a token contribution towards preventing young girls from following the paths of “my characters” especially the child brides who are married off as young as 11 years old in Northern Nigeria (2015 n.p.). The movie’s plot is based on extensive research and focus groups made up of 11–15 year old girls from the North and 11–15 yr old girls from Southern Nigeria.

Robert Agnew (1983) vividly captures the various levels of abuses the girl child is continuously subjected to especially in developing countries:

Girl children in poor households have a high work burden placed on them both through informal domestic labour including childcare, laundry, cleaning, cooking, gardening and water gathering as well as more structured wage earning activities. Leisure time is severely restricted, leaving girls little opportunity to develop interest and reach their full imagination potential. Education possibilities are often limited due to cultural barriers and financial issues that prioritize male school attendance and societal norms that encourage girls to remain in the home (235-236).

Agnew’s position explains the degree to which the girl child has been relegated to the background against the basket of prospects available to her male counter parts. Chidinma Onwubere (2012) regrets that “a good number of children in Nigeria, under the age of fifteen are involved in different types of activities inimical to their health and growth such as sexual immorality, abortion, child trafficking, drugs, pick pocketing, self medication and prostitution, to mention just a few” (197). Flourishing from stereotypes and structural systems of oppression derived from prevailing social norms, media portrayals of Nigerian women have been dismissive and disparaging in the gender discrimination discussion. These new feminist critics reveal the subtle traces of male dominance which appear insidious and could be accepted as true experience thereby invalidating the female position. Undoubtedly there is a march to break the culture of silence as more women become
assertive and vocal about their conditions. In a culture that sexualizes young girls, these three female film makers have sought to speak the truth that fits their reality.

6.2. Challenging reductive characterizations

Umar and Danjuma (2008) observe that Nigerian youths have played important roles in the country’s political space right from the late colonial era. Recognizing the importance of identifiers and what they represent in terms of human value, certain young female film makers have strategically harnessed the film medium to articulate the needs of this vulnerable group. Value-based portrayals cultivate realistic perceptions and are important to understand gender and identity and also how sexism harms gender. Notable critical research in gender studies have revealed the negative effects of sexism and gender oppression on mental health and well-being (Gerdes et al., 2018; Griffith et al., 2012; O’Neil, 2008; Wong et al., 2017). Young female Nigerian filmmakers highlight relevant social concerns through the prisms of female protagonists in their creative works, drawing important connections between their movies’ agenda setting plots and the intersecting identities of the audience. There have been many woeful accounts from women caught up in the web of pervasive violence in both public and private spaces (Jekayinfa, 1999; Okoi, 2019). The Nigerian government and other stakeholders have largely shirked from halting the trend of sexual and gender-based violence as there has been low accountability for violence perpetrated against women. The cases of Uwa Omozuwa, a University of Benin undergraduate student brutally raped and murdered, and 13 year old Ochanya Ogbaje allegedly raped to death by her uncle and his son in Benue state, add to the growing body of sexual assault against women in Nigeria. These numerous stories of female victimization have been denied significant creative representation while sexual violence and oppression remain lived realities for Nigerian women. In existence are an undocumented number of victims violated every day in Nigeria with the Chibok girls’ abduction in 2014 most prominent (Okafor, 2011). Women’s bodies have continually remained contested sites where struggles for personal dignity and self determination persist. Women face sexual and gender based violence in the forms of rape, defilement, trafficking, sexual harassment, wife battery, domestic abuse, early and forced marriage, denial of inheritance rights, torture, abandonment without means of livelihood, etc. (Agnew, 1983 236).

Women have been traditionally depicted in roles that visualize them as socially inferior and less powerful. Women have been presented in passive domestic positions as wives, mothers, etc., in contrast to active roles that involve social visibility and power. Genevieve Nnaji’s Braveheart (2018) positively characterizes the economic role of empowered women and gender relations as critical aspects in the politics of marginalization. Focusing on the complicated relationship between a bride to be and her fiancée in a drama rich in sexual anxiety and moored infidelity, Kemi Adetiba (2018) delineates a complex heroine glamorized, yet morally desirable. Oboli, like Adetiba interrogates the pervasive role of political ambition and power play. The research aligns with Jekayinfa’s (1999) position that such counter-narratives potentially intellectualize the marginalized people’s cultural identity and advance self consciousness by problematizing the authenticity of cultural identity as a shared experience. The films under review portray this cultural trend specifically through the actions of major female characters. In Dry and Unspoken, both female protagonists were housewives just as Oboli’s Wives on Strike comprised mostly housewives and other female characters that initially appear passive and docile. The analyzed movies restate that beyond domestic roles women could become social vanguards without being limited by their sexuality. In Dry, Halima’s ordeal as a child bride is juxtaposed with the social successes achieved by Doris, a female lawyer, whose contrasting fortune is a product of her family’s vision and faith in the value and capacity of the girl child. In Wives on Strike, the women’s protest is largely underpinned by their disenchantment with the lack of opportunities facing the girl child bidding to acquire basic education and social skills relevant for her survival. The deprivation captured in the movie is a product of the implicit bias against the girl child as an unfit candidate for empowerment.
In the increasing face of incompetent leadership, female film makers have taken up the gauntlet spurred by young people's growing interest in governance and politics. Nigerian women in the frontlines of the gender struggle as mothers, sisters, wives, etc., have transformed from the passivity of old to become drivers of change, breaking barriers and opening up spaces for their marginalized peers. Stephanie Okereke Linus, Omoni Oboli and Remi Vaughan-Richard crafted their various movies: Dry, Wives on Strike, Unspoken, respectively to support the fight against the abuse of women in Nigeria. Their movies advocate social change through the provocative plots of young women battling to realize their aspirations in a suffocating space. These female Nigerian filmmakers have integrated an array of counter interventionist measures to undercut patriarchy's narrative primacy by exploring sensitive issues resonating with young audiences on mediated platforms. Their three films under review portray the patriarchal cultural prejudice that privileges the male child over the female child. In Stephanie Okereke Linus' Dry, Halima's ordeal is definitely a result of this oppressive cultural norm. This is evident in the conversation between her father, Ibrahim and Sani (her proposed husband), in the marriage scene where Ibrahim thanks Sani, his contemporary, for marrying Halima remarking that, “it is certainly a great relief for a man like me with too many daughters to have one of them getting married” (1:15:25–1:16:10). Sani replies, “Allah has answered your prayers” (1:15:25–1:16:10), implying he has saved Alhaji from his affliction, the girl child.

In Oboli’s Wives on Strike, the culture of child marriage and the subject of the wives revolt is portrayed as a repressive tool that commodifies the girl child. Vaughan-Richard’s Unspoken focuses on 11 year old Halima who is excited by the prospect of her fast approaching spelling bee competition, before her mother reminds her that her impending marriage is more important in the economic scheme of things. Her father categorically informs Halima that her school days are over with her new husband expected to pay her dowry to be used to train her brothers. Vaughan-Richard subtly highlights Nigerian parents’ domineering penchant to take decisions in their children's so called “best interests” as primary detraction to the girl child’s realization of her full potential. Halima's mother, Alhaja, embodies women's flaws as she is complicit in conniving with her husband to marry off Halima to Sani. Grace Olowe’s mother is not available for Grace leaving her no other option than to confide in a street girl who leads her into prostitution. Halima’s vulnerability is highlighted in the scene where she is abandoned by her husband and her father due to her degenerating state. In Linus's Dry, Dr. Zara is a strong positive model embodying confidence, selflessness and courage in her mission to ensure improved care for at risk women admitted to the emergency unit. She is motivated by the knowledge that vulnerable women at the clinic depend on. Eventually, the Nigerian government recognizes her model attributes and gives her a merit award.

Feminists observe that virginity has been traditionally used in conservative societies to frame female sexuality as something valuable to be provided by women, taken or lost. What has been notably absent on the Nigerian entertainment scene is how this sexist pattern of emphasis on purity fails to document the authentic experiences of young women caught in the web of intimacy. In Dry, Halima’s mother – in law, Hauwa, admonishes her that one of the ways to be a “good wife” is by promptly submitting to her husband’s sexual needs at all times. The sexual objectification of women is highlighted in the movie through Hauwa, a submissive wife required to minister to her husband’s need irrespective of her personal interests. In both examples mentioned above, the protagonists’ traumatic encounters as child brides could be evinced. In Wives on Strike there is an emphasis on the instances of sexual objectification manifesting as rape, and other forms of sexual assault both within and outside the home. For instance, while speaking to some of the local women in the market scene, Mama Ngozi declares the need to stop “shameless men from violating our daughters” (16:46–17:34). The term “violation” evokes the image of a sexual act which ignores the passive gender as a partner with consensual rights. The narratives of the three studied films sentimentally illustrate all the abusive social attitudes negating the rights of the girl child and warrant moral and ethical sanction. In Dry and Unspoken, the two father figures are portrayed as weak abusive parents that have cruelly contracted their daughters to older male suitors. Contrastingly Grace Olowe, like Halima, is admired in her school not only on account of her
exceptional beauty, as her boyfriend attests in the restaurant scene, but also as a bright female student with potentials. Dr. Zara, the medical consultant who took up Grace Olowe and Halima’s case, reflects a strong modern woman, a soldier for truth fighting for justice with all her resources unlike the fundamentally flawed Alhaja, Halima’s mother, who connives with her husband to keep her daughter, one of the best students out of school.

In *Wives on Strike* the protesting wives’ utterances and actions, serve as vehicles for making strong statements about the evil of girl child abuse. However, the movie director adroitly corrects the impression that the agitation for such female rights is anti masculine driven. As a girl Amina is vulnerable, a sacrificial goat whose future is cancelled in favor of the boy child (Garuba) whose education would be funded from her dowry. The bedroom scene reveals Mama Amina vainly pleading with her husband to allow her to secure a job with her NCE Certificate. He bluntly disagrees preferring instead that she continues depending on him based on his belief that a woman’s place is in the kitchen. On a Saturday afternoon scheduled for Amina’s marriage, the market women led by Mama Ngozi storm the compound, abusing Alhaja and freeing Amina. The new women’s march is also seen in the scene where Madam resists her husband, Callistus who wants “janglovers” (sex) against the collective decision of the market women to refrain from such sexual trysts. Madam’s resolve is unshaken as she stands for emancipation refusing to be swayed by her husband’s fickle bribe. This action announces a new Nigerian woman unmovd by material gains that are short-term based.

In Linus’s *Dry*, after Alhaji had just finished raping Halima and interrogates her on her mother’s failure to adequately prepare her for a wife’s duties, he warns her not to resist him again and demands total submission. Linus challenges women to reconsider their role in perpetuating this obnoxious practice. Linus, Oboli and Vaughan-Richards subtly emphasize that men, in creative works and in the material world, do not face the same grave consequences as women when they commit social transgressions. The advocacy message from their works is the need to have tough conversations with the men folk in order to win over potential allies who are in apparent fear of the connotation of feminism. With the recent popularity of female protagonist centered movies it is hoped that Nigerians, especially men in a society still struggling with the apron strings of its conservative past, would be inspired to change many chauvinist practices. Expectedly, this should be an uphill task in a society where toxic masculinity pervades and the ideology that “tradition must remain” persists. Such sexist attitudes, even among the educated and enlightened, are further complicated by Nollywood and portend grave consequences for Nigeria’s educational security. There are potential ramifications for the mental and gender security of women in Nigeria as Nollywood has infamously used archetypal depictions of the wicked stepmother and scheming housewife or daughter in law, to sustain bias as truth in the name of showcasing culture. If the present crop of audience keeps receiving the diet of subservient gender there are consequences for the cognitive growth of this important gender.

**7. Conclusion**

Sexism has created an oppressive space for discriminatory practices and identity policing to flourish in Nigerian society. This paper has significantly highlighted how young female Nigerian filmmakers have used their art to overcome age long discrimination, combat negativity and show women in a dignified creative manner. Oboli, Vaughan-Richards and Linus have mobilized their creative platforms through the creation of authentic female characters whose needs have outgrown traditional feminist margins. Their treatment of female protagonists reflects the various ways different women experience public space in comparison to men, as well as the cultural reasons motivating abusers of women. Remi Vaughan Richards believes women should create their own stories and get those stories told so every member of the society becomes aware of emotional and health risks such as depression, early sex and teenage pregnancy. The study finds that Nigerian creative female directors have leveraged their artistic platforms to create positive identities for women as intellectuals. In *Dry*, when Dr. Zara confirmed that her staff nurse moonlighting as a D&C expert, conducted abortion on Grace Olowe, she promptly handed her over to the police. The three reviewed female directors have created complex characters to be admired, not
because of their sexual natures, but as graceful, dignified personalities with the ability to make choices, and live independently without fear of social stigma.

Conclusively, the Nigerian movie could serve as vehicle for child rights advocacy as evinced in the reviewed movies which highlighted women abuse and advocated new cultural attitudes. Indeed the psychological cost of reductive two-dimensional characterization of women is enormous. Recognizing that feminism as a brand of women empowerment has been poorly marketed as anti male advocacy, Oboli, Linus and Vaughan-Richards have sought to reflect in their movies the different ways women experience public space compared to men. They have portrayed women as complex, flawed, beautiful, strong vulnerable characters, focused on women’s health and used humour to discuss critical issues. The reviewed female directors have highlighted overt prejudice and unfair treatment of women as well as re-appraised social relationships connected to gender. The important fact they have established about identity in their movies is that women possess indelible rights to choice, working out how best to navigate that process in relation to their needs and social expectations. Women’s lives are complicated and cannot be reduced to the simple stereotypes traditional Nollywood movies have projected. Influential female content producers with access to visible platforms need to join the conversation about gender equity. Prominent singers like Tiwa Savage, Yemi Alade, actresses like Genevieve Nnaji and Omotola Jalade Ekeinde, etc. could adopt their creative platforms as female movie makers have done and create inclusive narratives with consequences for sexist behaviour. The progressive nature of this current feminist movement facilitates the conversation on girl child empowerment and basic human rights. It emphasizes the role of dramatic characterization in the material world as one that should signify our present condition while ensuring advocacy for development and inclusiveness. Young women’s identities could be enhanced with more open dialogue to create safe spaces for their bloom.

Funding
The authors received no direct funding for this research.

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Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Citation information
Cite this article as: On new voices in Nollywood: female agency and value in selected Nigerian movies, Chinenye Amonyeze & Ogochukwu Agbo, Cogent Arts & Humanities (2022), 9: 2064080.
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