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# Examining the Sexist Representation of Career Women in Nigerian Film

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## Introduction

Society finds women who are successful, powerful, and ambitious to be unpalatable and difficult to digest. Women like this are often financially buoyant, independent, and empowered to take decisions on their own. They are often not compelled to center their existence and life choices around the patriarchy, which is demonized. One way through which the world tries to humble such women and use their lives as a cautionary tale for other women who would otherwise be inspired by their autonomy is film. In American films, we are familiar with how the career woman is typically portrayed: the affluent businesswoman who is revered in her industry, but behind closed doors barks at her staff, is mean and overbearing (see Miranda Priestly in *The Devil Wears Prada*). It is as if these films are saying: “You can be successful like this woman but deep down, she is unhappy, unkind and disliked by the people around her.” Given the ubiquitous nature of sexism, this portrayal of career women is also present in Nigerian films.

### Context of analysis

While filmmaking in Nigeria has been in existence since the 1900s<sup>1</sup> (*Africa Update*, n.d.), undergoing several eras<sup>2</sup> as new mediums of filmmaking are developed and new genres are introduced, the context of my analysis is limited to the latter portion of the video film era<sup>3</sup> and the new Nigerian cinema<sup>4</sup>, collectively referred to in this paper as “Nollywood”. My project seeks to examine the sexist portrayal of the career woman in Nollywood. I have chosen these films, which are predominantly made by men, as the backdrop of my analysis because of their power in influencing beliefs about how Nigerian women should behave and what we should be permitted to do. Although some of the films described in this paper date as far back as year 2000, and Nollywood has undergone transformations in storytelling especially with the emergence of the new Nigerian cinema, some of the effects of older films are still salient today. In my analysis, I uncover and call out the common sexist ways in which the career woman is represented, depicted, and treated in Nollywood, highlighting recurring tropes and including specific examples from 10 popular films. I have included short video clips from some of these films to provide context. In addition to the film analysis, I conducted informal interviews with 6 Nigerian women to discuss their opinions on this topic. The short quotes that appear throughout this paper stem from these conversations. Finally, I explored the impact of Nollywood’s depiction of the career woman on these women’s perceptions of themselves. The insights from this part of the interviews also appear in this paper.

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<sup>1</sup> Production and distribution of films in Nigeria at this time was controlled by foreigners. Nigerian content in films, controlled by indigenous filmmakers, did not become popular until the late 1960s into the 1970s.

<sup>2</sup> Filmmaking in Nigeria also constitutes of two earlier eras – the Colonial era and the Golden era – which are not referenced in this paper.

<sup>3</sup> The video film era (late 1980s to late 2000s) refers to the home video boom in the Nigerian film industry when films were produced in direct-to-video format, typically viewed in video parlours or purchased or rented from rental shops and viewed at home.

<sup>4</sup> The new Nigerian cinema (mid 2000s to present) emerged towards the end of the video film era and represents a shift from the home video format to the cinema method.

## Married women who are dedicated to their careers are vilified

A common trope in the portrayal of the career woman in Nollywood is that of the working wife and mother who loses her husband and children because of her dedication to her career. Given the demands of her job, she leaves home early every morning and does not return until nighttime. On several occasions in the film, we see the tension between this woman and her husband as they quarrel over the late nights spent at work or the woman's refusal to quit her job at her husband's request. The woman is,



*Click on image to view video excerpt*

unsurprisingly, usually unable to juggle being a full-time wife and mother with working full-time, so she leaves most of the housework and childcare duties to a domestic worker, who is usually female. Often, the woman is pressured by her family and the tone of the film to find work that would give her the time she supposedly needs to manage her home; usually she is encouraged to start a small business. This is all without considering what she wants for herself and insinuating that spending more time at home is the right thing to do. She is encouraged to rely on her husband for sustenance, rather than pursue her own endeavours. The film makes it a point to show how the woman's husband and children feel neglected by the woman's absence from home. In the woman's absence, the domestic worker cooks, cleans, and takes care of the husband and children. The film usually ends with the husband falling in love with or engaging in sexual activity<sup>5</sup> with the domestic worker. The husband's infidelity is justified in the film because he is getting the care and attention that his wife has deprived him of, from the domestic worker. The woman always returns in the final scenes of the film after she has realized her 'mistake' of 'neglecting' her home, to grovel and ask her husband for forgiveness. This is the plot of many films including *The Bank Manager* (2005), *Family Battle* (2005), and *Married but Living Single* (2012). In *Married but Living Single*, the wife's devotion to work is cited as grounds for her husband's infidelity and her husband's infidelity is excused for this reason.

## Gender roles are aggressively enforced in Nigerian films

There is no doubt that the moral lesson of films described above is that women (in heterosexual marriages) should never be too busy for their husbands and children, lest they lose both and are left with nothing. In *The Bank Manager*, the protagonist is a married, busy career woman with two children. She complains to her brother about the sexual relationship between her husband and

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<sup>5</sup> Much can be said about the lack of consent in such encounters given the power dynamic between both parties.

their housekeeper to which her brother responds: “If you had settled down and faced your family at home, all of this would not have happened.” I find that stories like this, which are very common in Nollywood, are often used as a scare tactic for any woman nursing ambitions of building a career or achieving life satisfaction through her job. Her career or job is often portrayed as a stumbling block to her performing the duties that are typically expected of a wife and mother in a heterosexual marriage. This scare tactic is described succinctly: “Essentially, women are emotionally and psychologically blackmailed with the notion that a refusal to comply with gender roles means a denial of marriage and love” (ObaaBoni, 2015). Men in Nigerian films on the other hand, who make their careers a priority, are praised for their hard work and dedication to providing for their families.

***“These films have a real influence on how people think. I know a man who was working as a teacher and his fiancée was working as a teacher as well. He said to me that once they get married, his wife has to stop working; that she cannot work and still be a good wife and mother” – Interviewee #1***

Nollywood works hard to enforce gender roles in its films. Women are to primarily be homemakers, while men are to be breadwinners. Anything outside of this dichotomy is wrong and will be corrected at the end of the film. What is even more ironic about this idea is that stay-at-home motherhood is not entirely heralded either. In Nollywood films, stay-at-home mothers are often represented as lazy and existing to benefit from their

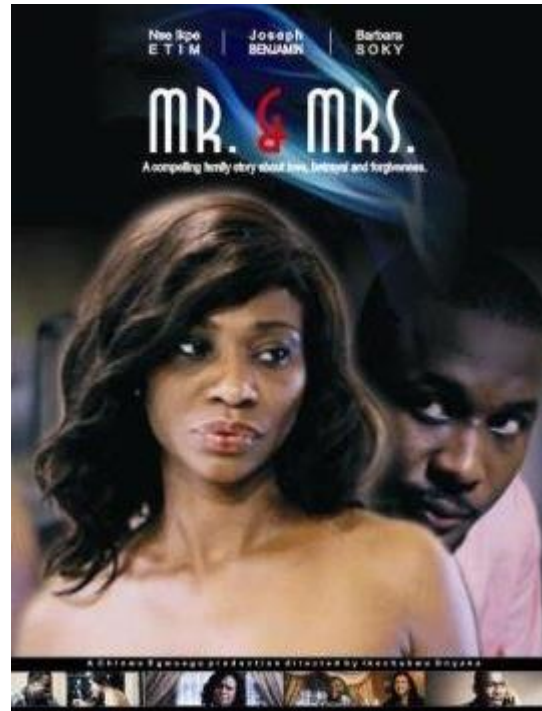
husband’s hard work (Aromona, 2016) without acknowledging the labor that goes into child care and domestic work, and the barriers that Nigerian women face in entering the labor force and staying there. Labor force participation by Nigerian women is almost on par with labor force participation by Nigerian men<sup>6</sup>. However, Nigerian women experience several challenges that prevent us from entering and/or staying in the labor force. Such challenges include: (a) discrimination in male-dominated industries such as banking, medicine and engineering, (b) child care duties that fall solely on women and poor or non-existent maternity leave policies, (c) sexual harassment in the workplace, (d) low level of educational attainment and skills attributable to unequal access to education, (e) the widespread assumption that women’s roles in the household are supportive, therefore their contributions via gainful employment are expected to merely be supplementary to those of the men, who are supposed to be the bread winners (Fadayomi, 1991). Vilifying stay-at-home motherhood perpetuates the idea that women should work but not spend too many hours at work and, at the same time, must also be primarily responsible for their homes. Essentially, women are responsible for their homes, but cannot only be at home and must also contribute financially. In *The Bank Manager*, the protagonist’s husband does not take responsibility for any child care duties in his wife’s absence and the film glosses over this. Of course, men are not responsible for homemaking so women must find a balance between working and homemaking, without the systemic and structural support needed for this to be possible.

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<sup>6</sup> Women make up 45.5% of the total labor force in Nigeria (Labor force, female (% of total labor force)—Nigeria | Data, n.d.)

## Domestication as a tool to control and subjugate the career woman

Similar to the films already mentioned, Ikechukwu Onyeka's *Mr and Mrs* (2012) sends a message to the (married) career woman that she is likely to lose her marriage and position to another woman if she does not perform traditional roles of wife and mother. What strikes me about the married career woman in Nollywood is that despite the demands of her job and the film's insistence on portraying her as a negligent wife and mother, she still acts as a 'household manager'. In *Mr and Mrs*, the subplot is about a banker who juggles the demands of her job with playing wife and mother. Before leaving for work in the morning, she instructs the housekeeper to ensure that the children eat well before school and tells the housekeeper specifically what to serve them for lunch, tells her to tidy the bedrooms and do the laundry, and finally, reminds her husband to see their son's teacher at school. While this character does not always execute domestic tasks, she performs household management and absorbs the mental labor that it requires. Household management is unpaid and gender specific work that comprises decision-making, worrying, planning, delegating tasks to the other parent and older children, and supervising the execution of chores as well as any other activity considered important for the overall family management (Gill, 2018). If career women in Nigerian films still perform household management, why is this not acknowledged as work? Why do these films still insist on portraying them as negligent wives and mothers? Part of the answer to these questions is control. Insisting that women carry out every piece of domestic work i.e. both household management and the execution of day-to-day tasks without having the option to delegate or opt out completely, is borne out of the desire to control women's freedom. In the films mentioned so far, the women are at liberty to control their schedules and go in and out of their home as they please. Performing all domestic labor, which is time consuming and energy draining however, would ensure that these women are confined to the home and their movement outside the home is limited.



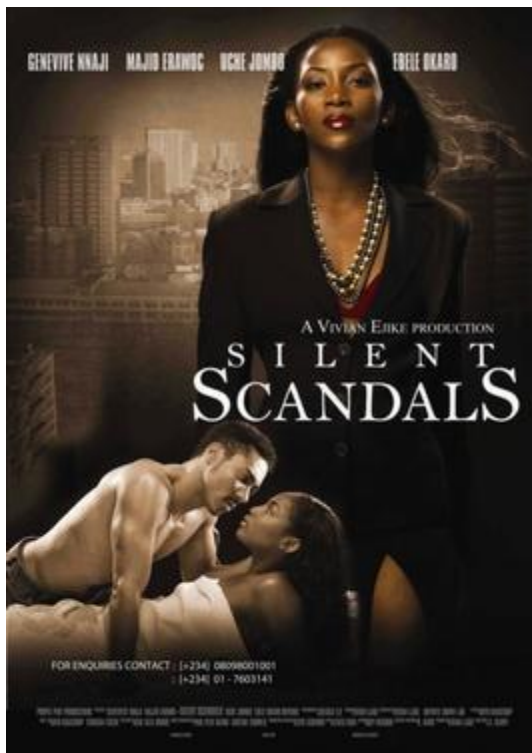
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## The 'iron lady' trope

Sometimes, the career woman in Nigerian films is represented as an 'iron lady', a woman without warmth or feeling. She is represented as being so focused on her career and in some cases, political ambition, that she lacks joy in her life. She is portrayed as a woman who is arrogant and direct in her interactions with other people. She occasionally makes scathing remarks directed at subordinates and neither cares to be cordial nor displays camaraderie with them. She leads with a heavy hand and people around her are afraid of her. There is a myriad of Nigerian films where the iron lady trope is present, but two that have stood out to me are Vivian Ejike's *Silent Scandals* (2009) and Emem Isong's *Bursting Out* (2010). In both films, the protagonist who is played by Nollywood sweetheart, Genevieve Nnaji, is a cold businesswoman who is blunt when addressing the performance of others and leaves no room for mistakes or human error. Both films portray the career woman as someone who has no time to socialize or the patience to engage in what she considers frivolous activities. She cancels social plans with friends and family because she would rather spend time working. The career woman lacks depth beyond her work life.

## In Nigerian films, behavior is gendered



*Click on image to view video excerpt*

Looking at the iron lady trope, it is not surprising to see this exaggerated depiction of a woman in a position of authority. The iron lady trope exists because to an extent, power, authority and leadership in women are still seen as foreign, abnormal and even unacceptable. Society becomes overly critical, thinking of the career woman as exceptionally high-handed and domineering, even when she is no more authoritative than the average person. We turn the behaviors that come with power and leadership, such as confidence and assertiveness, into behaviors that only men should exhibit. Women are supposed to be nice and understanding and anything short of this is pathologized. If a male character were to act in the same manner, his behavior would not be framed as cold and arrogant, rather, he would be heralded as shrewd, business-minded, and focused. Women in Nigerian films, especially career women, are not to display such 'masculine' behavior, as if behavior is gender specific. They *must* always display amiability,

even when in positions of authority. When the career woman resists succumbing to this repression of her

behavior, she is labelled disobedient, difficult, and stubborn. In *Authority* (2000), a lawyer is rejected by her fiancé's family for fear that she would be difficult to control by her husband-to-be,

given her career and level of education. The career woman is often humbled into submission and obedience. She is told that “everything she works for is irrelevant if she does not conform to the social and cultural construct of a subdued woman” (Abah, 2008).

## Love as the ultimate goal for the career woman

Women’s lives are generally centered around romance and our capacity to love and be loved. The career woman in Nigerian films is not an exception. The iron lady trope, when used in depicting unmarried career women, is sometimes interwoven with love. The unmarried career woman who is depicted as cold and embracing a dismissive demeanor towards others is sometimes depicted this way because of either an unfortunate experience with love in her past or as a result of her lacking romance in the present. For example, in *Silent Scandals*, the protagonist’s caustic behavior is attributed to betrayal by past boyfriends. This narrative ascribes to men a god-like status and perpetuates the idea that heart break by a man or the lack of male validation has the power to completely transform a woman’s behavior and her outlook on life. Men are simply not that powerful, but through conditioning via messages such as this one, heterosexual women internalize this ideology.

When it comes to the unmarried career woman, a lot of attention is placed on the fact that this woman does not have a (male) love interest. It is usually implied that she is too acerbic to find love and will cease to be as acerbic when she finds love. When she falls in love with a man, her outward disposition towards people often changes. She meets a man who softens her up and teaches her that there is more to life than her job, with her job being positioned as a problem. In *Bursting Out*, the protagonist who is an unsmiling single career woman, goes as far as being cheerful towards her employees after she meets a love interest. The idea of the unmarried career woman who becomes softened by love or who becomes more endearing because of love is created by the belief that for the successful, powerful or ambitious woman, partnering with a man is a cure or a missing element in her life. Suddenly, her life becomes better and more worth living with the man in it. This leads

(heterosexual) women to place romantic love and attention over self-love and familial or platonic connections. This trope does not encourage women to do the work required to create full lives for ourselves, and again, ascribes that god-like status to men and places them on a pedestal.

***“Even in this recent decade, the emphasis placed on love is still there. [The career woman] is represented as a mean woman who obviously has a high social status. She often falls in love with a man of a lower social status who is placed there to ‘humble’ her. There is always this “humbling” undertone for women who are ambitious. There is a need to make her homely and humble because somehow, there is something wrong with a woman with autonomy and independence. Of course, this does not apply to men” – Interviewee #1***



## The heteronormativity of representation

My analysis so far has demonstrated that in the representation of career women, Nigerian films are terribly heteronormative even though LGBTQ+ women exist in the workplace. When the career woman in a film is married, she is always married to a man. When she is unmarried, her love interest is always a man. If the career woman does not express romantic interest in men, she is usually accused of being a lesbian. When attraction or romantic interest is expressed outside the ideals of heterosexuality, it is usually expressed as a perversion. An interviewee raised an interesting point about this issue, citing the criminalization of homosexuality in Nigeria as one of the reasons for the heteronormativity of representation. Outside of Nigerians generally being homophobic and guilty of reducing homosexuality to sexual intercourse, Nigerian law does not permit LGBTQ+ representation. Nigerian filmmakers, who would like to profit from their films locally, are forced to cater to the law or risk having their films banned.

## Insights from interviews

Understanding that representation in Nigerian films can shape cultural norms, beliefs and opinions, I explored the impact of Nollywood's depiction of the career woman on women, with my interview participants. I asked them questions about how they felt, especially growing up, seeing the way career women are treated in Nigerian films and how that might have affected their perceptions of themselves. I extracted some insights from these conversations:

*Insight 1: As a woman, I can be easily replaced if I am unable to cater to my family's needs*

Having watched multiple films where a woman loses her position in her home to another woman for being unable to balance work and family, one of my interview participants mentioned feeling, for a long time, that women who are unable to cater to their family's domestic needs are easily disposable and deserve to be replaced. Having this mindset made her pander and caused her to be more than willing to demonstrate her value to others, without considering that her value should not be tied to her ability to serve others.

*Insight 2: There are repercussions and punishments for not complying with gender roles*

Nollywood is heavy-handed in its use of moral lessons, which are used as a scare tactic for women. Several interview participants cited being afraid, while growing up, that a refusal to comply with gender roles would mean social ostracism and maltreatment from male partners.

*Insight 3: Heterosexual men are the only romantic partners available to me*

Unsurprisingly, the heteronormativity of representation in Nollywood and the centering of (career) women's lives around love and marriage gave some interview participants the impression that heterosexuality was compulsory, even when they were not necessarily heterosexual.

## Looking ahead

Nollywood has undergone some transformations in storytelling especially in the last three or four years, although these transformations have not been very subversive. Current representation of the career woman is no longer as extreme as the woman being punished for daring to have a life outside the four walls of her home. The emphasis placed on love as a goal for the career woman has also reduced. These changes can be attributed to the general trend towards greater social consciousness

and Nigerian filmmakers, though moving slowly, are not left behind. Films are getting better at not painting career women as cold or unduly harsh. Like anyone who must deal with the demands that come with a job, career women in newer films display a range of emotions and behavior, from kindness to firmness, happiness, anger, sadness and affection. They have more depth; though career-oriented, they are not too busy to socialize and spend time with family and friends. We have characters who are their own person and not an extension of their duties as a mother or wife. Films featuring a career woman (or female lead) usually still allude to the existence of *some* male love interest regardless of how progressive they try to be, however, we're seeing less films where the woman is painted as being incomplete for not having a male partner. Jadesola Osiberu's *Isoken* (2017) and Nnaji's *Lionheart* (2018) are recent films that have done things differently in their representation of the career woman. Nnaji publicly identifies as a feminist (Majumdar, 2018), which could be why her film is able to represent the career woman in a different light. Nigerian women in the entertainment industry have taken deliberate steps to dissociate from feminism, either due to backlash from fans who disagree with the ideology or their own personal bias (Animashaun, 2018; Odufuwa, 2018). Therefore, a filmmaker who publicly brands herself a feminist is likely to be deliberate about using her art to express her beliefs.

*Isoken* and *Lionheart*, which both stand out as being different from earlier films, were directed by women. A case can be made for the presence of more female directors, like Nnaji and Osiberu, in Nollywood to portray career women in a way that is not ridden with sexist stereotypes. While viewership of Nigerian films has been led by women (Haynes, 2007), Nollywood has hosted very few female directors. The industry has been highly saturated with male directors (Amobi et al.), with the likes of Zeb and Chico Ejio, Fred and Jeta Amata, Tchidi Chikere, Ikechukwu Onyeka, Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen, Kunle Afolayan, just to name a few, being prominent in either the video film era or the new Nigerian cinema. Amaka Igwe, a director who hit national limelight for attaining and maintain high standards in her films and television soap operas, was a household name in the 1990s. With the exception of Igwe, there were barely any female directors during the video film era, although the new Nigerian cinema has ushered more women into the industry. Directors like Mildred Okwo, Emem Isong, Biodun Stephen, Omoni Oboli, and Tope Oshin,

***“I would say that there have been subtle improvements in the way that the career woman is represented. The love factor is still there but it’s no longer a do-or-die affair. Filmmakers are sort of shifting the narrative to “we think this woman needs a companion because love and companionship are nice, but she can do it on her own terms.” It’s slow, it’s subtle, but it’s there” – Interviewee #2***

among others, have been able to find their feet as filmmakers in Nollywood despite barriers to entry into directing for women. Having more female directors in the industry is not necessarily a magic antidote to the sexism embedded in storytelling in Nigeria. However, the presence of more women managing the way stories are told, might create films that are a truer representation of reality.

## Conclusion

Nollywood is guilty of producing films that reproduce and regurgitate patriarchal ideals. It does not come as a surprise when this regurgitation extends to the career woman, who is seen as a threat given her autonomy. It is important to interrogate representation in film because film is a very powerful cultural tool through which audiences can learn values and norms. The ways in which career women are represented in Nigerian films not only teaches audiences that women deserve subjugation, they also sow seeds of diffidence, insecurity, and self-doubt in women and girls. They teach us to undermine our confidence and ambition when we are taught that there are social repercussions for desiring power and independence. While Nigerian films have caused some harm, they are still important agents of social change and are useful for re-orienting the attitudes of Nigerians towards female autonomy, authority and independence. Having had decades of sexist representation, with change only seeping in slowly in the last couple of years, patience and deliberate efforts are required to overhaul the status quo of representation in Nollywood.

Disclaimer: This report was prepared by Chinedum Nwaogwugwu as part of her 2019-2020 GATE MBA Student Fellowship. The opinions expressed in this report are her own and do not necessarily reflect the views of GATE or the University of Toronto.

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