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## **Sexism and Gender Profiling: Two Decades of Stereotypical Portrayal of Women in Nollywood Films**

By Kevin Uwaecheghi Onyenankeya<sup>1</sup>, Oluwayemisi Mary Onyenankeya<sup>2</sup>, and Oluyinka Osunkunle<sup>3</sup>

### **Abstract**

Critics of Nollywood especially gender activists, have challenged its predominant, if not exclusive portrayal of women for its narrowly traditional occupational and domestic roles and images. This paper seeks to examine various ways women are depicted in Nollywood films, including physical appearance, domestic and family life, occupational life and interpersonal relationships over a 20 year period spanning the video film era. The research employed a quantitative content method to analyse 10 films while the coding sheet that contained established content categories served as the data gathering instrument. A multistage sampling technique was used to draw the sample. The findings revealed that although there is a higher percentage of women than men in Nollywood films, women still play diminished central roles, and continue to be portrayed less frequently in roles that reflect current social realities than men, especially regarding the professions. Nollywood continues its penchant of depicting successful and powerful women in social and domestic settings as dangerous and doomed for destruction. This characterisation apart from the potential of discouraging females from creating a niche for themselves, simultaneously severely hampers the critical role of generating new cohorts of outstanding independent and powerful females in business, politics or the professions. It can be concluded that the representation of women in Nollywood has not witnessed any radical departure from the traditional preconception of women roles in societies over the two decades. Roles and contemporary treatment of women in Nollywood films should rather emphasise, current accomplishments or successes of women in several spheres of life and do away with negative representations which only help in accentuating and perpetuating stereotypes.

*Keywords:* Sexism, women, women in Nollywood, Nollywood films, gender content analysis

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## Introduction

The representation of women in visual media continues to ignite quite a considerable amount of debate and scholarly investigation across the globe. It has been argued that cinema in particular has made no genuine effort to project the position of women in a positive and systematic manner. Smith, Chouëiti, and Pieper (2015), found no radical improvement in the stereotypic representations of female characters in popular films both in developed and developing nations. In Nigeria, the roles and treatment of women in the nascent film industry popularly known as Nollywood<sup>4</sup> remain contentious. Critics of Nollywood films especially feminist scholars, have attacked the predominant, if not exclusive, portrayal of women along the narrow traditional occupational and domestic roles and images of women in societies since its reinvention over two decades ago. This paper examines various ways women are depicted in Nollywood films, such as physical appearance, family life, professional life and interpersonal relationships over a 20 year period spanning the video film era (1997- 2016).

## Portrayal of Women in Nollywood Films

Mainstream film production in Nigeria predates the 1960s and 1970s (Okon, 2009). Between 1992 and 1997, after a period of relative stagnation in the 1980s and 1990, the output of films skyrocketed. This was the 'video film era,' the period when Nigerian films were produced using cheap video format (Winkler, 2004). The Nollywood era began earnestly albeit modestly, in 1992 (Haynes & Okome, 1998) deriving impetus from the success of the iconic video film, *Living in Bondage*, produced by Kenneth Nnebue (Ayengo, 2012). By the turn of the century in 1999, Nigeria had become one of the world's prolific centres of film production, even though the greater percentage of the films were lacking in basic cinematic ingredients (Onyenankeya, Onyenankeya & Osunkunle, 2017). In 2005 alone the number of registered video films stood at 1,711 (Obiaya, 2015). Nollywood has grown substantially in the last 10 years. The industry produces about 2,500 movies annually, according to a report by the New York Times in 2016. The United States International Trade commission reported that Nollywood injects about \$600m annually into Nigeria's GDP and provides direct and indirect employment for over one million people (Onishi, 2016). In spite of its technical and marketing inadequacies, Nollywood has emerged as a major vehicle for entertainment especially in the rural areas where its films remain the principal family entertainment staple.

But the content and influence of these films are just as important as their economic contributions. Many are concerned by what appears to be a consistent "glorification of negative themes and storylines" (Akpabio, 2007: 95). Some critics have also pilloried the films for lacking in cinematic finesse. In recent years, however, Nollywood has witnessed remarkable improvement in production and thematic focus, showing films with less dramatisation of negative themes and stereotypically voodoo-steeped scenes. Clearly, "Nollywood films may not compete with Hollywood in terms of cinematic production and accoutrements, but its stories and settings to a large extent, reflect the Nigerian cultural context even if it is sometimes embellished to meet commercial and entertainment needs" (Onyenankeya et al. 2017:5).

Nevertheless, the culture of stereotyping women appears not to be ebbing. A number of scholars and cultural critics argue that the industry has yet to exorcise itself from these stereotypical practices. Ukata (2010) holds that the depiction of gender roles has failed to go beyond the domain of traditional roles and images of women deeply rooted in the "dominant social

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<sup>4</sup> The common name used to describe the Nigeria film industry.

value of patriarchy”. Aromona (2016) found that there has not been any major shift in the conventional representations “of women in the past five years”. While Nollywood films tend to portray male characters as evolving and keeping pace with social trends, the role portrayal of women appears stuck in the past, invariably amplifying negative gender stereotypes. This dogmatic representation, critics argue, threatens to not only undermine the gains women have made over the decades, but also adds to the strain that women experience, due to sexism arising from the patriarchal setting.

Previous studies that have examined the treatment of women in Nollywood films are mainly cross-sectional studies that focused on one or two films. There has not been any longitudinal study to document the contemporary treatment of women in Nollywood over time. This study attempts to fill this gap by examining the treatment of women from the perspective of physical appearance, occupation, and domestic and interpersonal relationships over a 20 year period.

### **Physical Appearance**

Sexual objectification of female characters seems an unwritten convention in the global film industry. The act of sexualisation manifests in the way female characters are dressed and addressed. A study by the Geena Davis Institute on Gender and Media, (2015: 24) found that women in Nollywood films were often dressed in skimpy attire, and are more likely to be depicted as prostitutes than male characters. Ogunranti (1981) found that the use of sexually attractive females in advertising was widespread, while Nollywood tends to portray female characters as commodities or objects of sexual desire. Adewoye, Odesanya, Abubakar and Jimoh (2014) reported that women were generally portrayed in the movies as “sex objects and objects of erotic gaze for men”. Brock (2009) argues that Nollywood depicts female characters in ways that suggest they are mere “appendages to men, object of sexual gratification or lust.” Covert and overt sexism is intricately woven in Nollywood stories. For instance, in the film, *Widow*, a female character was forced to shave her hair and drink some concoction in order to prove she had no hand in the death of her husband. Ironically, this ritual was administered by her fellow women. This sexist representation echoes the widely held belief that women are more likely to be involved in witchcraft than men. Targeting women for accusations of witchcraft is one of the gender based discrimination that is quite common in Nollywood narratives. Although the National Film and Video Censors Board has attempted to rein in producers with regards to excessive sexuality or portrayals that may potentially demean the dignity of individuals or groups, many Nollywood films as evinced in a myriad of narratives and plots, remain obsessively fixated on women’s sexuality and their supposed emotional frailty.

### **Occupational or Professional Life**

Depiction of female characters in occupational or professional life remains a major concern. As Smith et al. (2015) reported, the depictions of women in films across many countries do not reflect “the slow but steady progress” women have made across professions. In Nollywood particularly, women characters appear to be confined to specific occupational interests which minimize the quantum leaps they have and continue to make in the political and economic fronts. Ogunranti (1981), suggests that male characters are more likely to be portrayed as executives and bosses than their female counterparts in Nollywood films. When female characters are given work-

related roles, they are frequently cast in traditional feminine occupations such as teaching, nursing, or administrative jobs and most often as subordinates devoid of the power and status their male counterparts are vested with. Seldom are women cast in the so-called high prestige professional fields such as engineering, science or medicine. Usaini, Chilaka and Okorie (2017), found that “only 30% of the major female characters in Nollywood films were shown as career professionals and intellectuals”.

### **Family or Domestic Life**

The majority of female characters in Nollywood films are commonly set in domestic contexts and roles, often as sexual partners and homemakers (Ogunranti, 1981; Brock, 2009). The images of female characters shown in Nollywood are those of contented women whose major life ambition is to marry and bear children. It appears that the ultimate goal of females in films is generally to satisfy their husbands' or partners' sexual needs. An infinitesimal few are depicted as breadwinners or pillars that hold together the entire family. In the few instances where women are cast as working class, they tend to be portrayed as “insubordinate wives and uncaring mothers” (Adewoye et al. 2014). As Aromona (2016) pointed out, Nollywood films appear untiring in stereotypically representing women as unambitious domestic servants. As well, these films emphasize the marital status of female characters, whereas the marital status of a female character is more likely to be revealed than the male character and often, the unmarried female character is shown as unfulfilled and desperate to find a partner. For instance, in the film *End of the Wicked*, there is “the dependent woman who derives bliss from the matrimonial enterprise only if and when she has a man she calls her husband and the idea of the complete woman, beautiful, yet unequivocally submissive... The film does not give women enough space to define themselves. Nor do they receive any special place to manoeuvre or to make necessary negotiations in a society that pushes women to the margins” (Okuyade, 2011: 8).

Olupohunda (2013) argues that women in Nollywood narratives are typically at the mercy of the men who dominate the society and as such can be slapped, kicked and raped. Ironically, where Nollywood attempts to promote the progress made by women in the political and economic arena, “they are constantly reminded that everything they have worked hard to achieve is irrelevant without conforming to the cultural construct of a good woman in their domestic lives” (Abah, 2008: 335).

### **Interpersonal Relationship**

Nollywood films continue to draw intense criticisms in the manner in which female characters are represented in domestic and social context. In their review of two movies, *Ije and Mr. and Mrs*, Adewoye et al. (2014) found that female characters in the films were generally portrayed as “the wicked mother-in-law.” In her analysis of two Nollywood videos, *Omata Women and More than a Woman*, Ukata (2010), noted that females were falsely depicted as sophisticated thieves and murderers. Ukata posits that film producers tend to represent women who are perpetually devious, desperate and sometimes diabolical, and ever ready to use magical powers, “Juju”, or sexual power to get what they want. These negative images of women in Nollywood have the potential to lead undiscerning audience members to see and “read women in both the films and in real life, as outlaws and evil to their families and society as a whole” (Ukata, 2010). Women are also portrayed in varying degrees when it comes to the struggle for resources. On the

one hand, Nollywood stereotypically depicts women “as warm and incompetent”; on the other, it shows them as “cold and competent when they compete for the same resources as the dominant group” (Aromona, 2016). In the main, Nollywood tends to suggest that women cannot find fulfilment or self-actualisation without the help of others which in most cases will be men and usually, the husband, father, lover or other male relatives.

Interestingly, when females are cast as independent or feminist, they are portrayed as self-centred and materialistic, while “men are typically shown as heroes who rescue the community from the clutches of these liberated women” (Duru, 2013). In the same vein, when women are shown in positions of power either in business or the political arena, these women always appear to attract some kind of reprisal for the simple reason that they dared to be successful. Thus, being powerful always has some negative consequences for female characters, which could come in the form of “loss of their beauty, family, and in some cases, their life” (Ukata, 2010). Nollywood narratives therefore suggest that power in the hands of a woman usually does not always augur well. Haynes and Okome (1998) noted that while ‘these dramas always invest their female characters with immense frightening power’, this power is invariably, consistently channelled to perform evil deeds. As stated by Abah (2008: 335) “Women are constantly portrayed as having power in these video-films, but the power of women is considered diabolical, particularly in social and domestic relations” (Ukata 2010). contends that such portrayals create the impression that women should not pursue power, and if they do, it will come at a high price. What this means is that the critical role of generating new cohorts of outstanding, independent and powerful females in business, politics or the professions, is simultaneously severely hampered.

### **The Nexus of Stereotype and Sexism**

Most of the representations or images of women shown in films are based on stereotypes. DeFleur and Dennis (1989 cited in Pieter, 2001: 303), contend that stereotypes not only straddle the boundary between cognition—mental pictures of the world about us—but also affect our attitudes, our feelings and evaluations of persons, issues, and situations in the world around us. Experts argue that gender role stereotyping in the media always reflects the condition of people’s values and beliefs in a particular time period” (Ni, n.d.). The practice of profiling or categorising women and predicting their behaviour based on gender appears to be underpinned by some elements of sexism which flow from the patriarchal orientation of the society. As noted by Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952), culture consists essentially of the traditional, especially ideas selected and derived from history and attached to values. Nigerian films are intricately enmeshed in “Nigeria cultural tradition and social texts” (Onuzulike, 2007) and the construction of female images in Nollywood tends to follow this historical and patriarchal construction of women. Onyenankeya et al. (2017: 300) hold that “Nollywood’s thematic thrusts and plots are underpinned by socio-cultural dynamics which appear putatively in congruence with everyday experience of most Africans.”

According to Adewoye et al. (2014) representation of female characters in Nollywood “fit into the prevalent social beliefs and gender role expectations from women in the larger Nigerian socio-cultural environment”. In essence, Nollywood reflects the values and beliefs of its social environment (Prinsloo, 2011). In Nigeria’s patriarchal society the male is not only recognised as the head of the family but commands a domineering role in all spheres of endeavour. Agbogu and Igbokwe (2015), argue that male chauvinism is prevalent in the Nigerian culture. Men are culturally perceived as superior to women as such they are expected willy-nilly, to kowtow, gratify

or pander to the whims of the men. Nigerian men still see woman in their households as their property—objects to be bossed and subdued (Okebukola, 2008: 96) and as mere tools used to celebrate the power of patriarchy (Okuyade, 2011:13). This culture of domineering men and subservient women, which pervades traditional and even today's society is given uncritical expression in Nollywood.

While Nollywood has made remarkable progress in the area of scripting, acting and cinematic finesse, empirical evidence indicates that the industry's depiction of female characters does not appear to reflect a broader worldview of women outside the traditional gender profiling.

## **Method and Measures**

This study explores the nature of female representations in Nollywood films with regard to physical appearance, family life, professional life and interpersonal over a 20 year period (1997-2016). To achieve this objective, 10 popular English language Nollywood movies were content analysed. The films had to be produced in Nigeria between January 1, 1997 and December 30, 2016. In order to enable us see how the portrayals compare over the years we divided the time frame into two segments, 1997-2006 and 2007-2016. The year of film production was then randomly selected. For the time frame between 1997 and 2007, four popular films were purposively selected, while six films were selected for the period between 2007 and 2016 because there were more films produced within this period (Obiaya, 2015). In total, 10 popular films were examined. The unit of analysis was every speaking or named character of each film. The 10 video films were watched over a 30 day period and coded along specified content categories.

We established four major content categories, for this study, derived from the literature review: physical appearance, family or domestic life, professional or occupational life and interpersonal relationships. "Every speaking (i.e., utters one or more words discernibly on screen) or named character" (Smith et al. 2015) was evaluated along the identified categories. Standardised coding sheets were used to facilitate coding as well as allow the researchers to classify relevant data by placing the established nominal values for the sub-variables in predetermined columns for each content category. The coding was done by the researchers and four other assistants who understood the language and culture embedded in the films.

## **Findings/Results**

### *Gender Prevalence*

Smith et al., (2015) reported that men outstrip women and account for the majority of central roles in films across the world. In this investigation female and male characters include every speaking or named characters as contained in the credit of the films and exclude extras and acolytes to the main characters. In all, 183 "speaking or named characters" were analysed with 58% female and 42% male. In spite of their numerical advantage, only 33% of female characters played leading roles in the films. Even in films with overwhelming prevalence of female characters, males were depicted as lead or sharing the central character with another male. Only 20% of the entire sample had gender parity in number of character. This pattern was consistent throughout the 20 year period.

**Table 1. Character Gender Prevalence by Film**

Film		% of Gender prevalence	% of lead/ Co-leads	Number of Characters
Out of Bound (1997)	Female	56%	20%	5
	Male	44%	50%	4
August Meeting (2001)	Female	63%	40%	15
	Male	37%	43%	7
Blood Sisters (2003)	Female	36%	40%	5
	Male	64%	22%	9
Mother In-law (2004)	Female	48%	25%	12
	Male	52%	23%	13
Free Giver (2008)	Female	50%	25%	8
	Male	50%	25%	8
Silent Scandal (2009)	Female	38%	44%	9
	Male	62%	7%	1
Cry of a Widow (2011)	Female	66%	14%	27
	Male	34%	14%	14
Baby Oku in America (2013)	Female	59%	40%	10
	Male	41%	14%	7
Caro the Shoemaker (2014)	Female	46%	27%	11
	Male	54%	23%	13
Before Getting Married (2016)	Female	50%	50%	4
	Male	50%	50%	4
Mean	Female	58%	33%	
	Male	42%	67%	

### *Portrayal of Female Characters in Professional or Occupational Life*

The literature suggests that fewer female characters were likely to be depicted as employed or occupying high profile jobs and when they do they are frequently confined to stereotypical occupations and positions without clout. Occupation was defined in this investigation as any job in which a male or female character receives remuneration. In order to determine the professional position of a character, five categories of information were examined: *spoken* (e.g., “I am an engineer”); *written* (e.g., name on office door); references to what a character does; *uniforms* (e.g., lab coat); or artifacts (e.g., stethoscope, helmet) associated with a specific occupation; engagement in role-related behaviours; and the context in which the character was shown working. The specific type of work, whether existing or nonexistent, was recorded as present or absent for each character (Smith et al., 2015).

As shown in Table 2, a low percentage of female characters (18%) were engaged in any remunerated employment, and only 2% of females were portrayed as business executives or bosses. Out of the 18% employed females only 6% were seen in high profile jobs such as doctor, lawyer, scientists or politician. This means that male characters were more likely to be cast in high profile jobs more than female characters.

**Table 2: Occupational Distribution of Characters Nollywood Films by Gender**

Films	Distribution of characters in workforce by Gender				
		% of Employed Characters	% as Bosses/ Executives	% in high Prestige jobs	Number of Characters
Out of Bounds (1997)	Female	0	0	0	5
	Male	75%	50	75	4
August Meeting (2001)	Female	7%	0	0	15
	Male	56%	22	22	9
Blood Sisters (2003)	Female	80%	0	0	5
	Male	22%	22	11	9
Mother in-law (2004)	Female	0%	0	0	12
	Male	31%	23	15	13
Free Giver (2008)	Female	25%	0	12	8
	Male	25%	25	25	8
Silent Scandal (2009)	Female	11%	11	11	9
	Male	13%	13	6	15
Cry of a Widow (2011)	Female	7%	7	0	27
	Male	43%	43	21	14
Baby Oku in America (2013)	Female	20%	0	10	10
	Male	43%	0	29	7
Caro the Shoemaker (2014)	Female	9%	0	0	11
	Male	27%	23	9	13
Before Getting Married (2016)	Female	25%	0	25	4
	Male	50%	25	25	4
Mean	Female	18%	2%	6%	
	Male	82%	98%	94%	

### *Portrayal of Physical Appearance of Female Characters*

The objectification of female characters remains a growing concern. A number of studies hold that Nollywood show female characters in racy and skimpy clothing that are “potentially demeaning.” In this investigation we used four sexualisation measures: *sexually revealing clothing* (i.e., body-hugging, revealing, eye-catching attire); *nudity* (i.e., partially or fully exposed “from mid-chest to high upper thigh region”); *thinness* (i.e., “minimal amount of body fat and/or muscle”); and *attractiveness* (i.e., “verbal/nonverbal utterances that communicate the physical desirousness of another character. These attributes were used in Smith et al. (2015), *Investigation of female characters in popular films across 11 Countries*.

Table 3 shows that more than a quarter (25%) of female characters were clad in sultry or figure-hugging dress, partially or fully naked (21%) and attractive (19%). Nearly half of the females (48%) were thin with only 1% of the sample fat. This suggests that thin females are more likely to get a role in Nollywood films than heavier or larger women.

**Table 3. Sexualisation or Physical Appearance of Female Characters**

<b>Film</b>	<b>% Female in revealing attire</b>	<b>% Female in partial or complete nudity</b>	<b>% Attracti ve female</b>	<b>% Thin female</b>	<b>% Fat women</b>	<b>Number of characters</b>
Out of Bound (1997)	40%	40%	10%	100%	0	5
August Meeting (2001)	13%	7%	13%	53%	0	15
Blood Sisters (2003)	40%	20%	40%	60%	0	5
Mother In-law (2004)	16%	8%	16%	50%	8%	12
Free Giver (2008)	12%	12%	25%	25%	0	8
Silent Scandal (2009)	11%	33%	22%	33%	0	9
Cry of a widow (2011)	25%	30%	11%	30%	4	27
Baby Oku in America (2013)	10%	0	20%	40%	0	10
Caro the Shoemaker (2014)	36%	36%	9%	36%	0	11
Before Getting Married (2016)	50%	25%	25%	50%	0	4
Mean	25%	21%	19%	48%	1%	

### *Portrayal of Characters in Domestic/Family Relationships*

Several studies have shown that female characters in Nollywood are commonly depicted in domestic contexts and roles, often as sexual partners and homemakers (Ogunranti, 1981; Brock, 2009). We sought to examine whether this pattern holds in this investigation. Domestic or family relationships were measured as the roles assumed by female characters in a domestic context. We focused on five roles in which women are frequently framed in films (i.e., wife, mother, sexual partner/object, family provider (i.e., whether the character is the financial pillar of the family), and agent provocateur (i.e., whether the character incites or entice another character to take rash or evil action). To identify the domestic status of female characters we scrutinised three types of information: verbal (e.g., “I am his wife/mother”) or references to what a character does; and the context in which the character was depicted in the family setting (Smith et al., 2015). Nearly a quarter of female characters (21%) in the sample were depicted as mothers, followed by wives (18%). This means that females (40%) were more likely to be portrayed as mothers or wives in Nollywood films. Females (22%) were depicted as sexual objects. Only 2% of female characters were shown to be playing the role of family provider. This finding is significant as it accentuates the representation of women as mainly dependent on men’s financial support.

**Table 4. Representation of Female Characters in Domestic Life**

Films	% female as wife	% female as mother	% female as sexual object	% female as family provider	% female as agent provocateur	No of characters
Out of Bounds (1997)	40	10	40	0	0	5
August Meeting (2001)	27	13	7	0	27	15
Blood Sisters (2003)	20	20	20	0	20	5
Mother in-law (2004)	33	33	8	0	25	12
Free Giver (2008)	0	12	25	0	12	8
Silent Scandals (2009)	11	22	33	11	0	9
Cry of a Widow (2011)	7	14	7	4	7	27
Baby Oku in America 2014	20	20	10	0	20	10
Caro the shoemaker (2014)	0	9	18	9	9	11
Before Getting Married (2016)	50	25	50	0	25	4
<b>Mean</b>	21%	18%	22%	2%	15%	

### *Portrayal of Female Characters in Interpersonal Relationships*

Interpersonal relationship denotes the way female characters relate with others in society. We measured five key attributes or behaviour traits: Devious (i.e. scheming, conniving or engaging in deceitful act to achieve an aim); desperation (i.e., employing any means necessary including sex to achieve an end); dependency (i.e., relying on others such as family and friends for basic needs and decision-making); diabolism (i.e., resorting to voodoo or evil means to achieve an objective); covetous (i.e., overt references or acts that portray greed or desire for the good life even if illegitimate); and wickedness (i.e., verbal/nonverbal utterances and acts that communicate cruelty to another character.

As indicated in Table 5, female characters were frequently depicted as desperate (24%), dependent (21%), diabolic (9%). The finding on diabolism is interesting as it suggests that Nollywood is gradually moving away from characterising females as diabolic or evil. It could also be that the sample contains fewer films with diabolism as a thematic thrust. It was found that films produced between 1997 and 2006 had more diabolic plots and scenes than films released between 2007 and 2016. Desperation and dependency varied according to films, in two of the films (*Out of Bound* and *Before Getting Married*) 40% and 50% of the female characters respectively, were depicted as desperate, while 60% and 50% were shown as dependent. Interestingly, only 16% were shown as caring, a behavioural trait that has often been associated with women.

**Table 5. Prevalence of Behavioural Traits Attributed to Female Characters in Interpersonal Relationships**

Film	% Female as devious	% Female as desperate	% Female as dependent	% diabolic/evil	% Female as covetous	% Female as caring	No of characters
Out of Bound (1997)	20	40	60	0	0	2	5
August Meeting (2001)	20	27	27	27	13	0	15
Blood Sisters (2003)	20	0	0	0	20	40	5
Mother in-law (2004)	8	8	25	24	8	25	12
Free Giver (2008)	12	25	25	12	12	12	8
Silent Scandal (2009)	11	22	11	0	0	22	9
Cry of a Widow (2011)	7	19	30	14	22	7	27
Baby Oku in America (2013)	20	20	10	0	20	10	10
Caro the Shoemaker (2014)	18	27	18	9	18	18	11
Before Getting Married (2016)	0	50	50	0	0	25	4
<b>Mean</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>16</b>	

## Discussion

### *Objectification*

Although physical appearance varied from film to film, sexualisation of females in Nollywood remains rampant in the films analysed. For instance, in the film *Cry of a Widow*, the central female character, Chidimma (Mercy Johnson) and the four supporting actresses were clad in revealing and skimpy clothing with the camera frequently giving close-up shots on the chest and waistline of the female characters. Overall, nearly half of female characters (46%) in the sample were shown in sexy or risqué clothing. This is consistent with the study by Smith et al. (2015), which showed that female characters are more likely to be depicted in revealing clothing in popular films across the world. The female body remains the centre of attention as demonstrated by the use of thin and attractive women whose alluring physique serve to titillate male desires. The films seem to suggest that female sexuality is just a bargaining material. In the 2013 film *Baby Oku* (hot damsel) the protagonist (Mercy Johnson), was portrayed as a woman who uses guile and deceit to get her heart's desire; that is, getting married to an American resident. In other words,

it is not sex per se, which interest her, but sex for what she gets out of it in terms of position and material gain.

As in many other films sampled, the woman here is the sex object, scheming devil, the aggressor who uses sex as a bargain. A similar narrative was re-echoed in the film *August Meeting* (2001) where the friends of one of the leading female characters Amaka (played by Eucharia Anunobi) were egged-on by her friends to sleep with a notorious philanderer, Chief Johnson (played by Ejike Asiegbu) in order to get the money she needed to finance her political campaign, “give him what he wants (sex) and you get what you want” (money). In the same *August Meeting*, the other lead female character Angela (Ngozi Ezeonu) was described as someone “who will go to any length to get what she wants”. In the films analysed we see an overwhelming portrayal of women as sex objects. For instance, in the film *Osuofia in Brazil* (2013), Osuofia, (played by Nkem Owoh) saw female students as part of the incentive of being a principal of the school. So Osuofia was not just satisfied molesting and abusing the school girls under his care but carried his lustful desires to women in the community, where he lured many into sexual acts to the admiration of his male friends. Depicting women as sex objects is consistent with previous studies, which show that female characters are often portrayed as objects of sexual gratification (Brock, 2009; Adewoye et al. 2014).

It was found that the portrayal of women in vice-related roles was increasing in intensity. The pattern of presentation follows the narrow, traditional images of women. Although this study did not indicate that having a nice figure or pretty face is a criterion for appearing in Nollywood films, an overwhelming majority of female characters tended to be thin and attractive. Overweight actresses and females with less attractive physique were seldom used in the sampled movies. In most of the narratives where plus-size females were shown, their physique tended to receive negative comments and oftentimes, with derisive laughter. This finding compares with a previous study which revealed that “80% of these comments are followed by canned audience laughter from the audience” (Fouts, 2002).

Nollywood films frame men as victims in sexual relationships; often the female is cast as seductress. In the 1997 film, *Out of Bounds* produced by Mofe-Damijo and directed by Tade Ogidan, a seemingly highly anointed Pastor (played by Richard Mofe-Damijo) was seduced by a desperate love-struck congregant, Adaora (Ayo Adesanya) into adultery. This pious priest was again overcome by Adetutu (Bimbo Akintola), the seductive daughter of Chief Adigwe (played by Steve Rhodes). In many of the sampled videos, the female characters (Baby Oku in *Baby Oku America*; Amaka, in *August Meeting*; Madam Gold, in *Cry of a Widow*) were presented as the archetypical femme fatale, ubiquitous, powerful, sexy and dangerous to whom men have no antidote to their spell. Always the man is taking the moral high ground against the stereotypic evil temptress, a continuation of the narrative that men are virtuous and women are licentious.

### **Professional Life**

One major finding of this study is that role portrayal of women in occupational life has made little progress in the past 20 years. Only 16% of females were employed and these were invariably in occupations in the traditional female domain. These jobs are often without status and authority reflecting real life activities. Men on the other hand, were portrayed in a much wider range of occupations. In *Out of Bounds* (1997) the two doctors were played by male characters. Fourteen years later, in another film, *Cry of a Widow* (2011) the doctor and lecturer were played by male characters. But in actual Nigerian society there are as many female doctors as there are

male doctors. Similarly, in *August Meeting* (2001), the doctor and accountant were played by male characters while the jobs of fashion designer and receptionist were assigned to female characters in keeping with the traditional role portrayal of women. In the film, *Mother in-law*, the three major female characters were cast as housewife and mother. In all the films analysed, women were more likely than men to be cast in traditional career jobs (nursing, receptionist, teachers etc.) while men were doctors, business executives or successful entrepreneurs. This finding corresponds with previous studies which show that female characters are seldom shown as executives or top rated careers (Ogunranti 1981; Usaini et al. 2015). In all, the findings indicate that women as far as Nollywood is concerned, is still at the same level they were 20 years ago. But in reality women not only have climbed the corporate ladder to become top executives, many are owners of successful enterprises, and a considerable number has penetrated and conquered fields hitherto dominated by men. In the main, for more than two decades, Nollywood has continued to stereotype female characters in traditional occupation.

### Family life

It was found that the Nigerian women were still being sex-stereotyped into limited roles such as home-makers and sex objects. Women were more likely to be shown as married in Nollywood films. The largest role category for women was the housewife/mother role. Women were more often shown as mothers than men appeared to be fathers. In the film *Mother In-Law* six of the leading female characters were cast as mothers who typically were obsessed with their children giving them grandchildren. They were portrayed as controlling and always eager to maltreat their children's wives respectively. In *August Meeting* almost three quarters of the female characters were depicted as wives. Women were basically defined as being home and family oriented. These findings are consistent with previous studies which found that female characters in Nollywood movies are shown as passive and contented homemakers in Nollywood narratives (Ogunranti, 1981; Brock, 2009; Aromona, 2016).

As revealed from the findings of this study, Nollywood movies tend to portray female characters as agents-provocateurs in the family setting. For instance, in *August Meeting* (2001) it was the coterie of Amaka and Angela's friends who planted the thoughts of employing means other than voting to get them elected. In *Baby Oku in America*, the co-lead female character, Mama G, played by the popular thespian (Patience Ozokwor) was the one who enticed Baby Oku (Mercy Johnson) to take some rash actions. In a scene in *August Meeting*, Mazi Igwemba (Amaechi Munogor) was shown admonishing his wife, Ugboaku for obsessing over the *August Meeting* wondering whether she too wanted to go into witchcraft and adultery like Angel and Amaka (the two central characters in August Meeting) who "bewitched each other for vainglory".

A notable pattern observed in the sampled films concerns the tendency of Nollywood to project career women as incapable of achieving success both in the family and workplace. Often, women who are successful in the workplace seems to have challenges at home, because they have become rebellious toward their spouses, either because of their new-found power or money, or because they have neglected their children's welfare due to their demanding jobs. This finding corresponds to Adewoye et al., (2014), which suggest that working class women tend to be portrayed as "insubordinate wives and uncaring mothers".

## Interpersonal Relationships

Insecurity emerged as a frequent attribute associated with female characters in the sample. Women were often coded as depending on men for security and financial support. Female characters in the sample were portrayed as rather unwilling and less capable of solving their problems without engaging the men to help out. As depicted in *August Meeting* (2001) the two leading protagonists, Amaka and Angella were presented as depending on their husbands to achieve their aims of becoming president. On the other hand, men were shown “as the decision-makers and action takers, while women were predominantly characterised as passive and as victims invariably in need of male rescue and protection (Adewoye et al 2014). Again, this fits into the patriarchal worldview of women as the weaker sex that needs the protection of a male figure (Duru, 2013). Desperation was a constant stereotype that was used to frame women in the movies. In the movie, *Caro the Shoemaker*, Stephanie (Nichole Banna) the girlfriend, of the male lead character, Cheta (Ken Eric) was so desperate for Cheta’s love that she was ready to eliminate anyone that stood in her way. In one of the scenes she even attempted to give an acid bath to a supposed rival. In the same film, Caro’s siblings were desperate to escape poverty and their miserable low-lives that they became scheming, lying bitches.

Another form of portrayal of women that stood out in this study was the low scores in the representation of women as diabolical, devious and most times, if not all the time, extravagant. Apart from the film *August Meeting* (2001), where two female characters were so obsessed with their ambition of emerging president that they had to engage diabolical means or witchcraft, the issue of diabolism seems to have ebbed in recent films. The woman is more often than the man likely to be portrayed as a troublemaker. For instance in the film *Baby Oku in America*, Baby Oku (Mercy Johnson) became a trouble maker so much that her husband ran away from home. Similarly, in *August Meeting*, Rufus’ wife was fermenting trouble at home over her husband’s refusal to give her money to purchase the attire for the women august meeting. Again, as stated above, this finding may be due to the sample.

We also found an overwhelming representation of women in wicked or cruel roles (*Mother in-law*, 2004; *Blood sister*, 2003). The stereotype of mothers-in-law as overbearing and cruel was overly represented in the film, *Mother in-law* (2004), where the mother-in-law Ugochi, (played by Patience Ozorkwor) was on a mission to frustrate and physically abuse the daughter-in-law Joy (played by the actress, Ini Edo). In *Blood Sister* (2003), Esther played by Genevieve Nnaji was envious of her sister Gloria, played by Omotola Jolade, and looked for every avenue to bring her down and snatch her husband. In her determination to marry her sister’s husband, Esther poisoned and killed her blood sister. Here again is a very typical portrayal of women as murderous, conniving, envious and wicked. Another example of the characterisation of women as devious is shown in the film *Free Giver* (2008), where Maryann played by Genevieve Nnaji was so desperate to attract the attention of the good spirited benefactor, Gius (played by Zack Orji) that she has to sleep with his friend (Tonbra) to get his attention.

## Conclusion

This study reveals that gender inequality is still prevalent in Nollywood. 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. Nollywood has shown no genuine deviation from the trite pattern of

portraying woman as sex objects whose main, if not the 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.

Further it can be concluded that women in Nollywood movies seldom appear strong and independent. Moreover, women are more frequently depicted as whores, wicked, and wasteful. More interestingly, this study provides evidence to validate the claim that satisfying market forces strongly underlies sexism and role portrayal of women in Nollywood films. Sexy, young, tall, slim and fair complexioned women are more likely to be featured in Nollywood narratives than overweighted, plus-size females, and darker-toned women.

It has been established that the media is a veritable avenue to construct and normalise common cultural values. As captured by Gramsci (1971), dominant ideologies can easily become normalised and popularised by their recurring circulation in the media. According to Du Plooy (2009) the importance of framing an issue, a person, or an event in the public's mind in a particular manner is elevated through repeated coverage. Movies help in structuring our perspectives about gender roles and relationships, and also contribute to the entrenchment of social stereotyping. Research has shown that perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs are cultivated via media exposure. The consistent depiction of women in sexualized garb in Nollywood films has the potential to make some individuals accept these fictitious representations as true. As previous studies have shown, repeated exposure to certain stereotypes may cause people, especially those of impressionable age, such as youths, to believe that what they view in films are actually realistic. The continuous construction of women along preconceived lines as sex symbols, the weaker gender who are invariably desperate, dependent and incapable of carrying out certain tasks, tends to accentuate negative images of women in the minds of the audience and over time this view of women is reproduced through this narrow and prejudiced prism. Nollywood film producers should be conscious of the harmful and erroneous impressions that can result from portraying women in terms of their sexual characteristics and societal perceptions. Effort should be made to emphasize women's accomplishments and successes in several spheres of life, rather than contributing to the challenges women face in overcoming patriarchal stereotypes and norms.

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