SETTING THE AGENDA FOR WOMEN'S LIBERATION AND EMPOWERMENT IN NIGERIA THROUGH MOVIES: AN ANALYSIS OF *WOMEN'S COT*, *WOMEN IN POWER* AND *THE BANK MANAGER*

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Abstract

One of the United Nations' millennium development goals is the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment. To achieve this goal, organizations around the world are using various tools to inform, educate and sensitize people on its benefits. One such tool is film. Film is a very powerful cultural tool as people can learn values and norms from it. The Nigerian film industry is one of the largest in the world and has become more than just an entertainment tool. Its audiences are informed, educated, sensitized and sometimes persuaded on Nigerian issues. One could argue that Nigerian movies that use Nigerian cultural values and norms to address an issue would be accepted as more authentic and representative than one that incorporates foreign values and norms.

Introduction

In September 2008, the United Nations' Secretary-General, Ban Ki Moon, addressed the organization on the progress of the Millennium Development Goals regarding women's issues. In his address he said, "The gender gaps remain considerable and the full potential of women is untapped" (5). This was not surprising, considering that various studies in recent times have shown an increase in the rate of domestic and gender-based violence (including honor killings, genital mutilation, trafficking and forced marriages), the victimization of women and girls in conflicts, a lack of women in political and economic decision-making positions, and a refusal to guarantee women's reproductive rights, particularly in the area of abortion. One possible explanation for this increase might lie in media portrayals of women and women's issues.

In examining the relationship between mass media, women and society, scholars have argued for decades that media images of women are often negative and stereotypical. Even the 1995 Beijing Platform of Action recognized that "the lack of gender sensitivity in the media is evidenced by the failure to eliminate the gender-based stereotyping that

can be found in the public and private, local, national and international media organizations" (Beijing Platform for Action, Section J, Women and the Media, 1995). Issues of gender inequalities are also narrowly constructed and presented in the media (Opoku-Mensah, 2001). When these issues appeared, they "displayed ideological constructions" that "define women's understandings of their experiences in ways that guarantee the reproduction of patriarchal definitions of the social world" (Yunjuan & Xiaoming, 282).

Additionally, media effects theories suggest that the mass media are not objective, stationary, facets of society. This is not to say, however, that the mass media are the only institution responsible for creating such values about women. If anything, the media are capable of reinforcing the status quo, giving certain issues importance over others, distorting accounts and shaping people's notion of society and societal issues.

This paper, therefore, investigates how the mass media present women issues. Specifically, the study examines how Nigerian video films are setting the agenda for the 2015 UN goal of women's empowerment and gender equality through their definitions of women empowerment, gender equality, and women's liberation. Agenda-setting scholars have argued for decades that the media can tell audiences what to think about.

Contextualising Nollywood
Nigerian movies are called video films, or home videos, because they are shot directly on video (including digital) for home viewing (Larkin, 2002). Known as Nollywood, the Nigerian video industry is the third largest in the world, following Bollywood (India) and Hollywood. Sold across the continent and abroad, these films "are one of the greatest explosions of popular culture the continent has ever seen" (Haynes, 1) and have replaced television in many homes. Since mass media are cultural industries, Nigerian video films might be good sources for learning Nigerian cultural beliefs, values and attitudes regarding gender.

There are three reasons why this study is important from a Nigerian perspective, apart from the fact that women's empowerment and gender equality are part of the Millennium Development Goals. One is that African women, "particularly at the grassroots level, are avid users of media despite a popular belief that they are too poor or busy with house chores" (Opoku-Mensah, 26). Therefore, one can argue that the more women are exposed to these movies and their messages, the more likely they are to believe that what they see is what is expected of them. Jonathan Haynes also points out that Nigerian films are "oriented towards female viewers" (4) because the audience is predominantly female. However, very few screenplay writers, producers and directors of these movies are women.

A second reason for this study is that African communication and social change scholars have understudied the media aspects in the areas of empowerment and gender equality. With the spread of these movies across the continent and the rise in similar industries in other African nations, it is time to closely examine their contributions to nation-building. Lastly, it is important to understand the terms of women's empowerment and gender equality from a Nigerian perspective because for decades, Nigerian women's rights advocates, like many other countries', and foreign development agencies have advanced the participation of women as equal partners with men in achieving sustainable development, peace, security, and full respect for human rights. But can Nigerian women actively participate in development if they receive messages contrary to this goal, considering that African culture is posited as being "hostile to women"? (Tamale, 47) Understanding such definitions could also increase the success of programmes aimed at achieving the MDGs on women's empowerment and gender empowerment in Nigeria.

This paper will examine two questions: the first is what is an empowered, liberated woman according to Nigerian video films? The second is what is gender equality according to Nigerian video films? Guiding this study is the agenda setting theory, which posits that the media can tell people what and how to think of events and issues by the cues they deliver on such events and issues. Continuous coverage of such events and issues will put them on the political agenda, thereby influencing governmental policies (Wanta, 1997). However, unlike previous agenda setting studies that have focused on news events and issues, and how news organizations and personnel select and present certain issues over others, this study applies this theory to film to learn how film can be used to build a public agenda; how film can be used to make societal issues politically relevant.

Considering that women's empowerment and gender equality are societal issues, one can presume that continuous and prominent media coverage of these issues could establish them as public priorities. Could filmmakers be considered gatekeepers too since movies by popular producers and directors are newsworthy? If popular producers and directors make movies, one can assume that the news media would cover their work. Larosa and Wanta (1990) found in their study on inter-media influence that regardless of differences in size, audiences or influence, the media agree on the issues and events that appear on the media agenda but present them differently to get different reactions from their audiences. Movies on women's empowerment and gender equality could be seen as influential and timely, considering that UN member nations have them on their political and social agenda as part of the MDGs.

Women's liberation, which is synonymous with the movement for equal rights, was added to the study because much of the literature and programmes in Nigeria never

divorced women's empowerment and gender equality from women's liberation. In some cases, women's liberation was used instead of equal rights.

The fight for women's empowerment and gender equality
Gender issues became one of the United Nations' top priorities following the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 (Parliamentary Assembly, 2005). More than 100 countries promised to implement the Beijing Platform for Action, which required strong commitments from governments and international organizations and institutions to "advance the goals of equality, development, and peace for all women everywhere in the interest of humanity" (Nigeriafirst.org, 2007, 1). The platform also asked signatory governments to recognize that "women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development, and peace" (Nigeriafirst.org, 2007, 1). But how will these countries achieve these goals, considering they might have different values, attitudes, and beliefs about women, gender equality and empowerment?

Empowerment is generally defined as increasing the political, social or economic strength or capabilities of marginalized groups. However, definitions abound of empowerment depending on whether the aim is empowering people on the basis of gender, politics, health, spirituality/religion, economics or social marginalization. These definitions and perspectives make empowerment a touchy and conflict-ridden issue. For instance, "The phrase combines optimism with misgiving. It puts forth the claim that empowerment will bring about substantial benefits – but only as a claim, not as axiomatic truth" (Troutner & Smith, 27).

One cannot also talk about empowerment without discussing power and what it means – who holds it, who applies it, who decides what struggles occur, is it visible or invisible, who loses it and so on. Troutner and Smith say the concept of power "raises the question of empowerment, which can simply be defined as the process of accumulating power" (4). Any empowerment programme or act presumes that some level of disadvantage and powerlessness exists. According to Nelson, Shanahan and Olivetti, "Empowerment begins with learning about one's own identity. This self-knowledge often leads to a concern for the empowerment of others and a commitment to promote change in society" (228).

One is empowered when one can "solve problems, make decisions to be proactive, and have a sense of control, even in problematic situations" (Järvinen, 174). For women, empowerment is defined as "the process of building a woman's capacity to be self-reliant and to develop her sense of inner strength" (Shetner-Rogers, et al., 323). According to Nwaneri, "For a woman to be empowered she has to be prepared for all forms of challenges; she has to know what she is actually struggling for" (40). Women's

empowerment symbolizes "a more political and transformatory idea for struggles that challenges, not only patriarchy, but also the mediating structures of class, race, and ethnicity that determines the nature of women's position and condition in developing societies" (Batliwala, 558). From an African perspective, empowerment is defined in the context of women having access and power in the areas of education, employment and politics (including decision-making positions at work) (Longwe & Clarke, 1999; Greig & Koopman, 2004; Ravinder & Narayana, 2006).

The emphasis in women's empowerment is putting women in charge of their own destiny, while recognizing that if they want to be empowered, they can choose how they want to be empowered. Of course, that begs the question of the standards one must use to determine who is empowered and who is not. According to the United Nations Development Program (www.undp.org, 2010), women's empowerment, like gender equality, is a human right that "lies at the heart of development and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals" (1).

On the other hand, gender equality refers to "the right of women and men to have the same opportunities" to achieve "important goals in society, e.g. quality of life, education, employment and income" (Reddock, 256). It is seen as a human right and a major goal of development because men and women need to actively participate in nation-building. Though gender and its roles are culturally and socially defined, signatory countries to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1979 and the 1995 Women's Conference in Beijing agreed that women had the short end of the stick because they were discriminated against in many ways. These countries agreed to find ways to not only empower women to participate in nation-building but also create environments that would monitor, eliminate, ratify and report discrimination in any form. To this end, gender equality is measured with indices like the Gender Equity Index and Gender Gap Index, which examine how well opportunities and resources are divided between men and women.

This is done by checking countries' progress or regression at four levels – economic, educational, empowerment and health and survival (Dijkstra, 2006; www.choike.org; www.wefoum.org). But recent studies show that women and girls are still discriminated against in many ways, and "the most pervasive and persistent forms of inequality" include "gender-based violence, economic discrimination, reproductive health inequities, and harmful traditional practices," which remain the most pervasive and persistent form of inequality (UNFPA, 1).

One reason for this, according to The International Centre for Research on Women (2005) is that "gender inequality is deeply rooted in entrenched attitudes, societal institutions and market forces that vary from community to community" (1). Another reason could be the messages people receive concerning women and women's issues.

What messages, therefore, are people receiving in their communities regarding the place and importance of women? One possible place to look for answers is in a country's mass media.

Women and the Mass Media

Mass communication scholars like Marshall McLuhan, Roger Everett and Daniel Lerner have argued since the 1950s that the mass media is a powerful tool for national development and social change. This is because "Mass media are key components in any nation's culture" that are "so pervasive and touch so many people" (Ogan, 294). Filmmaker David Putnam also adds that "Stories and images are among the principal means by which societies transmit their values and beliefs from generation to generation, and community to community" (1). Furthermore, "*How* empowering messages are communicated, such as in a dialogic, rather than one-way style, can itself be an empowering influence" (Shetner-Rogers, et al., 322).

However, the media has been criticized for stereotyping women as sexual objects, passive, evil and submissive, and under-representing them (Yunjuan & Xiaoming, 2007) in several countries. In the United States for instance, studies show that the media still perpetuate unhealthy and unrealistic images of women. Giffard, Cunningham and Van Lueven (2006) found in their study that the way the media frames women and women's issues help set the agenda for public discussion on the MDGs. Bottomline, "Media have defining power, whether we like it or not" (Fröhlich, 161). The media are thus hypothesized to fulfill the structural needs of a patriarchal and capitalist society by reinforcing gender differences and inequalities" (Yunjuan & Xiaoming, 282). Take the medium of film for instance, which according to Adenugba Olushola (2008), plays a vital role in social mobilization and information. Owing to its ability to hold a captive audience, films are used more than any other means of mass communication to promote ideas of positive social transformation as well as to consolidate and build new relationships between culture and national development (2).

As Norma Iglesias puts it, "Cinema creates and disseminates important symbols that we use to shape representations" (225). However, film is a "gendered technology," one that like any mass medium or technology men control. Though women are actors, they are excluded or few in the ownership and production arenas (Iglesias, 225). Many movie industries still perpetuate stereotypical images of women. From 1993 to 2003, women directed only 3 percent of the top 50 movies in Europe (ERICarts, 2005). Byerly explains that "women's marginalization and stereotyping" in film is "the result of a patriarchal media system that has manifested male biases in neglecting and undervaluing women's experiences, meanings, ongoing daily contributions, and imagery" (226).

But one must not conclude that women have not made any gains in the film industry. For example, Mexican women have produced films that challenge traditional notions, images and identities of women (Iglesias, 2004). Organizations like Women in Film actively support and promote the contributions of women in the film industry with the purpose of empowering them. Its members' works have won awards and critical acclaim in several arenas. "Women's access to media and ICTs is obviously crucial for their personal empowerment" (Steeves, 192). Therefore, the image of women in film has changed over time. But Steeves (2007) warns that though women are present, content has not changed much. Also, regardless of the culture, media portrayals of women are "related to the broad socio-economic, political and cultural context of a society" (Yunjuan & Xiaoming, 282). Therefore, significant studies on how film portrays women must be "based on specific social, economic, political, and cultural conditions of a given country within a particular period of time" (Yunjuan & Xiaoming, 282). Let us examine this issue from the Nigerian context.

The Nigerian Case
Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa. Located in West Africa, women make up about 50 percent of its 140 million people (Onyedika, 2009). Men make up 30 percent, while children make up the remaining 20 percent (Onyedika, 2009). Women's liberation, empowerment and gender equality became a major part of Nigerian life following the Women's Conference in Beijing in 1995. Prior to that, Maryam Babangida, the nation's first lady from 1985 to 1993, created a Better Life for Rural Women program to address the issues of women's "unappreciated" and "marginal position" in the country (Babangida, 1). The programme's goal was to "empower rural women socially, economically and politically through adult education and training in the fields of education, agriculture, public health, arts and crafts, and food processing" (Nwonwu, 1).

A National Commission for Women was created to oversee the programme, which later became the Ministry of Women's Affairs and Social Development under General Sani Abacha in 1997 to further "confer institutional recognition on the contribution of women to national development" (Mama, 12). Since Babangida, other Nigerian first ladies have undertaken programs geared directly at women and such efforts have sparked feminism, which in this study refers to "the awareness of women's oppression in the society within the family, economy, law, at work, etc., and the struggle by women and men to change the situation for a just and fairer society" (Adamu, 3). Nigerian women today are more visibly recognized in the economic, educational and political spheres, but still fight patriarchy daily instituted through religion and tradition.

Many are also still disadvantaged by poverty (including ownership of the means of production), harmful traditional practices (genital mutilation, violence, and inheritance and widowhood customs), religion, customary laws and illiteracy (Okunna, 2002; Para-

Mallam, 2006). Some women have created non-governmental organizations at the national, grassroots and international levels to deal with these issues, which deal directly with empowerment and gender equality, and have been effective in some areas. But what is really holding women back? Could it be the messages they are getting from the Nigerian mass media, which "men produce an overwhelming majority of"? (Okunna, 7)

Nollywood – The Rebirth of Nigeria Cinema
The Nigerian movie industry, popularly called Nollywood, was resurrected in 1992 when Kenneth Nnebue produced *Living in Bondage* to sell a stock of blank videocassettes (Ebewo, 2007). His company, NEK Videos, sold about 750,000 copies of the movie and marked the beginning of a $200 million to $300 million industry that produces about 1,000 movies annually (Hays, 2005). Prior to this, the Nigerian movie industry was almost dead. Soap operas and made-for-TV movies dominated the Nigerian television screen in the 1980s. A few film producers turned to video production in the late 1980s to stay in the movie business. However, they had limited funds and very small audiences. Nnebue's success provided an alternative. Moreover,
With the global world united under the sway of visual culture, the emergence of the video film in Nigeria is timely and crucial as it serves as the voice of its people and responds to the drudgery of a socioeconomic existence characterized by high unemployment and dwindling opportunities. It has taken all on board, including religious-minded people. (Ebewo, 47)
Nollywood movies differ from Hollywood movies largely in terms of production and distribution. The movies are shot using video technology (including high-definition video technology) and shooting can take 10 to 14 days to complete on a $15,000 to $24,000 budget (Osifo-Dawodu, 2007). The movies are commonly produced in multiple parts. It is not unusual to find a movie with four parts, most times under a different title. Movies are also re-released under different titles. More than 65 percent of them are produced in English and the rest in indigenous languages, with English subtitles, including Hausa, Yoruba, Idoma, Bini and Pidgin English. There are some with French subtitles to reach the Francophone audience. The industry's major source of funding includes marketers, individuals, non-governmental organizations or corporations.

In terms of distribution, television, not film or movie theatres, is the major channel for Nollywood. The movies come in videocassettes, video CDs (VCD) and DVDs, which are intended for home use (hence its other name, home videos) for about $1 or less. There are many ways to watch the movies without buying them directly. State- and private-owned television stations in Ghana, Kenya, Cameroon and Uganda feature the movies on their programming schedules (Osei-Hwere & Osei-Hwere, 2008). In the United States, Ireland and the United Kingdom, Nollywood channels are available through DishNetwork and Sky, as well as through The African Channel, a video-on-demand channel in the United Kingdom. Some flights to Africa also feature Nollywood movies,

and they are free through YouTube and sites like onlinenigeria.com and africanseer.com.

The movies are so popular that they have driven foreign films off the shelves in Nigeria (Ozele, 2008). Ebewo (2007) explains that Nollywood movies are very popular because "they have indigenous content and address issues relevant to the audience" (p. 47). "In spite of the ethnic differences, there are core values that transcend ethnic and regional boundaries. These include: religiosity; extended family; tradition and rituals; community; respect for elders; and veneration of ancestors" (Ozele, 14). The movies also feature the cultural hybridity of modern (Western) and traditional (African) cultures in Nigeria, as well as the resulting tensions between old and new, extending their appeal to an international audience. Despite its success, filmmakers estimate the industry loses at least $20 million annually to piracy, duplication and online streams (Osifo-Dawodu, 2007).

In terms of storylines, Nollywood tells melodramatic stories. According to Abah, "Melodrama is a powerfully conservative social artifact" that draws its audience "into both the prescriptions and the proscriptions of mainstream cultural values" (338). "Nollywood films tend to be full of moralizing messages, cautionary tales in which citizens are handed dire warnings about the perilous consequences of infidelity, crime and greed," a common trend in melodrama (Hays, 2). Melodrama is a genre with local and international appeal (Haynes, 2000; Casas-Perez, 2005; Martin-Barbero, 2006). The common themes deal with social and cultural issues, including religion, corruption, women's rights, materialism, culture, immigration, AIDS, marriage, unemployment, and gender roles. In its depiction of women, however, Nollywood is heavily criticized.

The Image of Women in Nollywood
According to Haynes (2007), Nollywood films are "oriented towards female viewers" because the audience is predominantly female. However, women account for less than one percent of producers, directors and writers. Abah (2008) found that though Nollywood movies "celebrate African women of all shades, shapes, and sizes," and portrayed women in "varying professional roles" from wives and CEOs to prostitutes, many videos showed a stereotyped image of women (339).

An ideal woman was depicted as married, with children, and submissive. Women were dangerous when they were "economically, socially, or politically independent" (Abah, 339). Movies like *Unchained*, which dealt with the political empowerment of women, thematically cast women in the "culture bound definition of domestic roles for women" (Abah, 353). Women who acted outside expected and culturally defined gender roles are generally depicted as bad and doomed. In *Power Tussle*, a rich and single woman was portrayed as bad. She became good only after a male servant beat her, daily, into submission. In other movies like *Girls' Cot*, *Aristos*, *Be My Val*, *Sleep Walker I – IV*, *Fishers*

of Men, *Koko Babes* and *Runs*, the Nigerian woman's "only asset is her sexuality" (Ozele, 20). She is frequently punished for doing the same things men are rewarded for, and someone her fellow women cannot trust.

This image of women as portrayed in Nigerian home video films cuts across the country from North to South, though with differing intensity. The difference being that the rituals and murders, which occur in Southern films, do not yet appear in Northern movies. Still, women in the Northern films are not reflected any better; they are seen as greedy, fickle minded, weak, unable to make their own marital decisions and are available for purchase by the highest bidder (Anyanwu, 84 – 85).

For instance, Chinyere Okunna (1996) found Igbo movies' portrayals of women were "unrealistic," "counterproductive and damaging to the cause of women" (34). Furthermore, she argued the movies could "lead to the subjugation of women because they can increase men's disdain for women, sow mistrust between women, undermine their confidence in themselves and strengthen the forces which push women to the background in this patriarchal society" (Okunna, 34). She also found that though none of the participants in her study knew women like these characters, many believed the depictions were accurate. It appears "Nigerian movies perpetuate sex role stereotypes and reflect the patriarchal social values dominant in Nigerian society" (Ebewo, 49). "The general impression is that women are negatively portrayed" to appeal to men (Ebewo, 48). Unfortunately, there seems to be no studies on the audience to challenge that impression.

Ozele (2008) also criticized Nollywood's image of women, saying that "the industry has still to critically address fundamental issues of gender equality and equity, violations of the rights of a woman, traditional stereotypes of females, and the struggles of the female child for equal educational opportunities" (20). He added that:

> Such uncomplimentary depiction of the *'Africanness'* in women undermine the lofty virtues of the African woman, especially in other spheres of life. The influence of these negative portrayals on adolescent minds who view movie actors as their heroes could only be left to the imagination (20).

Methodology
To answer the research questions, I looked for Nigerian movies produced from 2000 onwards where women's empowerment, liberation and gender equality were the central themes. At first, I used the descriptions on the back covers to select a sample. Unfortunately, the descriptions on the back covers were inaccurate, which I discovered after watching 10 movies that featured women stereotypically as previous research indicated. Though seven movies carried important messages, they did not fit the criterion for this study and were excluded. These movies largely fit the city girl genre,

which depicts women as prostitutes and gold-diggers. A future study would widen the criteria to include movies on women in general.

Though most movies did not have the desired concepts as themes, they had powerful stereotypes of women that could influence women's understanding of empowerment and gender rights. Only three movies (technically, they count as six as two had multiple parts) had women's empowerment, liberation and gender equality as the central theme. I had hoped to find more movies using these themes because Nigerian women are committed to meeting this MDG. While watching the movies, I categorized the portrayals of these issues according to the themes that rose from the data since I could not replicate them from previous studies. Definitions and descriptions were then analyzed and interpreted to describe and discuss the values women will learn or cultivate about empowerment and gender equality from these movies. The movies I used were *Women's Cot* (parts 1, 2 and 3), *Women in Power* (parts 1 and 2) and *The Bank Manager*. Each movie was at least 80 minutes long.

Women's Cot dealt with an important issue facing women in Nigeria – widowhood. Many women are disenfranchised by customs and tradition when their husbands die as in-laws seize whatever property exists (regardless of who owns what). In some cases, the relatives do not consider the children, especially if they are young or female, as beneficiaries. In others, relatives are allowed to inherit the widows. In one scene, we learn from a local king that women cannot inherit property because "widowhood and posterity do not sleep together. …inheritance issues are never discussed in the kitchen." Produced in 2005 and directed by Dickson Iroegbu, *Women's Cot* told the story of two widows, Adanma and Joyce, and their efforts to fight the unfortunate plight of widows in Nigeria through the Widows' Cot organization. Using their own experiences they decide to "liberate" other widows facing the traditional predicaments of widowhood. The movie is full of messages, especially from Igbo culture, on the plight of widows.

Women in Power is about four women – Lois, Agatha, Stella and Maureen – who attended a women's conference in Canada. They belong to the Career Women's Forum, a non-governmental organization that addresses issues facing women in Nigeria. Maureen, Lois and Agatha are married, with successful careers and successful husbands. Stella is a single "independent woman" with a very successful career as a personnel manager. Directed and produced by Adim C. Williams and released in 2005, this film, more than the others, directly addressed the issues of empowerment, liberation and gender equality. In the movie we see how though these women belong to the same organization and attend the same conference, they return with different interpretations of women's empowerment and gender equality.

In *The Bank Manager*, also produced in 2005 but directed by Ugo Ugbor, we meet Nneka, a well-educated (has a doctorate in banking and finance) and career-driven woman. She

is the mother of two children, a boy and a girl, and is married to a very successful businessman, Evans. In the movie, she is so busy with work that she neglects her responsibilities as a mother and wife with dire consequences.

Findings
To answer question one, what is an empowered, liberated woman according to Nigerian films, I found that though the films had various definitions for what an empowered, liberated Nigerian woman was, these definitions came with negative and positive connotations. The characters in the movies who exemplified certain definitions either suffered or were rewarded enormously. They showed what happened to women who acted contrary to what was expected of them as women, mothers and wives in Nigeria. Men in the movies were not portrayed as being against women's empowerment, liberation or gender equality.

An Empowered and Liberated Woman is Free From Men
In each of the movies, an empowered and liberated woman was portrayed as being free from male domination and independent. However, this definition carried negative connotations for women. The women who exemplified this definition believed men control women through marriage and relationships. Therefore, they had no husbands, and if there were men in their lives, including sons, they were aggressive towards them. These women were in charge of their relationships and ruled with an iron fist. Men were unavoidable necessities only good for sex, making babies and getting things.

In *Women's Cot*, for example, Adanma told Joyce, "Freedom from men is the preoccupation of womanhood." The movie's theme song also said a woman has "lots of freedom when she is nobody's wife." The movie also took a very unusual turn when a powerful woman, Ezewannyi, told Adanma that she must encourage women to be free of men. The way to do this? Kill your husband. Adanma then began a crusade of attracting women into the organization through materialism – expensive cars, monetary gifts, power and expensive clothes. Seduced by wealth, several women actually killed their husbands to join what later became the "Women's Cult."

In *Women in Power*, Stella and Lois also depicted this definition. Stella believed getting married would stop her from attaining the "corporate target" she set for herself. Moreover, she was "an independent woman who functioned better as a single lady." On her part, Lois saw her husband, and men, as an obstacle. She constantly attacked men who worked for and with her. However, she was not opposed to using men to get traditional honors women would not receive without being married, or attaining certain political positions she could not get on merit. For instance, when village elders offered her husband a chieftaincy title, she nagged him to accept, against his will. But Lois was obsessed with status, and as a married woman, any rise in her husband's status would benefit her. She constantly undermined her husband in public, even in front of elders.

An Empowered and Liberated Woman Has a Career

These movies also defined an empowered and liberated woman as one who worked outside the home. She was educated and trained to work outside the home and support the family too. All the major characters in the movies had careers. This was a positive message, considering that in Nigerian society today, two-income households are becoming more prominent. However, there was a negative connotation attached to this definition when the women placed their careers before their families. Take Nneka for instance in *The Bank Manager*. Nneka loves her career so much that she barely had time for the children. She returned from work late at night (often around 10 p.m.) when the children were in bed and constantly quarrelled with her husband about her responsibilities.

Nneka believed staying at home would prevent her from "reaping the fruit" of her labor, especially since she was well educated and advanced in her career. Her husband, Evans, constantly reminded her that she was a "mother and a housewife with children who need her." When her brother chided her on her attitude toward her husband and children, she said had "labored so hard to be where I am today, and I have a few more steps to go. So whoever loves me should stand by me." Soon, Evans falls for and marries the maid and sends Nneka packing. She was punished for choosing her career at the expense of her family. She later went mad and roamed the streets. In one scene, the director mocked her choice by having her in her mad state believe she is in her office attending to customers.

In *Women in Power*, Agatha was also very focused on her business. She spent a lot of time travelling and making money. Her husband, Mavis, asked her to spend more time with him so they could start a family, to which she replied, "Those babies ain't coming. I can't sit at home brooding about it when my mates are out there making millions. Is it only men who have the prerogative to make money?" She interpreted her husband's concerns as jealousy. In the end, she too lost her husband to a woman he married secretly. Agatha found this out when she returned from a business trip and met a pregnant woman. Mavis nonchalantly introduced the woman as his wife, a "nice, domestic, fertile" woman who "understands my needs." Overall, the women who exaggeratedly put careers before family lost what Nigerian society considers valuable to women – their husbands. Both wives also deviated from the cultural definition of a good wife, one who is submissive to her husband and wants children.

In contrast, the movies also showed other women with careers whose characters carried positive connotations. Positively, a liberated and empowered woman understood her role as a wife and a mother (if she had children) and put her family before her career. She valued her children and respected her husband. She did what brought honor to her husband. We see this in Maureen who cooked for the family despite being a minister of

the federal government. She gave up any position that conflicted with her role as a mother and a wife. As she put it, "Women's liberation and empowerment is all about understanding our roles as women and realizing our talents and endowments and making sure there are no hindrances in achieving full potential." Her husband explained further that, "A totally empowered woman does not allow emancipation to conflict with her God-given roles as mother and wife." Women like Maureen were constantly called "good wives" and "good women" in these movies.

An Empowered and Liberated Woman is Proud of Her Culture
A third definition of a liberated and empowered woman concerned cultural pride through her dressing. Though one might think this is too simple to be an issue, traditional undertones filled this definition with negative and positive consequences. There was also an identity issue here. In Nigerian society, a good woman or girl dresses conservatively, with little or no makeup. If she is married, her body is for the eyes of her husband and she dresses mainly in traditional clothes that identify her as married and a mother. When she wears Western attire, she is also conservatively dressed. In the movies, liberated and empowered women who were presented as bad wore very tight, short and low-cut Western clothes, except when they were in traditional settings. They also wore too much make-up, and used blond or red hair extensions or wigs. It almost seemed as if being empowered or liberated for these women meant dressing like European or American, not Nigerian, women.

In a scene in *Women in Power* for instance, we meet Paulina, an obese mother of four who visits her friend in very tight jeans and a very tight blouse. No part of her is left to the imagination. Paulina called her dressing "women's libe" (pronounced lee-bay), short for women's liberation. She told her friend, Ugonma, that according to a new government declaration, men and women were now equal; women now had power. As a result she could dress as she liked, and not even her husband could tell her what to do. Though the scene was comedic, Paulina (notice the English name) was standing next to Ugonma, a married woman whose dressing suggested she was a good woman. Confirmation of this came when Paulina's husband went to Ugonma to complain (Nigerian husbands do not complain to their wives' friends unless they respect them and see them as good women).

Ugonma explained that Paulina was simply "confused" because "Some of our women do not understand the true meaning of women's liberation and empowerment. They think it's all about dressing anyhow, talking anyhow, and disrespecting their husbands." The way a woman dresses actually says a lot in Nigerian societies and often determines people's reactions to her. Good women like Maureen and Joyce were always conservatively dressed in traditional Nigerian attire, with minimal make up.

When the women who erred changed their behavior and attitude, their dressing also changed. When Nneka was healed, she returned home dressed in traditional clothes with no makeup and covered hair. Gone were the blond hair and tight pantsuits. When Paulina begged her husband to let her return, she too covered her hair and dressed modestly in a shirt and wrappers. Overall, the movies teach that a truly liberated and empowered woman showed through her clothes that she respected the traditions of her people regarding her role. One could say she was proud to be Nigerian; did not copy or embrace Western women and their concept of what was good for the world.

An Empowered and Liberated Woman Does Not Dominate Others
A third definition of an empowered, liberated woman is that she cares about others. She used her power for the good of others, the less fortunate, and respected her subordinates. She sought to empower others and pushed for social change (as Shetner-Rogers, et al. defined). She believed that when women understood and actualized their strengths and goals, they cared about other women. Joyce and Maureen were good examples of this definition. Whenever these women met the less fortunate, they helped them extensively. For example, though Maureen was a minister, she attended to women in her home, not just in her office. She was interested in their welfare, listened to them and even provided scholarships to less privileged girls because education and skill acquisition, she said, were "the first steps to self-empowerment." In her position, Joyce started Widows' Cot to help fellow widows. Her goal was to get the government to recognize that certain cultural practices were unfair to widows. When the organization raised millions of naira, she pushed the organization to use some funds to help orphans, the poor and the hungry; even though Adanma told her "charity is not a cure for poverty." But not all the women displayed such attitudes toward others.

There were women in the movies who dominated others, and this attitude carried negative connotations. If these women could not dominate through money and political power, they used sex. They had no respect for men, other women, the poor or the powerless. This was a common theme in all the movies. In *Women's Cot*, Adanma advised a widow to exercise her "right to pleasure" by having sex with her three brothers-in-law, who wanted to dispossess and yet, individually wanted to have sex with her. The widow took Adanma's advice and as long as she slept with the men, they did not give her any trouble. When their wives became suspicious, Adanma told her to kill them. She did. One wonders why she did not advise her to go to court and fight for her rights.

Adanma also used her money and influence to seduce younger men into relationships, which she controlled. The men were young enough to be her sons, but she did not care because they gave her pleasure and she gave them money or cars in return. However, they could not leave the relationship until she said so. When her boyfriend in the movie ended the relationship, she assassinated him for his "ingratitude." Adanma also

believed that the leader of the Widows' Cot should have absolute control – no debate, no votes. Lois, who arrogantly commanded everyone to address her as Honorable Chief Mrs. Lois Collins, also took pride in dominating men and other women. She believed men and women were at war and the only language men understood was "action and aggression." She called Maureen a bad leader because, "A woman leader cannot be on good terms with her husband and take care of the family. A good woman leader must be hostile and uncompromising to the men folk." She believed there was no need being nice to men or empowering women through education and work because their husbands would take the money away. Women must aggressively demand their rights from men, not be nice to them, or ask them for anything because such a beggarly attitude was weak.

Domination was also displayed through wealth. Money was power. In *Women's Cot*, women were seduced to join the organization through wealth. In her membership bid, Adanma used some of the money they raised to buy exotic cars, expensive clothes and give monetary gifts. Every member of the more than 100-member organization gave new widows a N50, 000 ($500) cash gift. Wealth attracted women so much that it did not take long for them to kill their husbands to join the cot. According to one woman, women would long to be widows after seeing its members. What those "women enjoy," she said, "no husband is worth it."

Nneka in *The Bank Manager* also drove exotic cars, wore expensive clothes, and attacked her maid physically and verbally. One gets the message here that men are not the only hindrances to women's empowerment and liberation. Women can be their own worst enemy. Domination in any form from women was portrayed as wrong and the women who dominated others suffered terrible consequences for their actions.

Lois's employers and seniors fired her for her aggressiveness and attitude towards men. She was also arrested for embezzling public funds and abusing her office. Even her husband divorced her and moved to Switzerland with the children, where he hoped to undo her evil influences. She pleaded with him to remain and help her, to which he replied, "You are an independent woman. I am sure you can take care of yourself, my dear," just as the police came to arrest her. Ezewannyi killed Adanma and was herself destroyed by a man.

A Liberated and Empowered Woman Needs a Man
The only women who were excluded from this were widows. The movies teach that women need men, no matter how independent or liberated they are. Women who said they did not need men were often reminded by their mothers, never by men or other women, that a man was necessary in a woman's life. For instance, though Stella wanted to meet a corporate target before she married, her mother constantly reminded her to replace the stuffed bear she hugged every night with a man. After her third engagement

ended, Julia, Lois's daughter, wondered why she could not keep a man. She soon realized that, contrary to her mother's teaching, she wanted marriage. Overall, these were the main definitions in the movies concerning what an empowered, liberated woman was. It was clear in the movies that women fighting for their rights and empowerment had to balance their needs with those of their culture, family, and tradition.

To answer the second research question, what is gender equality according to Nigerian video films, the movies provided two definitions. The first definition of gender equality was that men and women are equal, have equal rights and are entitled to the same things, regardless of tradition. One could easily dismiss this definition as Western since Nigerian women belong to a communal culture that recognizes the importance of tradition and customs. The women who adopted this definition often expressed it as competition between the sexes in the movies and wanted to do as the men did. For example, Julia told her older brother to cook because she could not cook all the time. "You men want to do the eating while we do the cooking," Lois retorted when her son complained. The chores must be shared equally. But Julia was never shown doing her brother's chores or paying on a date. Agatha never did the chores at home either. She never cleaned or cooked, and left the house very early without seeing her husband or guests when they had them. You got the impression she was a bad wife because she did not perform her duties as a wife. In one scene, Lois publicly defied the patriarchal structure of tradition.

At a meeting of the CWF, Maureen's husband, Chief Odensi, welcomed guests using the Igbo tradition of showing the men kolanuts in a covered bowl before they were broken. Seated at the table for honored guests as well, Lois strained to look into the bowl when it was shown to the men at the table. But the presenter never showed them to her. Just before they were broken, Lois loudly demanded to look into the bowl. The audience was stunned, including her ardent supporters. Odensi politely told her, women do not see the kolanuts before they are broken.

Lois haughtily replied that she must because she is a chief, a minister, and equal to men. Odensi said, "Chief or no chief, you are still a woman and this is tradition." Lois then threatened that if she was not shown the kolanuts, she would leave with the members. But she stormed out alone as none of the women wanted to break this patriarchal tradition. They were afraid of disturbing the status quo and obviously only take the fight for equality so far for fear of ruffling the men. Her strongest supporters later told Lois they would no longer support her because she did not know that "tradition must be followed". One of them even described her as having "too much ambition." The women who adopted the definition of gender equality as men and women being equal were portrayed as bad and unsuccessful women.

The second definition of equality the movies showed was that men and women, though created equal, have different abilities that complement each other. These abilities are not in competition with each other. Lois's husband gave this definition throughout *Women in Power*. When Julia expressed her confusion about the equality of the sexes, her father explained that "with equality comes the actual realization of the responsibility as a man or woman. To usurp the other's role is to cause friction." This definition falls in line with what many womanists and African feminists express as gender equality. The women who imbibed this definition were portrayed as successful and good women.

Conclusion

According to Romy Frohlich, "the people who make decisions about media content, may it be news or entertainment, have defining power" (161). The people who made the decisions about the contents of these three movies were men from the Igbo ethnic group of Nigeria. The major owners of Nigerian mass media are men. Therefore, one could argue that these definitions of empowerment, liberation and gender equality were men's visions (based on Igbo culture), their interpretations, of what empowered Nigerian women should be and look like, and how equality should be activated in society. Men have thus used these films to set an agenda concerning women's empowerment, liberation and gender equality.

The definitions indirectly said men were not against women's empowerment or their fight for rights, but then defined the contexts in which they should be empowered or given equal rights (if at all) as beholden to tradition. A woman who fell outside the roles tradition assigned her was not only bad, she was exaggeratedly so. For example, though Nneka worked outside the home, Evans still saw her as a housewife. Even in the context of gender equality, the message was that women should know their place. Women were not in competition with men, but if she wanted to be one, she was doomed. Traditional roles were presented as more important.

Women will learn that empowerment, liberation and gender equality are good, if they can bear the consequences. In some ways, the movies' definitions and interpretations of these terms were unfair to women as the portrayals of bad women were exaggerated. Lois's character for instance was too aggressive, rude and ambitious. She was too hard. It also did not make sense that Agatha, who should know that children are the basis of marriage in Nigeria, was nonchalant about her childless state and did not care about her husband. In Nigerian societies, "Women are highly valued for their childbearing capabilities. Therefore, a childless woman" is of "little or no value to her husband, her family, or the community at large" (Wilson & Ngige, 252). Also, while women were punished for their actions through tradition, tradition permitted men to commit adultery.

For example, though Evans blamed Nneka for the family's breakup, he never took responsibility for having an affair with the maid. He never even noticed his children were starving and unhappy. The writer excused this as a voodoo or juju spell. But the viewer was not even aware he was charmed until at the end of the movie. In fact, the first time he had sex with the maid, he was not under any magical influence because he called her to his bed after noticing the seductive negligee she wore to bring him breakfast. One might also interpret his actions as punishment for Nneka because she was a bad wife.

In *Women in Power*, Agatha was another victim of tradition. When she did not play her wifely role as was expected of her, her husband married another wife since tradition allowed him to. He did not divorce Agatha. His family was aware of this action and fully supported him. It was his sister who broke the news to Agatha. Her sister-in-law tells her with glee that the woman is, "our wife. She has done for us what other women (meaning Agatha) have been unable to do in many years." Moreover, by getting another woman pregnant, Mavis showed Agatha, not him, was the infertile one. Agatha was the man she wanted to be after all. Women are apt to say Agatha deserved what she got because her career was more important than her "God-given roles."

The movies carried a serious warning for women about how dispensable they are. When they misbehave, a man can simply replace them. Women do not have that luxury. What's more, though well educated (even in the United States and United Kingdom) and a senator, Joyce's husband did not leave a will or make arrangements to safeguard his wife and children's futures upon his demise. His brother explained that it was because he was "a traditional man" who understood the customary rules of inheritance. Why did he not plan for his family? Was he not willing to change the status quo? Do men like the traditions that subjugate women in Nigeria? Are these not gender issues?

These movies also showed the immense pressure Nigerian women face in a world that wants to live in modern times but still hold on to its traditional past. Nigerian women must simultaneously achieve their goals of self-realization and actualization as women without being seen as antifamily, anti-men. They must maintain a balance between the two. They can get an education and jobs, but they must also be able to have children, raise them, take care of their husbands, cook and clean, and be good at their jobs. Nigerian women must be superwomen. These movies also showed that if a conflict exists between their lives as workers and their lives as wives and mothers, they must give up their work and their selves for their families. Family comes first.

In addition, no matter how successful she is in her professional life, a Nigerian woman is incomplete until she has a husband and children of her own. When she gets them, she must do all she can to keep them for a woman who puts her career before her family is

heading for destruction, as Nneka's brother put it. Women might learn to look at their careers as hobbies from these movies, something to while away time, especially when you have a rich and hardworking husband who can provide for you. But what if you do not? What options do you have? How will tradition treat you?

Also, *Women's Cot* could have focused on much more about widowhood and the fight to bring about social change through the organization. The issue was trivialized with the addition of Ezewannyi. Does that mean these unfair widowhood practices cannot be changed? The way the issue was handled showed how men view the issue, which is a serious one for Nigerian women. Widowhood disenfranchises so many women, particularly in cultures where women are considered property, and women's groups are fighting such customs. Another common stereotype in the movies was that women cannot trust other women. Nneka could not trust her maid who starved her children and took her husband. Lois could not trust her friends, neither could Joyce trust Adanma.

In the end, perhaps Lois's husband was right when he said women must always apply what they learn realistically because, after all, "This is Nigeria." That excuse is difficult to swallow, and defeatist, considering all the efforts and contributions Nigerian women have made in society. It is time for movie makers in Nigeria to tell stories that not only highlight the issues in society, but suggest ways to solve these issues.

Overall, these movies carried important messages about Nollywood's role in setting the media and political agenda and preparing Nigerian women to meet the MDGs. But since men are the dominant producers, directors and writers of these stories, they have maintained the status quo of portraying women negatively. Women's images in the context of these issues were very negative, subjective and even unrealistic in some cases. The danger here is that such images can influence the perception of women, who are the dominant viewers of these movies, regarding women's empowerment, liberation and gender equality. They could also hamper the fledgling movement for women's empowerment and rights in Nigeria. When movies routinely exaggerate the negative aspects, the consequences could be devastating, not only for the group stereotyped, but society as a whole. Nigerian women in the industry should also produce movies from within, to address "what is specifically female," because Nigerian men don't seem to get how important social change regarding women's issues is (Iglesias, 226).

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