Research Square

Preprints are preliminary reports that have not undergone peer review.
They should not be considered conclusive, used to inform clinical practice,
or referenced by the media as validated information.

Gender Disparity, Social Exclusion, and Women's Agency in Contemporary Nollywood Cinema: A Comparative Analysis of Wives on Strike 2 and Up North

Dr Kingsley Oyong Akam

kingsoacredibility@gmail.com

University of Calabar

Dr Esther Frank Apejoye-Okezie

University of Calabar

Article

Keywords: Gender Disparity, Social Exclusion, Women's Agency, Nollywood Cinema, Feminist Film Theory, Intersectionality

Posted Date: September 11th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-10433525/v1

License: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
Read Full License

Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

Gender disparity and social exclusion remain persistent features of patriarchal societies, shaping women's access to education, economic opportunities, political participation, and social mobility. Although Nollywood has increasingly engaged with these issues, limited scholarship has comparatively examined how contemporary female-directed films represent both structural exclusion and women's agency. This article addresses this gap through a comparative analysis of Omoni Oboli's *Wives on Strike 2* and Tope Oshin's *Up North*. Drawing on Barry's theory of social exclusion, Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, feminist film theory, and the concept of women's agency, the study employs qualitative content and contextual analysis to examine how the films depict patriarchal power relations while positioning women as agents of resistance and social transformation. The analysis demonstrates that gender inequality is sustained through intersecting cultural, religious, political, and socio-economic structures, yet both films challenge these systems by foregrounding women's resilience, leadership, and resistance. While *Wives on Strike 2* emphasises collective mobilisation against child marriage and educational exclusion, *Up North* foregrounds individual agency, educational aspiration, and the negotiation of patriarchal expectations. The article argues that contemporary Nollywood cinema functions not merely as a reflection of gendered oppression but as a cultural site for contesting exclusionary structures and imagining more inclusive social futures. By integrating social exclusion, intersectionality, feminist film theory, and women's agency within a comparative analytical framework, the study contributes to scholarship on African cinema, gender studies, and feminist media studies by demonstrating how female-directed Nollywood films reposition women from passive subjects of exclusion to transformative agents of social change.

Introduction

Gender disparity and social exclusion remain among the most persistent forms of structural inequality, shaping women's access to education, employment, political participation, economic resources, and cultural citizenship across societies. Despite sustained international commitments to gender equality, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), women continue to experience systemic disadvantages that restrict their full participation in social, political, economic, and cultural life (United Nations, 2015, 2024; UN Women, 2024). These inequalities are rarely determined by gender alone but are produced through intersecting structures of class, ethnicity, religion, geography, age, and other social identities that shape patterns of inclusion and exclusion (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Fraser, 2008). Consequently, contemporary feminist scholarship increasingly conceptualises gender inequality as a multidimensional phenomenon embedded within broader systems of social exclusion rather than as an isolated form of discrimination (Barry, 2002; hooks, 2000). Understanding these interconnected forms of inequality therefore requires analytical frameworks that recognise both the structural conditions that produce exclusion and the diverse ways women negotiate and challenge them.

Within Nigeria, gender disparity remains a significant social challenge despite constitutional guarantees of equality and numerous policy initiatives aimed at promoting women's rights. Patriarchal cultural

norms, religious traditions, unequal educational opportunities, child marriage, gender-based violence, and economic marginalisation continue to restrict women's opportunities and participation in many communities (Aina, 1998; Amadiume, 1987; Makama, 2013; United Nations, 2024). These structural inequalities not only shape women's lived experiences but also influence how gender identities, power relations, and social justice are represented within cultural production. As one of the most influential forms of popular culture, cinema does more than reflect existing social realities; it actively participates in constructing, legitimising, and contesting dominant understandings of gender, identity, power, and belonging (Hall, 1997). Film therefore provides an important site for examining how cultural narratives reproduce or challenge systems of inequality.

As one of the world's largest film industries, Nollywood has become a major producer of cultural meanings within Africa and its diaspora (Haynes, 2016; Krings & Okome, 2013; Larkin, 2008). Beyond entertainment, Nollywood functions as a significant cultural institution through which contemporary social issues—including corruption, ethnicity, religion, migration, family, governance, and gender relations—are negotiated and debated (Haynes, 2016; Gugler, 2015; Jedlowski, 2013). While earlier Nollywood productions often reproduced patriarchal stereotypes and conservative gender ideologies, more recent films increasingly portray women as complex social actors capable of negotiating, resisting, and transforming unequal social structures (Haynes, 2016; Ogunleye, 2014; Shaka, 2004). This shift is particularly evident in films directed by women, whose work frequently foregrounds female subjectivity, agency, and resistance while critically interrogating entrenched patriarchal institutions and advocating more inclusive visions of gender justice.

Scholarship on gender in Nollywood has made important contributions to understanding female representation, patriarchy, domestic violence, sexuality, motherhood, political participation, and women's empowerment (Ukadike, 2000; Onuzulike, 2007; Ogunleye, 2014; Ekwuazi, 2013; Haynes, 2016). Collectively, these studies demonstrate that Nigerian cinema both reflects and contests dominant gender ideologies. However, existing research has tended either to focus on individual films or to examine specific aspects of gender inequality in isolation. Consequently, relatively little attention has been paid to how contemporary female-directed Nollywood films simultaneously conceptualise gender disparity, social exclusion, and women's agency within an integrated comparative analytical framework. Likewise, insufficient consideration has been given to the ways female filmmakers employ cinematic narratives to expose exclusionary structures while imagining alternative possibilities for inclusion, empowerment, and social transformation. Addressing these gaps is important because comparative analysis provides deeper insight into the different narrative and cinematic strategies through which women filmmakers negotiate questions of gender justice in contemporary Nigerian society.

This article addresses these gaps through a comparative analysis of Omoni Oboli's *Wives on Strike 2* and Tope Oshin's *Up North*, two influential films directed by leading Nigerian women filmmakers whose work engages critically with questions of gender inequality, education, social exclusion, and women's empowerment. While *Wives on Strike 2* examines child marriage, girls' educational exclusion, and collective female activism against patriarchal oppression, *Up North* explores women's educational

aspirations, self-determination, and the negotiation of patriarchal expectations within Northern Nigeria. Examining these films together enables a more nuanced understanding of how contemporary female-directed Nollywood cinema simultaneously represents structural inequality and imagines women's agency as a catalyst for resistance and social transformation. Rather than examining representation alone, this study analyses how social exclusion operates as a structural process and how women's agency functions as a cinematic strategy for challenging patriarchal power.

The article draws upon Barry's (2002) theory of social exclusion, Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) theory of intersectionality, feminist film theory (Mulvey, 1975; hooks, 1992), and contemporary scholarship on women's agency to examine how cinematic narratives construct gendered identities and negotiate relations of power. Methodologically, it adopts a qualitative comparative research design that combines textual and qualitative content analysis. Particular attention is paid to narrative structure, characterisation, dialogue, visual symbolism, and socio-cultural context in order to examine how both films represent gender disparity, social exclusion, and women's agency.

The analysis demonstrates that although both films expose deeply entrenched patriarchal structures that marginalise women through educational exclusion, socio-cultural discrimination, and unequal power relations, they also conceptualise women's agency as a powerful challenge to these exclusionary systems. While *Wives on Strike 2* foregrounds collective mobilisation against child marriage and educational inequality, *Up North* emphasises individual agency, educational aspiration, and the negotiation of patriarchal expectations within culturally conservative contexts. Together, the films demonstrate that women's resistance extends beyond individual empowerment to encompass broader processes of social transformation that contest structural exclusion and reimagine more inclusive forms of citizenship and participation.

This article contributes to scholarship in three important ways. First, it provides one of the few comparative analyses of *Wives on Strike 2* and *Up North*, thereby extending scholarship on female-directed Nollywood cinema. Second, it integrates social exclusion theory, intersectionality, feminist film theory, and women's agency within a unified analytical framework, demonstrating how these concepts illuminate the complex relationship between structural inequality and cinematic representation. Third, it contributes to broader debates in feminist media studies, African cinema, and cultural studies by demonstrating how contemporary female-directed Nollywood films challenge patriarchal ideologies while imagining alternative visions of social inclusion, empowerment, and gender justice within postcolonial societies.

The remainder of the article reviews the relevant literature and theoretical framework, outlines the research methodology, presents the comparative analysis, and concludes by discussing the broader implications of the findings for gender studies, feminist media scholarship, African cinema, and debates on social inclusion and cultural transformation.

Methodology and Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative comparative case study design to examine the representation of gender disparity, social exclusion, and women's agency in contemporary Nollywood cinema. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to interpret the meanings embedded within cinematic narratives rather than to measure variables quantitatively. Films are treated as cultural texts that construct, reproduce, negotiate, and contest social realities through narrative, dialogue, characterisation, visual symbolism, and cinematic technique. As cultural artefacts, films not only reflect prevailing social values but also participate in shaping public understandings of gender, power, and social justice.

The comparative case study design enables a systematic examination of similarities and differences in the ways two contemporary female filmmakers represent comparable social issues while employing distinct narrative and cinematic strategies. Comparative analysis is particularly valuable because it reveals how different cultural contexts, storytelling techniques, and representational practices shape cinematic constructions of gender disparity, social exclusion, and women's agency. Rather than evaluating the films independently, the study analyses them relationally to identify recurring patterns, points of divergence, and broader implications for contemporary Nollywood and feminist media scholarship.

Case Selection

The study employs purposive sampling to select Omoni Oboli's *Wives on Strike 2* and Tope Oshin's *Up North* as the two case studies. Purposive sampling is appropriate because both films explicitly engage with questions of gender inequality while offering contrasting narrative settings and forms of female resistance.

The films were selected according to four criteria. First, both are directed by prominent Nigerian women filmmakers whose work contributes significantly to contemporary debates on gender, education, and social justice within Nollywood. Second, both position gender disparity and social exclusion as central narrative concerns rather than peripheral themes. Third, although they address related issues, the films differ in geographical setting, narrative structure, and modes of women's agency, thereby providing meaningful grounds for comparative analysis. Finally, both films have received considerable scholarly and public attention, making them appropriate case studies for examining how contemporary female-directed Nollywood negotiates questions of gender justice, education, and social transformation.

The comparison therefore facilitates an examination not only of shared representations of patriarchy and structural exclusion but also of the diverse narrative strategies through which women filmmakers imagine resistance, empowerment, and social change.

Data Collection

The primary data comprise the two selected films. Each film was viewed repeatedly to ensure familiarity with its narrative development, character interactions, visual composition, dialogue, and thematic

progression. During successive viewings, detailed analytical notes were recorded, focusing on scenes depicting gender relations, educational access, political participation, family dynamics, cultural expectations, institutional discrimination, and women's responses to structural inequality. Repeated viewing enabled the identification of recurring narrative patterns, symbolic motifs, and visual strategies relevant to the study's analytical framework.

Secondary data were drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, edited collections, and authoritative reports on gender studies, African cinema, feminist film theory, social exclusion, and Nollywood. These sources provided the theoretical and contextual foundations for interpreting the films and situating the findings within broader debates in film, media, and gender scholarship.

Data Analysis

The study combines qualitative content analysis with comparative textual analysis. Qualitative content analysis was employed to identify recurring themes, patterns, and meanings relating to gender disparity, social exclusion, and women's agency across the two films. The analysis examined dialogue, characterisation, narrative events, and symbolic representations that illustrate relationships of power, exclusion, resistance, and empowerment.

Comparative textual analysis complemented the content analysis by examining how cinematic elements—including narrative structure, mise-en-scène, cinematography, costume, setting, visual symbolism, sound, and character development—construct gendered meanings and communicate ideological positions. Rather than analysing isolated scenes, each film was interpreted as a coherent cultural text before systematic comparisons were undertaken to identify convergences and divergences in the directors' representational strategies.

The analytical process proceeded in four stages. First, repeated viewing of the films enabled familiarisation with their narrative structures and thematic content. Second, significant scenes were identified and coded according to themes related to gender disparity, social exclusion, patriarchal power, and women's agency. Third, these themes were interpreted using the study's integrated theoretical framework. Finally, findings from both films were compared to identify common patterns, significant differences, and their broader implications for feminist media scholarship and contemporary Nollywood studies.

The analysis was guided by the integrated theoretical framework developed for this study. Barry's theory of social exclusion informed the examination of institutional and structural mechanisms that marginalise women. Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality facilitated analysis of how gender intersects with religion, geography, education, culture, and other social identities to produce diverse experiences of exclusion. Feminist film theory provided analytical tools for examining visual and narrative representations of gender, while the concept of women's agency informed the interpretation of resistance, negotiation, leadership, and empowerment within the selected films.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis. First, repeated viewing of both films ensured close engagement with the primary data and reduced the likelihood of selective interpretation. Second, the comparative design enabled themes identified in one film to be systematically examined against evidence from the other, thereby strengthening analytical consistency. Third, triangulation was achieved through the integration of multiple theoretical perspectives, allowing the films to be interpreted from complementary conceptual viewpoints rather than through a single explanatory lens. Finally, all interpretations were grounded in explicit narrative and visual evidence drawn from the films, thereby enhancing the credibility and transparency of the analytical process.

Limitations

This study is limited to two contemporary Nollywood films directed by Nigerian women and therefore does not claim to represent all cinematic representations of gender within Nollywood. Instead, the findings should be understood as an in-depth comparative examination of two purposively selected case studies that illuminate broader debates concerning gender disparity, social exclusion, and women's agency. Future research could extend this analysis by examining a larger corpus of films, comparing female- and male-directed productions, incorporating audience reception studies, or exploring how digital streaming platforms are reshaping representations of gender and social inclusion within African cinema.

Ethical Considerations

The study analyses publicly available films and published scholarly literature and therefore did not involve human participants, interviews, surveys, or the collection of personal data. Consequently, formal ethical approval was not required. Nevertheless, the research adheres to established principles of academic integrity through accurate citation, faithful interpretation of source materials, transparency in analytical procedures, and responsible reporting of findings.

Literature Review and Analytical Framework

Gender Disparity and Social Exclusion

Gender disparity refers to the unequal distribution of opportunities, resources, rights, and responsibilities between women and men across social, political, economic, and cultural institutions. Rather than reflecting biological differences, feminist scholars argue that these inequalities are socially constructed and reproduced through patriarchal systems that privilege masculine authority while marginalising women's participation and decision-making (Butler, 1990; hooks, 2000). Consequently, gender inequality manifests in unequal access to education, employment, healthcare, political representation, property

ownership, and economic resources, reinforcing women's structural disadvantage across societies (United Nations, 2024; UN Women, 2024).

The concept of social exclusion extends this understanding by shifting analytical attention from unequal outcomes to the structural processes through which individuals and groups are systematically denied access to resources, opportunities, rights, and meaningful participation in society (Barry, 2002). Unlike poverty, which primarily concerns material deprivation, social exclusion encompasses political, cultural, institutional, and relational dimensions of inequality. Barry (2002) argues that exclusion is sustained through institutional arrangements that prevent disadvantaged groups from participating fully in economic, political, and civic life. Viewed from this perspective, gender disparity is not simply a consequence of individual discrimination but is embedded within broader social structures that regulate access to education, employment, political power, and cultural recognition. Gender disparity and social exclusion are therefore mutually reinforcing processes through which patriarchal institutions reproduce unequal citizenship and limit women's opportunities for social participation.

Intersectionality further deepens this analysis by demonstrating that women's experiences of exclusion cannot be understood through gender alone (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Rather, gender intersects with class, ethnicity, religion, geography, age, and educational status to produce multiple and overlapping forms of privilege and disadvantage. This perspective is particularly significant within the Nigerian context, where cultural diversity, regional differences, religious traditions, and socio-economic inequalities shape women's experiences in distinct ways. An intersectional approach therefore reveals that gender disparity and social exclusion operate differently across social locations, requiring analyses that move beyond universalised understandings of women's experiences. Taken together, social exclusion theory and intersectionality provide a robust conceptual foundation for examining how structural inequalities are produced, experienced, and contested within contemporary Nigerian society and its cultural representations.

Gender Representation in Nollywood Cinema

Cinema is not merely a medium of entertainment but a powerful cultural institution through which societies construct, reproduce, and contest meanings of identity, power, and social relations (Hall, 1997). As one of Africa's largest and most influential film industries, Nollywood has become an important site for negotiating debates surrounding culture, morality, governance, ethnicity, religion, migration, and gender (Haynes, 2016; Krings & Okome, 2013; Larkin, 2008). Its narratives both reflect existing social realities and actively participate in shaping public understandings of gender, citizenship, and social justice.

Scholarship on gender in Nollywood has evolved considerably over the past two decades. Earlier studies largely focused on how films reproduced patriarchal ideologies through stereotypical portrayals of women as submissive wives, dependent daughters, dangerous seductresses, or self-sacrificing mothers (Ukadike, 2000; Onuzulike, 2007). Such representations were understood as reinforcing dominant gender norms while legitimising unequal power relations within Nigerian society.

More recent scholarship, however, identifies important transformations within contemporary Nollywood. Haynes (2016) argues that newer productions increasingly engage with complex social issues and present women as multidimensional characters capable of negotiating, resisting, and transforming patriarchal structures. Similarly, Gugler (2015) and Jedlowski (2013) observe that contemporary Nigerian cinema has expanded its thematic concerns beyond domestic narratives to include education, governance, migration, identity, and gender justice. These developments are particularly evident in films directed by women, whose work frequently foregrounds female subjectivity, critiques patriarchal institutions, and imagines alternative possibilities for empowerment and social inclusion.

Despite these important advances, existing scholarship remains fragmented. Studies have generally concentrated on individual themes such as female representation, patriarchy, domestic violence, or women's empowerment, often examining single films in isolation. Consequently, relatively little attention has been devoted to understanding how contemporary female-directed Nollywood films simultaneously conceptualise gender disparity, structural social exclusion, and women's agency within a comparative analytical framework. As a result, the relationship between structural inequality and women's resistance remains insufficiently theorised in Nollywood scholarship. Addressing this gap is important because comparative analysis reveals not only how female filmmakers critique patriarchal systems but also how they employ cinematic narratives to imagine alternative forms of inclusion, empowerment, and gender justice. The present study responds to this omission by examining how *Wives on Strike 2* and *Up North* construct gender inequality as a structural condition while simultaneously representing women's agency as a transformative force capable of challenging exclusionary social relations.

Women's Agency in African Feminist Film Scholarship

While feminist scholarship has historically focused on exposing patriarchal structures and the multiple forms of oppression experienced by women, more recent research has increasingly shifted attention towards women's agency, resilience, and capacity for social transformation (hooks, 2000; Mahmood, 2005). This shift reflects a broader recognition that women should not be understood solely as victims of structural inequality but also as active participants who negotiate, resist, reinterpret, and reshape unequal social relations. Mahmood (2005) argues that agency should not be equated with complete autonomy or freedom from structural constraints; rather, it encompasses the diverse ways individuals exercise choice and act meaningfully within existing social, cultural, and institutional conditions.

African feminist scholarship has similarly challenged reductive portrayals of African women as passive recipients of patriarchal domination. Instead, scholars emphasise the diverse strategies through which women negotiate power, exercise leadership, and pursue social change within complex cultural contexts (Nnaemeka, 2004; Oyěwùmí, 1997). These perspectives reject universalised Western conceptions of feminism and foreground locally grounded forms of resistance that emerge from African social realities. Accordingly, women's agency is understood not only through overt political activism but also through

everyday practices of negotiation, community leadership, educational advancement, and collective mobilisation.

These developments are increasingly reflected in African cinema. Contemporary films, particularly those directed by women, have moved beyond stereotypical portrayals of female victimhood to present women as complex protagonists capable of challenging patriarchal authority, pursuing education, participating in public life, and initiating social transformation. Female filmmakers have contributed significantly to this shift by foregrounding women's perspectives, questioning dominant gender ideologies, and expanding cinematic representations of female subjectivity and empowerment.

Despite these important developments, existing scholarship has rarely examined how contemporary female-directed Nollywood films simultaneously integrate gender disparity, structural social exclusion, and women's agency within a comparative analytical framework. Much of the literature continues to privilege representation or patriarchy as its principal analytical focus, leaving the dynamic relationship between structural exclusion and women's resistance insufficiently theorised. This study addresses that gap by examining how *Wives on Strike 2* and *Up North* represent women not only as subjects of exclusion but also as agents whose individual and collective actions challenge oppressive structures and contribute to broader processes of social transformation.

Integrated Analytical Framework

This study adopts an integrated analytical framework that combines Barry's (2002) theory of social exclusion, Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) theory of intersectionality, feminist film theory (Mulvey, 1975; hooks, 1992), and the concept of women's agency (Mahmood, 2005). Although these perspectives originate from different intellectual traditions, they are employed as complementary analytical lenses operating at different levels of analysis. Collectively, they provide a multidimensional framework for examining how structural inequalities are produced, differentially experienced, represented through cinematic narratives, and contested through individual and collective forms of resistance.

Barry's (2002) theory of social exclusion provides the principal theoretical foundation for this study by conceptualising exclusion as the systematic denial of opportunities, resources, participation, and recognition that prevents individuals and groups from engaging fully in economic, political, cultural, and social life. Unlike approaches that explain inequality primarily through poverty or individual disadvantage, social exclusion theory locates inequality within institutional arrangements and structural relations of power. This perspective is particularly relevant to the Nigerian context, where patriarchal traditions, unequal educational opportunities, discriminatory cultural practices, and restricted access to economic and political participation continue to shape women's lived experiences. Within the selected films, Barry's framework enables an examination of how institutions, customs, and social norms reproduce gendered forms of exclusion and constrain women's participation in society.

While Barry explains the structural production of exclusion, Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) theory of intersectionality demonstrates that exclusion is experienced differently by women occupying different

social positions. Rather than treating women as a homogeneous social category, intersectionality highlights how gender interacts with class, ethnicity, religion, geography, age, and educational status to produce multiple and overlapping forms of privilege and disadvantage. This perspective is particularly valuable for analysing *Up North*, where gender inequality is intertwined with regional, religious, and cultural contexts in Northern Nigeria, and *Wives on Strike 2*, where girls' educational exclusion is shaped by intersecting cultural, social, and institutional factors. Intersectionality therefore enables a more nuanced understanding of the differentiated experiences of exclusion represented within both films.

Feminist film theory provides the analytical tools for examining how cinema constructs, reproduces, and challenges gendered meanings through narrative, visual representation, characterisation, cinematography, mise-en-scène, dialogue, and symbolism (Mulvey, 1975; hooks, 1992). Rather than viewing films as passive reflections of social reality, feminist film scholars argue that cinema actively participates in the production of cultural knowledge by shaping public understandings of gender, identity, and power. This perspective is especially useful for analysing how Omoni Oboli and Tope Oshin employ cinematic language to critique patriarchal ideologies while presenting alternative representations of women's experiences, aspirations, and resistance.

The concept of women's agency complements these perspectives by shifting analytical attention from structures of oppression to women's capacity for action, negotiation, resistance, and transformation (Mahmood, 2005). Agency is understood not as the complete absence of structural constraints but as the ability to exercise meaningful choice, reinterpret social expectations, and challenge unequal power relations within existing institutional contexts. This perspective is particularly significant because both selected films portray women not simply as passive victims of patriarchal exclusion but as active participants in promoting education, mobilising communities, exercising leadership, and advancing social justice.

Taken together, these four perspectives constitute a coherent analytical framework that operates across complementary levels of inquiry. Barry's theory explains where exclusion originates by identifying the structural mechanisms that marginalise women. Intersectionality explains how exclusion is experienced differently across diverse social locations. Feminist film theory explains how these inequalities are represented, negotiated, and contested through cinematic form and narrative discourse. Finally, the concept of women's agency explains how female characters respond to, resist, and transform exclusionary structures through individual and collective action.

The integration of these perspectives enables a comprehensive analysis that connects social structures, lived experiences, cinematic representation, and processes of resistance within a single interpretive framework. Accordingly, this analytical framework guides the subsequent discussion by examining how *Wives on Strike 2* and *Up North* simultaneously expose structural gender inequality, reveal the intersecting processes through which women experience social exclusion, and imagine women's agency as a catalyst for inclusion, empowerment, and broader social transformation.

Analysis and Discussion

Representing Gender Disparity: Patriarchy, Education, and Unequal Citizenship

Both *Wives on Strike 2* (2016) and *Up North* (2018) represent gender disparity as a structurally produced system of unequal power relations embedded within patriarchal institutions rather than as the outcome of individual prejudice or isolated acts of discrimination. Across both films, women's access to education, participation in decision-making, and social mobility is constrained by cultural norms, institutional practices, and gendered expectations that privilege masculine authority while limiting female autonomy. In doing so, Omoni Oboli and Tope Oshin reject essentialist understandings of gender inequality and instead portray patriarchy as a historically and socially constructed system sustained through everyday practices, communal values, and institutional arrangements. This representation aligns with feminist arguments that gender inequality is reproduced through interconnected cultural and institutional mechanisms that normalise male dominance and marginalise women's voices (Butler, 1990; hooks, 2000).

In *Wives on Strike 2*, gender disparity is articulated most explicitly through the representation of child marriage and its consequences for girls' education. Rather than portraying child marriage as an isolated family decision, Oboli frames it as a socially sanctioned institution that legitimises the exclusion of girls from education, civic participation, and future economic independence. Through repeated scenes in which community elders and male authority figures determine the futures of young girls without their participation or consent, the film reveals that patriarchal power operates collectively through social institutions rather than solely through individual men. The narrative consistently juxtaposes girls' educational aspirations with the expectation of early marriage, exposing how patriarchal customs systematically subordinate female ambition to communal notions of tradition, honour, and obedience.

Oboli reinforces this critique through her cinematic construction of space and authority. Public meetings, family negotiations, and traditional ceremonies are organised around male-centred spaces in which men occupy positions of authority while women and girls remain physically and symbolically marginal. Framing, blocking, and character positioning repeatedly privilege male voices, with girls frequently appearing as silent observers excluded from decisions that fundamentally determine their futures. The mise-en-scène therefore transforms patriarchal hierarchy into a visual structure, demonstrating that exclusion operates not only through formal institutions but also through the everyday performance of cultural authority. Educational spaces, by contrast, function symbolically as sites of possibility, autonomy, and future citizenship, creating a visual and ideological contrast between empowerment and exclusion.

Barry's (2002) theory of social exclusion provides an important interpretive framework for understanding these representations. The film depicts educational exclusion not simply as the denial of schooling but as part of a broader institutional process that restricts women's future participation in economic,

political, and civic life. By linking child marriage to educational deprivation, the narrative illustrates how patriarchal institutions reproduce structural inequalities across generations, transforming cultural practices into enduring mechanisms of social exclusion. Oboli therefore reframes child marriage as a systemic form of gendered exclusion that limits women's opportunities long before they enter adulthood.

Although *Up North* explores gender disparity within a different geographical and cultural setting, it advances a similarly critical interrogation of patriarchal power. Set within Northern Nigeria, the film demonstrates that gender inequality is inseparable from the cultural, religious, and regional contexts within which women's lives are negotiated. Female characters confront expectations that privilege marriage, domestic responsibility, and conformity over educational achievement and professional ambition. However, unlike *Wives on Strike 2*, which foregrounds collective mobilisation against institutional injustice, *Up North* adopts a more intimate, character-driven narrative in which resistance emerges through personal determination, education, and self-development. Oshin's approach suggests that meaningful social change may also originate through gradual negotiation within existing cultural structures rather than solely through direct confrontation.

This distinction is reinforced through the film's cinematic style. Oshin frequently privileges character-centred storytelling, sustained dialogue, and carefully composed interpersonal interactions that foreground the emotional and psychological dimensions of gender inequality. Educational settings function not merely as narrative locations but as symbolic spaces in which women imagine alternative futures beyond prescribed gender roles. The contrast between domestic environments governed by patriarchal expectations and educational spaces associated with aspiration and self-realisation visually reinforces the central tension between conformity and autonomy. Through these representational strategies, the film portrays women's pursuit of education as both a personal aspiration and a challenge to established gender hierarchies.

Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) theory of intersectionality provides a particularly valuable lens for interpreting these representations. Rather than presenting gender inequality as a universal experience, *Up North* demonstrates that women's opportunities are shaped by the interaction of gender with geography, religion, culture, and educational access. Patriarchal authority therefore operates unevenly across different social contexts, producing diverse forms of exclusion and resistance. By foregrounding these intersecting structures of inequality, the film complicates monolithic representations of Nigerian women and instead highlights the contextual nature of gendered experience.

Viewed comparatively, the two films employ distinct cinematic and narrative strategies while advancing a shared critique of patriarchal power. *Wives on Strike 2* visualises structural inequality through collective action, public confrontation, and community-centred storytelling that exposes institutional mechanisms of exclusion. In contrast, *Up North* emphasises personal transformation, educational aspiration, and the gradual negotiation of patriarchal expectations through character-centred narrative development. Despite these differences, both films reject deterministic representations of women as passive victims of tradition. Instead, they demonstrate that gender disparity is socially produced through institutional

and cultural processes that can be contested through education, collective mobilisation, and individual agency.

Taken together, these findings extend feminist scholarship by demonstrating that contemporary female-directed Nollywood cinema does more than represent gender inequality; it actively reimagines the relationship between patriarchy, education, and citizenship. By exposing the structural foundations of gender disparity while simultaneously envisioning pathways towards resistance and inclusion, Oboli and Oshin reposition women as central actors in processes of social transformation. In doing so, the films challenge dominant patriarchal narratives and contribute to broader debates within feminist media studies concerning the role of cinema in contesting structural inequality and imagining more inclusive social futures.

Social Exclusion and the Cinematic Construction of Structural Inequality

The comparative analysis further demonstrates that gender disparity in *Wives on Strike 2* and *Up North* cannot be understood independently of the broader processes of social exclusion through which patriarchal power is institutionalised and reproduced. Barry (2002) conceptualises social exclusion as the systematic denial of opportunities, participation, recognition, and access to social resources through institutional arrangements that privilege certain groups while marginalising others. Consistent with this perspective, both films depict exclusion not simply as economic deprivation or individual discrimination but as a multidimensional process operating through educational institutions, family structures, cultural traditions, and community expectations. In doing so, the films shift attention from individual experiences of inequality to the structural conditions that regulate women's participation in social, political, and civic life.

In *Wives on Strike 2*, social exclusion is most visibly represented through the denial of girls' access to education. Oboli presents child marriage not as an isolated cultural practice but as an institutional mechanism that systematically restricts girls' educational attainment, economic independence, and future citizenship. The repeated juxtaposition of classrooms with domestic and traditional spaces creates a powerful visual contrast between inclusion and exclusion. Educational environments are framed as spaces of aspiration, knowledge, and opportunity, whereas patriarchal domestic settings symbolise the social structures through which girls' futures are constrained. This recurring spatial opposition transforms education into both a narrative objective and a cinematic symbol of empowerment, reinforcing the argument that exclusion operates through the regulation of access to knowledge and opportunity rather than through material deprivation alone.

The film's visual composition further reinforces this critique. Girls are frequently positioned at the margins of communal decision-making, while male authority figures dominate public spaces in which social and familial decisions are negotiated. These compositional strategies illustrate how exclusion is

embedded within everyday social practices and reproduced through the organisation of social space, the distribution of authority, and the normalisation of patriarchal customs. Barry's (2002) framework therefore illuminates how the film represents exclusion as an institutional process that systematically limits women's participation in education, civic life, and future economic opportunities.

Although *Up North* depicts less overt forms of exclusion, it reveals equally significant structural constraints. Rather than relying on explicit institutional discrimination, the film illustrates how social exclusion is reproduced through family expectations, community norms, religious values, and culturally sanctioned understandings of appropriate femininity. Educational ambition becomes a site of negotiation in which female characters must continually reconcile personal aspirations with communal expectations. Oshin's restrained narrative style and character-centred storytelling emphasise that exclusion is often internalised and reproduced through everyday social interactions rather than imposed solely through formal institutions.

Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) theory of intersectionality deepens this analysis by demonstrating that exclusion is mediated through multiple and overlapping social identities. In *Up North*, women's experiences are shaped simultaneously by gender, geography, religion, class, and regional identity, producing forms of marginalisation that differ from those represented in *Wives on Strike 2*. Rather than presenting Nigerian women as a homogeneous social category, the film foregrounds the differentiated ways in which structural inequalities are experienced across distinct cultural contexts. In doing so, it challenges universalised understandings of gender oppression and highlights the contextual nature of social exclusion.

Viewed comparatively, the two films extend Barry's concept of social exclusion beyond questions of economic disadvantage to encompass cultural recognition, educational opportunity, political participation, and social citizenship. Both directors demonstrate that exclusion is sustained through interconnected institutional and cultural processes that regulate women's access to knowledge, leadership, decision-making, and public visibility. By exposing these mechanisms, the films reveal that patriarchal power is reproduced not only through explicit discrimination but also through everyday practices that appear culturally legitimate yet systematically restrict women's participation in society.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that social exclusion functions not merely as a consequence of gender disparity but as one of its principal structural mechanisms. Contemporary female-directed Nollywood therefore represents exclusion as a dynamic process through which unequal citizenship is produced and maintained while simultaneously revealing education and social participation as critical pathways towards inclusion, empowerment, and gender justice.

Women's Agency and Resistance

Perhaps the most significant contribution of *Wives on Strike 2* and *Up North* lies in their reconfiguration of women's agency within patriarchal societies. Rather than portraying women solely as passive victims

of structural oppression, both films foreground their capacity to negotiate, resist, and transform exclusionary social relations. This emphasis reflects contemporary feminist scholarship, which conceptualises agency not as the complete absence of structural constraints but as the capacity to exercise meaningful action within historically and culturally situated contexts (Mahmood, 2005). By shifting analytical attention from victimhood to resistance, the films challenge deterministic understandings of gender inequality and reposition women as active participants in processes of social transformation.

In *Wives on Strike 2*, agency is primarily constructed through collective mobilisation and community solidarity. Oboli depicts women organising, negotiating, and confronting institutionalised child marriage through coordinated public action. Individual experiences of injustice are transformed into collective political resistance, illustrating how solidarity becomes a powerful strategy for challenging entrenched patriarchal institutions. The film repeatedly situates women within shared communal spaces, emphasising cooperation, dialogue, and collective leadership as mechanisms through which social change becomes possible. Through these narrative and visual strategies, female solidarity is represented not simply as emotional support but as a form of political agency capable of disrupting exclusionary systems and advocating educational justice.

By contrast, *Up North* privileges individual agency while acknowledging its broader social implications. Oshin constructs resistance through the gradual development of female characters who pursue education, negotiate cultural expectations, and redefine their social roles without entirely rejecting the communities to which they belong. Agency therefore emerges through perseverance, self-determination, and the strategic negotiation of patriarchal norms rather than through overt political confrontation. This representation closely reflects Mahmood's (2005) understanding of agency as culturally situated action, demonstrating that resistance may operate through accommodation, negotiation, and incremental transformation as well as direct opposition.

From the perspective of feminist film theory, both films also challenge conventional cinematic representations that position women as passive objects of patriarchal authority. Through character development, dialogue, narrative progression, visual symbolism, and spatial organisation, female protagonists are constructed as knowledgeable decision-makers, educators, community organisers, and agents of social change. Rather than reproducing stereotypical images of female dependency, Oboli and Oshin employ cinematic form to foreground women's intellectual authority, resilience, and leadership while simultaneously exposing the structural conditions that constrain them. Consequently, women's agency is represented not merely as an individual characteristic but as a socially transformative force capable of reshaping communities and challenging entrenched systems of inequality.

The comparative analysis demonstrates that although *Wives on Strike 2* and *Up North* adopt different narrative and cinematic strategies, both reject deterministic portrayals of female victimhood. Oboli visualises resistance through collective activism, public confrontation, and community mobilisation, whereas Oshin emphasises personal growth, educational aspiration, and the gradual negotiation of

patriarchal expectations. Despite these differences, both films ultimately redefine women's agency as a central mechanism through which structural exclusion can be contested and transformed.

Taken together, these findings suggest that contemporary female-directed Nollywood extends feminist debates beyond the representation of oppression by foregrounding the diverse ways women create possibilities for inclusion, justice, and social change. Rather than presenting gender equality as attainable solely through institutional reform, the films demonstrate that meaningful transformation also depends upon women's capacity to exercise leadership, pursue education, build solidarity, and renegotiate existing social relations. In this respect, both *Wives on Strike 2* and *Up North* position women's agency as the critical bridge between the recognition of structural inequality and the realisation of broader social transformation.

Conclusion

This article has examined how *Wives on Strike 2* and *Up North* represent gender disparity, social exclusion, and women's agency through a comparative analysis informed by Barry's theory of social exclusion, Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, feminist film theory, and the concept of women's agency. The analysis demonstrates that both films conceptualise gender inequality not as the result of individual prejudice but as a structurally produced condition embedded within patriarchal institutions, cultural norms, and unequal systems of access to education, participation, and social recognition. By foregrounding child marriage, educational exclusion, patriarchal authority, and gendered restrictions on public participation, the films reveal how institutional and cultural practices reproduce unequal citizenship and constrain women's opportunities across generations.

At the same time, the comparative analysis demonstrates that both films move beyond narratives of female victimhood by foregrounding women's capacity to negotiate, resist, and transform exclusionary social structures. While *Wives on Strike 2* constructs agency through collective mobilisation, community solidarity, and public resistance to child marriage, *Up North* emphasises personal determination, educational aspiration, and the strategic negotiation of cultural expectations. Although these films employ different narrative and cinematic strategies, both ultimately represent women as active agents of social transformation rather than passive recipients of patriarchal power. Contemporary female-directed Nollywood therefore emerges not only as a medium for exposing structural gender inequality but also as a cultural space in which more inclusive visions of citizenship, empowerment, and social justice are imagined.

This study contributes to scholarship in three significant ways. First, it addresses an important gap in Nollywood studies by providing a comparative analysis of two influential films directed by Nigerian women, thereby extending existing scholarship that has largely relied on single-film analyses. Second, it demonstrates the analytical value of integrating social exclusion theory, intersectionality, feminist film theory, and women's agency within a coherent interpretive framework capable of explaining the relationship between structural inequality, cinematic representation, and resistance. Third, it contributes

to wider debates in feminist media studies, African cinema, and postcolonial cultural studies by illustrating how contemporary African cinema provides important insights into the intersections of gender, power, exclusion, and social transformation.

The findings also have broader implications beyond film scholarship. By critically engaging with issues such as child marriage, unequal educational opportunities, patriarchal authority, and women's participation in public life, the films demonstrate the capacity of popular cinema to shape public discourse on gender equality and social justice. Rather than functioning merely as a reflection of social realities, Nollywood emerges as an influential cultural institution that can challenge discriminatory norms, stimulate public debate, and contribute to the reimagining of more inclusive social futures.

This study is necessarily limited by its focus on two purposively selected films and its reliance on qualitative textual analysis. Consequently, its findings should be understood as an in-depth comparative interpretation rather than as representative of all gendered representations within Nollywood. Future research could extend this work by examining a larger corpus of films, comparing female- and male-directed productions, incorporating audience reception studies, or investigating how digital streaming platforms and transnational distribution are reshaping representations of gender, citizenship, and social inclusion within African cinema.

Ultimately, this article argues that contemporary female-directed Nollywood has become an increasingly significant site for negotiating questions of gender, power, and social justice in postcolonial Africa. Through their cinematic representations of structural inequality alongside women's resilience, leadership, and collective action, *Wives on Strike 2* and *Up North* demonstrate that film can do more than document social problems: it can challenge exclusionary structures, expand public understandings of gender justice, and imagine alternative possibilities for social inclusion. In doing so, these films reaffirm the transformative potential of African cinema as both a cultural practice and a critical intervention.

Declarations

Filmography

Oboli, O. (2018) *Wives on Strike: The Revolution* [Film]. Nigeria: Dioni Visions.

Oshin, T. (2018) *Up North* [Film]. Nigeria: Anakle Films and Inkblot Productions.

Data Availability

This study is based on qualitative textual analysis of two commercially released Nigerian films, *Wives on Strike 2* (2018) and *Up North* (2018), together with the scholarly literature cited throughout the article. No quantitative datasets were generated or analysed during this study. The evidence supporting the findings consists of publicly available film texts and published academic sources. The analytical framework, coding approach, and research notes used to interpret the films are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Author Contributions

Kingsley Oyong Akam: Conceptualisation; Methodology; Formal analysis; Investigation; Theoretical framework; Writing – original draft; Writing – review and editing; Project administration.

Esther Frank Apejoye-Okezie: Literature review; Contextual analysis; Validation; Writing – review and editing; Supervision.

Both authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Ethical Approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

Informed Consent

This article does not contain any studies involving human participants requiring informed consent.

Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

References

1. Adichie, C.N. (2014) *We Should All Be Feminists*. London: Fourth Estate.
2. Akam, K.O. (2025). *Women Filmmakers and the Remaking of New Nollywood: Gender, Politics and Governance*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Lancaster University, Lancaster, United Kingdom.
3. Barry, B. (2002) *Social Exclusion, Social Isolation and the Distribution of Income*. In J. Hills, J. Le Grand and D. Piachaud (eds.) *Understanding Social Exclusion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 13–29.
4. Butler, J. (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
5. Crenshaw, K. (1989) 'Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), pp. 139–167.
6. Crenshaw, K. (1991) 'Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color', *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), pp. 1241–1299.
7. Ekwuazi, H. (2013) *Film in Nigeria*. 2nd edn. Jos: Nigerian Film Corporation.
8. Gugler, J. (2015) *African Film: Re-imagining a Continent*. 2nd edn. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
9. Hall, S. (1997) *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage.

10. Haynes, J. (2016) *Nollywood: The Creation of Nigerian Film Genres*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
11. hooks, b. (1992) 'The oppositional gaze: Black female spectators', in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston: South End Press, pp. 115–131.
12. hooks, b. (2000) *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. 2nd edn. London: Pluto Press.
13. Jedlowski, A. (2013) 'Small screen cinema: Informality and remediation in Nollywood', *Television & New Media*, 14(1), pp. 49–65.
14. Krings, M. and Okome, O. (eds.) (2013) *Global Nollywood: The Transnational Dimensions of an African Video Film Industry*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
15. Larkin, B. (2008) *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
16. Mahmood, S. (2005) *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
17. Mulvey, L. (1975) 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', *Screen*, 16(3), pp. 6–18.
18. Nnaemeka, O. (2004) 'Nego-feminism: Theorizing, practicing, and pruning Africa's way', *Signs*, 29(2), pp. 357–385.
19. Ogunleye, F. (2014) *African Film Studies: An Introduction*. Lagos: Rex Charles & Patrick.
20. Onuzulike, U. (2007) 'Nollywood: The influence of the Nigerian movie industry on African culture', *The Journal of Human Communication*, 10(1), pp. 25–36.
21. Oyěwùmí, O. (1997) *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
22. United Nations (2015) *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. New York: United Nations.
23. United Nations (2024) *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024*. New York: United Nations.
24. UN Women (2024) *Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2024*. New York: UN Women.
25. UNESCO (2020) *Global Education Monitoring Report 2020: Inclusion and Education*. Paris: UNESCO.

Supplementary Files

This is a list of supplementary files associated with this preprint. Click to download.

- SupplementaryAnalyticalMaterials.pdf