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Portrayal of Women in Nigerian Home Video Films: Empowerment or Subjugation?

By Chinyere Stella Okunna

Abstract

The article starts from the premise that empowerment is needed where weakness and subjugation are apparent.

Poverty, illiteracy, religion, cultural prejudices, male chauvinistic tendencies manifested in diverse patrilineal practices against women are some of the formidable forces that relegate women to the background.

Portrayal of women in the media is examined through their portrayal in selected Igbo language films. The image of women in these films is found to be very bad and capable of negatively influencing the perception of women among the large audience of video films in Nigeria.

The article shows that the technology of video has been effectively used for the empowerment of severely marginalised social groups like poor and illiterate women in some rural Third World countries.

It is advocated that women actors should reject roles that relegate them to second fiddle. The domination of male producers in the home video industry is decried, and women are encouraged to seek more positive and active roles.

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L'image des Femmes dans les Cassettes Video Domestiques au Nigeria: Passage du Pouvoir ou Subjugation

Par Chinyere Stella Okunna

Résumé

Le thème central de cet article est le passage du pouvoir à ceux qui se trouvent dominés, partout où cette faiblesse et la subjugation existent.

La pauvreté, l'analphabétisme, la religion, les préjugés culturels et le chauvinisme masculin se rangent parmi les puissances sociales qui oeuvrent contre les femmes. Celles-ci, entre autres, facilitent la domination et la marginalisation des femmes partout dans le monde.

Dans cette communication, on expose l'image des femmes telle qu'elle ressort d'un échantillon de cassettes video en Igbo (= l'une des langues les plus répandues au Nigeria). C'est une mauvaise image qu'on peint, susceptible d'influencer négativement la perception des femmes, chez les consommateurs de ce genre de médias.

L'auteur s'efforce de montrer qu'on a pu efficacement utiliser la technologie des cassettes video pour faciliter le passage du pouvoir aux groupes socialement et sévèrement marginalisés. En effet son article donne l'exemple bien connu, des femmes analphabètes et pauvres, des régions rurales dans les pays du tiers monde.

La suggestion de l'auteur est que les femmes devraient refuser de jouer les rôles qui dévalorisent les femmes et renforcent cette image. On regrette la domination masculine dans le secteur de la production des cassettes domestiques. En effet, Okunna incite les femmes concernées à infiltrer ce domaine, de façon à ce qu'elles puissent participer à la production au même pied d'égalité que leurs collègues masculins.

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If you want to hold down and subjugate someone, you must belittle him or her through loss of confidence (Ezeigbo, 1996: 116)

Introduction

Empowerment presupposes the existence of weakness and subjugation. It has become incontrovertible and thoroughly documented that in gender relations, women occupy an inferior position all over the world. The results of a recent Gallop poll on equality between the sexes, broadcast on the Cable News Network (CNN) show that "there is nowhere in the world where women are considered to be equal to men" (CNN, 1996).¹ Referring to findings from contemporary research on the condition of women, Abati (1996:27) says:

Based on concerted research the conclusion has long been reached that women are a de-centred, de-natured sub-species of humanity; harassed by culture, intimidated by politics and subsumed in helplessly patrilineal and patriarchal structures which pamper the male ego.

The 'decentralization' or marginalization of women and their disadvantaged position are at the root of the global movement for the empowerment of women, or 'the women agenda'. Generally characterized by various indices of underdevelopment, women in sub-Saharan African countries like Nigeria are more desperately in need of empowerment than their counterparts in other parts of the world. In Nigeria, for instance, the forces which relegate women to the background are formidable. They include poverty, illiteracy, religious and cultural prejudices and, in particular, male chauvinistic tendencies manifested in diverse patrilineal and patriarchal practices against women (Abati 1996, Kukah 1996; Okunna 1992).

Worldwide, the efforts being made to enhance the empowerment of women include the bolstering of women's confidence in themselves and in fellow women. They also include the elimination of stereotypical and negative images of women which shape public opinion and attitudes towards women and undermine society's confidence in them. Of particular importance in this regard is the need to improve the portrayal of women in the communication

1. This was part of a broadcast on CNN on 25th and 26th March, 1996.

media which are powerful vehicles for moulding public opinion and determining people's perception of social reality. Cognizant of this power of the media, the Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) highlights the communication media as a 'critical area of concern' – "one of the ten major obstacles to women's progress, and an area in which extensive strategic action must be taken if equality is to become a reality" (Gallagher, 1995:6).

With this recognition of the communication media as a critical area of concern in women's empowerment, it becomes really worrisome that the media in Nigeria are still dominated by stereotyped portrayal of gender relations and negative images of women. A good example is the portrayal of women in home video films, a medium which has taken the Nigerian media scene by storm in recent times. The explosion in the number of local video films is truly astounding. As Aihe (1996:7) points out, conservative estimates indicate that at least one video film enters the market every week. According to him, "The result is that in a single year since the past three years, more than three hundred local films have been pumped into the Nigerian market."

Among people who are sympathetic towards the struggle for women's empowerment, this proliferation and the popularity of these films have heightened fears that the little gain that might have been made in this struggle is being eroded by the internalization of the negative images of women by the large audience of local home video films.

Purpose of Study

The idea of this pilot study sprouted from a conversation I had with my two teenage daughters aged 18 and 19. I was startled and disheartened by their assertion that the views they expressed about Nigerian women were largely shaped by their exposure to local home video films. This situation generated the desire in me to find out whether young people held such views about these films..

In addition, a growing number of Nigerian women have in recent years expressed misgivings about the portrayal of women in Nigerian video films (Ezeigbo, 1996: Laylor, 1995). One of the aims of this study was to begin to search for empirical evidence to support or disprove such misgivings.

Using Igbo language video films as a case in point, the study examined the portrayal of women in this medium of communication, and the reactions of young women towards this portrayal.

Theoretical Framework and Review of Literature

One theory that could explain what is apparently happening among impressionable young women in contemporary Nigeria is the 'cultivation theory', based on Gerbner's 'cultivation hypothesis' which holds that "the more people are exposed to the mass media, especially television, the more they will come to believe that the real world is like the one they observe." This theory of media effects views the media as moulders of society and argues that the message of the media is deviant from reality on several key points, yet persistent exposure to it leads to its adoption as a consensual view of society (McQuail, 1987: 283).

Despite the fact that some researchers have questioned the validity of this theory, citing weakness of the hypothetical relationship, several studies by Gerbner and his colleagues have consistently found empirical support for the cultivation hypothesis (Gerbner et al., 1977; 1978; 1979; 1980). So has research by Tan and his associates (1986, 1988). Following his study of strategies for elaborating the cultivation hypothesis, Potter (1988:938) concludes that "this study provides evidence that cultivation effects do exist." Writing about the validity theory, McQuail (op. cit: 283 & 284) says:

The main evidence for the cultivation theory comes from systematic content analysis of American television, carried out over several years. The second main source of evidence in support of the theory comes from surveys of opinion and attitude which seem to support the view that higher exposure to television goes with the sort of world view found in the message of television.

Other theoretical approaches like Bandura's 'Social learning theory' and the 'agenda – setting theory' lend support to the cultivation theory. In their study of media use and image of nations, Nwuneli et al. (1993:37) clearly discuss how these theories support the expectation that "perception of social reality will correspond closely to the mass media 'realities' because the images of the world portrayed in the media will be internalized and accepted as accurate representations of reality by media audiences."

In most countries of the developing world, there are grave fears among political leaders that the negative images of themselves and their countries in the Western media could undermine both internal and external confidence in these countries. These fears are generated by the belief that people's behaviour towards others depends on the images they have of these others, and that the mass media very strongly influence the formation of these images. This is particularly true of situations where there are no direct personal experiences and people become dependent on the media for their construction of social reality. As Okigbo (1995: 107) succinctly explains, "Our knowledge of the world comes from various sources, of which the two most important are personal experience and the mass media." According to the 'media-dependency hypothesis', "mass media influence on people's conception of social reality will decrease when people have personal experience with phenomena" (Ball-Rokeach and Defleur, 1976).

However, as Perry (1987: 417) says, evidence from survey research shows that many U.S. residents know little about specific foreign nations. This is not peculiar to the United States. Everywhere, as far as individual countries are concerned, "we witness or experience directly only a very small part of the facts and opinions that make up our image of these countries" (Okigbo, op. cit: 108). Understandably, therefore, the lack of personal experience with, and ignorance about, Third World countries which characterizes the residents of Western nations, offers fertile ground for powerful cultivation influence from the mass media. Okigbo, again, effectively summarizes this reality:

In this age of modern communication more than any other, the international media are playing an ever increasing role in the process of national image cultivation and management (p. 108).

This cultivation role of the mass media has for many years fueled the Third World vociferous demand for a new world information and communication order. The fears which generated and sustained this demand appear to have become even more profound in this age of the information super-highway, as negative reporting of the developing world, particularly Africa, waxes stronger and stronger in the international media.

Even in situations of direct personal experience with phenomena, people's perceptions of social reality is structured by the media. Strong belief in the powerful socializing influence of the media is gaining ground universally.

This is demonstrated by the widespread condemnation of violent and socially-deviant contents of the mass media and of stereotyped and negative portrayals of vulnerable social groups like women. Gooch (1995) clearly describes the battle being waged against 'gangster rap' in the United States by the National Political Congress of Black Women, supported by religious representatives, leaders of the Jewish Community and some lawmakers on Capital Hill in Washington D.C. who have held hearings on the perceived negative effects of this brand of music on the behaviour of children.

Gangster rap is the hard-core form of rap music often filled with lyrics and images that glamorize violence and misogyny, and is widely blamed for influencing young people to be violent. The opposition to gangster rap by people who are in sympathy with the empowerment of women stems from the "growing awareness that this music champions the disrespect and mistreatment of women" with its demeaning lyrics which portray women as a clan worthy of sexual exploitation and abuse, and glorify sexual harassment, sexual abuse, rape and murder of women (Gooch, 1995: 47). The danger from gangster rap, as voiced by Gooch (p. 48) is that both its performers and spectators "internalize these stereotypic perspectives reified through the music."

Gallagher (1995: 8) expresses similar condemnation against other media contents which could degrade and dehumanize women, such as the "routine trivialization and objectification of women in advertisements, the popular press, and the entertainment media.' Speaking specifically about the portrayal of women in advertising, she points out that "countless studies have demonstrated the persistence of highly stereotyped portrayals of gender relations in advertising." That these stereotypes structure public perception of women, has been shown by the well-documented public concern about the portrayal of women in advertising. As Gallagher has noted in this regard, in the United Kingdom, research by the Advertising Standards Authority shows that three quarters of the public agree with the statement "Advertising can help establish unrealistic views of the way women should look and behave."

Method of Study

This was a pilot study, the major purpose of which was to gain an insight into an apparently novel and unexplored situation. To generate the data for this,

the conversation with my daughters was expanded to include six of their friends, culminating in a focus group discussion with these eight young women. Data were also gathered from a class of mass communication undergraduates enrolled in a course of critical writing and reviewing. Although the 32-member class comprised male and female students, 26 of them (81%) were female. Written critical reviews of Igbo language video films, as well as our class discussion of these films, yielded relevant data for the study.

Given the purposeful decision which informed the use of these two categories of respondents, the method of their selection is definitely convenience sampling. Despite the shortcomings of this sampling technique, such as its unsuitability for certain types of sophisticated statistical analysis and its unrepresentativeness it is considered adequate for this pilot study. As Asika (1991: 45) agrees, the method is good enough for a study in which the researcher is interested in having a feel or smattering idea of a phenomenon of interest.

Ten Igbo language video films were used for the study. Questions for the focus group discussion and the class discussion revolved around the following aspects of the films:

- i. the portrayal of women in the films – realistic or otherwise;
- ii. the image of women, *vis-à-vis* the major female characters – negative or positive;
- iii. possible influence of this image on the respondents' perception of women.

The critical review assignment also specifically instructed the students to review the films based on the above aspects.

Film Findings: Synopses of Female Roles in Selected Igbo Video Films

In *Forbiddèn*, Juliet vilifies best friend Tina before Emeka, Tina's fiancé, as she schemes to break up their engagement in her desperate effort to snatch Emeka from her friend. When this fails, she procures the services of a medicine man who 'ties' Tina's womb to make her barren after their wedding. Stella, Emeka's ex-girlfriend, consumed by their desire for vengeance against Emeka

for not marrying her, poisons his wedding cake, leading to death and grief among the wedding guests.

Betrayal tells a story of women's destructive tendencies in their desperate hunt for men. Mike betrays Ogechi his wife because of the charms used on him by his secretary, Rachael (Ogechi's friend), who toils throughout the film to take Mike away from her friend. Meanwhile, Oby's constant fear of losing her husband, Ide to other women makes her a regular client of the medicine man, Enyi.

In *Deadly Affair*, Isabella a big-time business woman engaged in all sorts of shady deals, is unwittingly involved in an incestuous relationship with her own son, Ike, who is in love with Bola, a girl his age. Consumed with jealousy, Isabella makes several attempts to eliminate Bola – sends thugs to beat her up, plants cocaine in her office and seeks the assistance of a medicine man and a spiritualist to harm the young woman.

In *Evil Passion* Jerry a wealthy young man is married to Linda. He gives a ride to Ijeoma one day on his way to work. Thereafter, Ijeoma's desperation to get him to marry her takes her to a spiritualist whose charms cause Jerry to abandon his wife and children and to marry Ijeoma. She joins a club of women whose aim is to get their husbands to make them partners in their businesses, murder the husbands after accomplishing this mission and inherit their wealth.

Fatal Desire tells the story of Chioma and Rubi who are best of friends; Chioma is married to Darnell, a wealthy entrepreneur. Rubi is having an affair with Darnell and is obsessed with the desire to marry him. She lures Chioma to the seaside and tells her to her face that she is the only impediment to her marrying Darnell. There and then Rubi lets loose her hired killers on Chioma. She and Darnell make wedding plans immediately after the hired killers are believed to have murdered her friend.

In *Taboo*, Dorcas, Igwe (king) Amadike's second wife, acquires powers from a spiritualist with which she bewitches her husband to do her eerie bidding and also renders him impotent to prevent his third wife from bearing him a child. Caught in her own trap because she too cannot have his child, she takes her friend's advice to seduce Obinna, a virile young man. Dorcas conspires with Jonah and others who want to dethrone the Igwe to assassinate him. The plot is discovered and she is banished from the town.

In *Obiora*, a woman's feelings of insecurity in a polygamous family take the evils of polygamy to the limit. Nkiru becomes the second wife of a man

who is about to take a chieftaincy title and feels that a second wife should be part of the trappings of his higher status. Acting on the advice of her friends, Nkiru gets a spiritualist to make the first wife insane, lest she gives birth to a male child first because, as her friends explain, only the first male child inherits a father's property in Igboland. By the time the first wife's son Obiora is born, she is already a lunatic living in the streets and Obiora has to be taken into care in a motherless babies' home.

In *Living in Bondage*, Chief Omego's household depicts the goings-on in a polygamous household, showing the misery of his sex-starved older wives as his second and youngest wives are locked in battle for their husband's attention. In another troubled household, Ego abandons her husband Anny after robbing him of his wealth and he takes up with Chinyere. When she (Chinyere) discovers a huge amount of money in his home, she attempts to cart it away but her effort is frustrated by her friend Caro, who takes and makes off with the money.

In *Jezebel*, Barbara, an over pampered, spoilt girl with a sense of decorum and decency, is engaged to Ifeanyi – a marriage arranged by their wealthy parents. He falls in love with Amaka and jilts Barbara whom he does not actually love, unleashing a wicked desire in his mother to eliminate the rival of her chosen daughter-in-law; she tampers with the brakes of Amaka's car. Her plot boomerangs when Ifeanyi takes the wheel of the car instead of Amaka's driver and both her son and the girl she wants to destroy are harmed in the subsequent accident.

Nneka, the Pretty Serpent features Nneka, a venomous and vicious woman whose supernatural power captivates the men whom she fancies, and destroys her opponents and anything that stands between her and her desires.

Findings from Respondents

The respondents' profile shows that, with the exception of a 19-year-old who had just completed the first semester of her first year in the university, the members of the focus group all finished secondary school nine months before this study and were awaiting the result of the national matriculation examination into the university. They were aged 17, 18 or 19.

The youngest respondent in the undergraduate class was 22 while the oldest was 26. Twenty-four or 75% of them were in the second year but had

all spent a minimum of three years in the university; they had lost time due to disruption in the academic calendar caused by several factors. Six students (19%) in the critical writing and reviewing course who were taking it as a 'carry-over' had spent even longer time in the university – three of them enrolled in 1991 while the other three entered in 1992. Nevertheless, these 'carry-over students' were in their third year, having also lost time due to the same reasons as above but mainly because of their poor academic performance. The other two members of the class were 'direct-entry' students who were in the second year of study, but had just entered the university.

The results of this study are unequivocal about the negativism in the image of women in Igbo language video films. All the 40 respondents said that the image of women and the roles they play are predominantly negative. From the synopses of the films used in the study, this answer is not surprising. In most Igbo language films, the themes of barrenness, polygamy, materialism and desperate quest for husbands are repeated to bring out the worst in women. Writing about female characterization in these films, Ezeigbo (1996: 118) observes that the major women characters are delineated as so depraved and diabolical that "their bestiality beggars description." Even the most casual exposure to these films confirms this observation.

How realistic is this image of women in these films? When this question was put to the respondents, all eight members of the focus group felt that the negative portrayal of women is unrealistic. When asked if any of them knew any women in real life who could fit the description of any of the major female characters, all the respondents again said "NO". On the other hand, students in the critical writing class were divided in their opinions about whether the portrayal of women is realistic or not. Nearly half of the class (15 respondents or 47%) said that the image of women in the films is realistic, even though 26 of them (81%) also said that they could not think of women they knew personally who could fit the portrayal of women in the films.

All told, the results of the study indicate that the portrayal of women in Igbo language video films is unrealistic, with 25 (63%) of the respondents saying so. Nevertheless, as indicated by some of the responses, there must be Nigerian women who are as depraved and deplorable as the women in the films, thus investing the films with a measure of realism. But evil women, like negative news in the mass media generally, are 'over-reported' in these films. Referring to local video films in Nigeria in general, Laylor (1995: 11)

asks, "Where are the independent and upright women who are not bed-hopping or being cheated on by their men?" This question is very relevant to Igbo language video films, particularly when the culture of the Igbo people and the qualities of their women are taken into consideration. What Ezeigbo (1966: 118 & 119) says, effectively summarizes the portrayal of women in these films. Describing this portrayal as "unrealistic and stereotypical," she writes:

Two broad types (of major women characters) are delineated – those who are good and those who are evil – and each female character is cast in either group. The good women – and they are very few – are docile, passive and extremely accommodating . . . the evil women are delineated as vicious, diabolical and morally bankrupt. They seem to have no virtues at all; and one wonders how a character can be so utterly depraved . . . Considering the nature of female characterization in these films, one is amazed at the objectivity of male characterization. Men are more realistically portrayed, and none of them is either totally good or completely evil. Their positive and negative attributes are highlighted, making them complex and more psychologically satisfying as characters.

On the issue of possible influence of the portrayal of women on people's perception of women and of social reality, the responses were a bit surprising. Although a majority of the respondents saw a portrayal of women in video films as unrealistic, all the respondents still said that this portrayal and the image of women are capable of negatively influencing people's perception of women and behaviour towards them. As a matter of fact, many of the respondents said categorically that the video films had already had this effect on them. Some of the responses are quite insightful:

1. "I don't think this is the way Nigerian women are but may be I don't know them well; the films are teaching me" (focus group respondent).
2. "Girls are not inferior to boys as human beings at all... but after seeing how girls are disgracing themselves in these films, I wish I were a boy" (focus group respondent).
3. "Even if women are not like that, a man has to be careful" (male respondent).

4. "It is good to watch these films, they open your eyes to the true nature of Nigerian girls" (male respondent).
5. "Many girls are not bad but the country is bad and it is affecting young girls; you can see that from the films" (female undergraduate).
6. 'I know Lagos girls are like that ... I have not lived in Lagos and I don't even want to visit it'.

Perhaps, more damaging to the efforts to empower women are the lessons which some of the female respondents said they learnt from the films. Two of these are paraphrased as follows:

1. One should not confide in a female friend if one had a serious boyfriend or fiancé, or introduce him to her.
2. A married woman should not keep unmarried female friends.

Finally, the data also indicate that age and sex were important variables in determining the respondents' reaction to the portrayal of women in the films. The older female respondents were harder on women than the younger ones, and reported stronger influences of the films on their perception of women. All the male respondents felt that the portrayal of women in the films is realistic and has taught them a lot about the true nature of Nigerian women.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to examine the portrayal of women in local home video films in Nigeria by looking specifically at Igbo language video films. The image of women in these films has been found to be very negative and capable of negatively influencing the perception of women among the large audience of video films in the country. This is in spite of the fact that most viewers of the video films acknowledge that the extremely negative portrayal of women in the films is unrealistic. The paper concludes that, in this era of concern for women's empowerment, these films are counterproductive and damaging to the cause of women. Rather than contribute to the much-needed

empowerment of Nigerian women, such films will only lead to the subjugation of women because they can increase men's disdain for women, sow distrust between women, undermine their confidence in themselves and strengthen the forces which push women to the background in this patriarchal society.

Consequently, the paper exhorts Nigerian video film makers to be mindful of the dangers inherent in their use of this potentially powerful channel of development communication. Research has shown that the potential use of video for pro-development communication is virtually limitless. In her review of this research, Okunna (1995: 619 and 620) shows that the technology of video has been effectively used for the empowerment of even severely marginalized social groups like poor and illiterate women in the rural Third World.

Nigerian actresses are also urged to reject parts which debase and dehumanize women in video films. One really wonders how directors of films with extreme stereotyping of women are able to get women to act these parts. Perhaps, economic reasons could compel script-writers to churn out more damaging portrayals of women. Negative news, it is often claimed, sells newspapers and magazines. The same could be the case in video production. Nevertheless, if women refuse to play roles which debase and subjugate them, film makers will create women characters that actresses will be willing to play.

Above all, there is a need for 'alternative video' – alternative, that is, to conventional male-created video. The video world in Nigeria is still largely a male-dominated one as far as scripting and production of video films are concerned. Perhaps, no hegemony or conspiracy theory is necessary to explain the negative portrayal of women in male-produced video films. Perhaps, male script-writers and producers are just typical Nigerian men and their subjugation of women through this medium of communication is unintentional. As has been pointed out by Okunna (1992: 52),

In Nigeria, both the larger society and the male sub-culture see women and women's aspirations as unquestionably subordinate, and the marginalization, trivialization and stereotyping of women are incontrovertible aspects of Nigerian life... the male members of the society are effectively socialized into the norms of their social category and those of the society as a whole. This socialization begins early in life and is so effective that male chauvinistic attitudes towards women appear inborn, and are often displayed unconsciously, irrespective of the educational background of the men.

If this is the case, the need for 'alternative video' becomes really urgent. This might well be the best strategy, if not the only one, at this state of our development in the Nigerian society to empower women through this medium of communication — by getting them to tell their own story from their own perspective. Some Nigerian women are already doing this, but their number needs to be greatly increased. Ezeigbo (1966: 120) is correct when she says that today, "millions of Igbo women are working hard for the growth of their families and communities (and) film producers should shoot films to highlight such welcome changes in situation." Such films will encourage other women through "snowball effects". After all, as Stuart (1989: 10) has observed, one great benefit of video is its ability to encourage horizontal exchange of information and experiences among the marginalized. This it does by letting people see what others like them are doing and encouraging them to emulate these activities. Women in Nigeria are still very much marginalized and any technology that could be harnessed for their development, should not be abused. Video is one such technology and as far as the struggle for women's empowerment is concerned, film-making is too important to be left to male film makers only.

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