

## **Defining African Feminism(s) while #BeingFemaleinNigeria**

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## Defining African Feminism(s) while #BeingFemaleinNigeria

### Abstract

In 2015, a reading group in Abuja, Nigeria, started the hashtag #BeingFemaleinNigeria, which received widespread attention. Within the confines of 140 characters, Nigerian women and men shared stories of gender inequality, sexism and misogyny in the country. Using discourse analysis, this article unpacks the tweets under the #BeingFemaleinNigeria hashtag, and teases out what they tell us about gender inequality in Nigeria, and the ambitions for emancipation. This article takes the stance that African feminism(s) exist, that empirical study of lived experiences of African women should define it, and not the postcolonial standpoint that rejects and argues that, feminism comes from the other. Therefore, this empirical research contributes to scholarship that seeks to define the characteristics of African feminism(s), particularly as the field is criticised for being over theorised (Lewis, 2001; Kolawole, 2002; Naemeka, 2004; Mekgwe, 2008; Akin-Aina, 2011; Naidu, 2013).

### Keywords

*African feminism, digital feminism, hashtag activism, gender inequality, cyberfeminism*

### Introduction

Many African feminist scholars have argued that discussions about African feminism(s) - whether it exists, what it means, if it's singular or plural - needs to be contextual focused and not over theorised (Lewis, 2001; Kolawole, 2002; Naemeka, 2003; Mekgwe, 2008; Akin-Aina, 2011; Naidu, 2013). Backed by empirical research, this article therefore contributes to scholarship that interrogates the existence of feminism in Africa, and the need for more empirically grounded discussions on African feminism(s). It argues that the #BeingFemaleinNigeria hashtag is an example of how activism for the rights of women, the mobilisation of resistance, and mutual solidarity might utilise the transformative potentials of social media platforms as channels of agency for the voices of women. A reading group in Abuja, the federal capital of Nigeria, started the hashtag in 2015. It trended on Twitter, receiving widespread attention far beyond the expectations of the group. Within the confines of 140 characters, Nigerian women and men

shared stories of gender inequality, sexism and misogyny in the country. This article unpacks the tweets shared under the #BeingFemaleinNigeria hashtag over a period of 8 weeks between July-August 2015, in order to provide empirical data that contributes to scholarship that seeks to define what African feminism(s) is/are. It also compares the tweets scripted by users based in Nigeria, versus those in the Diaspora, in order to identify the differences and similarities in the issues and stories described in the tweets, whilst considering the influence of intersecting identities of participants in the two groups.

While the central philosophy that guides all forms of feminism is the aspiration to breakdown the patriarchal system that places the interests and needs of men over women, definitions of feminism vary. Some consider the economic injustices experienced by women due to their sex (Richards, 1980), others ask that the interests of women be put first (Oakley, 1981), and there are those that considers all forms of oppression - race, class, abilities, sexual orientation, age - that women need to be free from (Smith, 1982), and much more. One of the major issues with the feminist movement of the United States in the 1970s and 1980s for example, was its lack of recognition that, while white women fought sexual discrimination, the struggles of black women existed on multiple levels. While white feminists were mostly middle-class women oppressed by white men, black feminists on the other hand tended to be working-class, and their oppressors were both white and black men, as well as their race and class (Collins, 1989; Springer, 2002; Smith, 2013; Rich, 2014). Therefore, to paint one picture of feminism was to ignore the experiences of black women in the United States. Audre Lorde (1979) put it eloquently in her open letter to radical feminist, Mary Daly, in response to her book *Gyn/Ecology*:

“To imply that all women suffer the same oppression simply because we are women, is to lose sight of the many varied tools of patriarchy. It is to ignore how those tools are used by women without awareness against each other. What you excluded from *Gyn/Ecology* dismissed my heritage and the heritage of all other non-european [sic] women, and denied the real connections that exist between all of us.”

This differentiation thesis also appears in the many scholarship on African feminism(s) (see for example, Aidoo, 1998; Lewis, 2001; Nnaemeka, 2004; Oyewunmi, 2005; Dosekun, 2007; Mekgwe, 2008; Naidu, 2013; Akin-Aina, 2011; Kemp et al, 2018). In her work, Filomina Chioma Steady (1981) argues that African feminism on one level seeks to differentiate itself from the global feminist movement, while on another level; it cautiously questions African cultural traditions. Steady and other theorists also argue

that African feminism cannot adopt a gender separatist stance if it is “to succeed as a humane reformation project” (Mekgwe, 2008; 16). Similarly, Norwood (2013) attempts to interrogate feminist theory from the perspective of Africana feminism, which she defines as encompassing all of Africa and its diaspora. Diaspora in this case refers to people of African descent who live outside of Africa as a result of slavery. Africana feminist theory is generally concerned with how African women on the continent and in the diaspora manage and challenge multiple layers of oppression; this includes the deconstructing of ideologies of racism and sexism that devalue them. The movement came as a result of the “experiences and conditions of colonialism, slavery and patriarchy” (Norwood, 2013; 225), which has therefore meant that it has had a difficult relationship with western and white feminism (see Oyewunmi, 2003, Hooks 1984, Williams and Chau, 2007).

It was important for me not to separate discussions of gender and race as this conceals intersectional experiences, and limits the comparison of emancipating ambitions of Nigerians at home and the Diaspora. I identify myself as a Nigerian woman living in the UK with some lived experiences in Nigeria. I cannot solely describe my identity as Nigerian, nor as British, so what makes up my identity and how does this define my views on African feminism(s)? This fluid approach to identity reflects what Dervin (2012) says allows for the overlapping between and contact with other identities, as opposed to a static identity focused on the boundaries between cultures and other forms of categorising people. Considering how the intersecting identities of the hashtag users impacted on their choice of tweet, would be an interesting exploration, but something I have not done for this article, instead I focused solely on theming and offering a critical discussion on the tweets themselves. I ask; what do the tweets under the #BeingFemaleinNigeria hashtag tell us about the emancipation ambition of Nigeria women, and how does this differ between Nigerians at home and in the diaspora. I do not explore Diasporas within Nigeria itself.

### **Scholarly Debates: What is African feminism(s), and what is it not?**

Discussions around the distinct characteristics of African feminism create a tension with Western feminism, which continues to view the world through a Western lens. Core arguments at the heart of the debate between African and Western feminism include the emphasis on motherhood over

sisterhood - though there are arguments that this is not the same across Africa, with particular reference to the importance of sisterhood in South Africa - the economic statuses across the continent in comparison to the rest of the world, and, being African. Scholars like Nnaemeka (2004) argue for caution in the process of developing African feminism to not present as aspiring to become more like Western women, but to seek the discussions and developments within the context of the African cultures. There are also concerns over naming by the other

Nnaemeka wrote of the “use/abuse of theory” (Nnaemeka, 2004; 361), and recommends that in the process of constructing African feminist theory, African feminist scholars should instead build on “the indigenous”. To theorise only, she argues, raises questions about who is theorising, what/who is giving authority to that theory, and to what social conditions it really speaks. On one level, Nnaemeka’s position is that we should not be averse to learning from other ideas as we explore and expand what African feminism is. Instead, ground these investigations and explorations on realities of women in Africa. Using the analogy of a chameleon, she advises scholarship in the field to be “goal-oriented, cautious, accommodating, adaptable, and open to diverse views” (Nnaemeka, 2004; 382). In other words, she prescribes against resistance to the ‘others’ views for the sake of it, but make sense of it in the African contexts.

These lines of argument are similar to other fields of exploration of issues around economic and political development in Africa where scholars caution the ‘follow your leader’ approach of striving to a Western exemplar. Instead, they argue that in order to map a relevant and facts based trajectory for development in Africa - in whatever sphere - one must look into the realities on the continent and explore its past, and let those findings dictate the direction for the future. Ignoring the lived experiences of African women, and how they differ from those of women in the global north assumes a universal “feminist suffragette experience” (Naidu, 2013; 159).

In her work on reproductive rights in South Africa, Naidu (2013) argues that the “emancipation agendas” that hold weight amongst gender activists in the global north, are alien in both ideas and action, and understood differently by African women. For example, the idea that sexual pleasure is a feminist choice may seem obvious to women in the north, but Naidu argues for African women “it was and is an assertion that needs to be vociferously reiterated” (Naidu, 2013; 156). For Nnaemeka, she observes what she terms “nego-feminism” (an ego-free feminism of negotiation):

“Here, negotiation has the double meaning of “give and take/exchange” and “cope with successfully/go around.” African feminism (or feminism as I have seen it practiced in Africa) challenges through negotiations and compromise. It knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal land mines; it also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal land mines. In other words, it knows when, where, and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts” (Nnaemeka, 2004; 378)

By building on the realities and lived experiences of African women, scholarship on African feminism(s) will thus satisfy Nnaemeka's questions of ownership of African feminism theories: whose authority and whose conditions and social circumstances is being theorised?

However, the idea of African feminism(s) has received some criticism. Characteristics of this criticism is largely around its otherness (*see for example* Oyewunmi, 2005). Critics argue that 'feminism' is in itself un-African and an adoption of a Western idea because of colonisation. This approach of measuring African feminism against what exists in the West, as Mekgwe argued, presents western feminist theory as a “universal phenomenon” (Mekgwe, 2008; 15) without its own problems. The idea that feminism is un-African, and the rejection of the word, has led to other labels such as Omolara Ogundipe Leslie's (1994) STIWANISM (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa), Alice Walker's (1983) Womanism, and, Clenora Hudson-Weems' (1980) Africana Womanism.

There are African feminist theorists (like Ama Ata Aidoo, 1998; Anne McClintock, 1995) however who reject the notion that feminism is a concept that is newly learned from the West, and who say history demonstrates that feminism has been in existence in Africa for a long time:

“It is not new and I really refuse to be told I am learning feminism from abroad”

(Ama Ata Aidoo, 1998).

“Denouncing all feminisms as imperialist ... erases from memory the long histories of women's resistance to local and imperialist patriarchies ... Many women's mutinies around the world

predated Western feminism or occurred without any contact with Western feminists” (McClintock, 1995).

The question is, in the context of arguing that African feminism is un-African, we must ask what does being ‘African’ mean and who determines this? Why should the state of being African remain a fixed, never developing/modifying state? Can one really speak of an essential African identity or Africanness, how then can one argue that something is un-African (Dosekun, 2007)? Dosekun argues that the idea that feminism is not indigenous to Africa assumes that an exploration of history and indigenous traditions will not reveal evidence of women resisting patriarchy. Such research, she says, should not be concerned with providing evidence that feminism existed in exactly the same way as today, “but if, how and why African women historically resisted the conditions that oppressed them as women” (Dosekun, 2007; 43). Similarly, Mekgwe (2008) is among those who call for an interrogation of the use of ‘Africa’ in naming African feminism as it too comes with its own obstacles. She argues that using ‘Africa’ in African feminism must not be static and must be relevant to Africa of present day, as opposed to a postcolonial Africa:

“It requires that we certainly move beyond the notion of African victimhood within the colonial process, to recognize Africa as ‘participant’ in the different phases/faces of ‘colonialism’ and not simply as recipient.” (Mekgwe, 2008; 22)

When we look into pre-colonial Africa, we certainly see the existence of women who display feminist consciousness through their leadership. Notable examples are Angolan queen Njinga Mbandi (around 1581 / 83-1663), Senegalese queen Ndete Yalla (1810-1860), South African Charlotte Maxeke (1874-1939), Nigerian activists Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti (1900-1978) and Margaret Ekpo (1914-2006), and South African anti-apartheid activist Albertina Sisulu (1918-2011), among others.

Finally, the question of whether there is a singular African feminism or multiple African feminisms also rears its head. After all, there are many cultures and subcultures in Africa, and as such, one can no more speak of a singular feminism in Africa, as one can of a single African culture.

## ***Hashtag feminism: transformative potentials of social media platforms for gender rights***

New media, for these voices on my case study for this article, the #BeingFemaleinNigeria hashtag, has facilitated them to voice their opposition to the societal structure that subordinates them. It is an opportunity to voice their stories as a counter narrative to their imposed representation by the gatekeepers of the mainstream media. The question for the voices on the hashtag is; do they consider themselves feminists, of whatever kind? Do they see themselves as being engaged in feminist activism? Moreover, are they taking their resistance to the status quo offline?

Since *The First Cyberfeminist International* (Documenta X, Kassel, Germany, 1997), discourse around the impact of digital spaces on feminist theory and practice has moved away from the excitement and romantic notions of the digital connectedness of women to a focus on the ways that activism and feminist theory meet online, and the relationship between online and offline feminism.

Several feminist scholars have pointed to the potential of online platforms in breaking down the structures of power and hierarchy, as well as breaking away from restrictions imposed on marginalized voices offline (Mann, 2014; Radloff, 2013). Mann for example argues that participation on social media platforms like Twitter and Tumblr, by black media makers, particularly black women, outweighs their participation on other media channels, which have historically “excluded, silenced, or heavily mediated/edited” the voices of those on the “wrong side of hegemonic power” (Mann, 2014; 294). Social media takes the power out of the hands of the usual mass media gatekeepers in deciding which messages get through, the shaping of said messages, and when they spread.

Demonstrating contributions made to advancements in communications technology by women, Radloff identifies the emerging concerns around internet governance and women’s rights and gender inequality. She highlights the importance of ICTs, digital tools and social media, as another alternative communication strategy, that can be employed by the feminist movement as a tool for social justice, in its attempts at “creating new discourses and challenging patriarchal and imperialist legacies” (Radloff, 2013; 3). As Huizing and Esterhuysen put it, the internet is an avenue through “which women have the freedom and capacity to actively tell their stories, participate in social, political and economic life, and claim their rights to be empowered, equal citizens of the world who can live free from discrimination and

the fear of violence” (2013: 6). Mann (2014) adds however that this level of visibility, whether voluntary or otherwise, does not necessarily translate to liberation. She discusses the harms visibility can cause, particularly the commodification, objectification and insult of the participants and their experiences. She however called for feminist media scholars to examine the conversations and content on these social media platforms. She goes on to describe hashtag activism as something derided and involving the repeated use of a phrase alongside a personal account relating to that phrase, with the aim of having it shared, discussed and/or praised.

### ***Intersecting Identities***

The “politics of location and difference” and the age of “posthuman”, argues Tuzcu (2016) is the real excitement in scholarship that looks at feminist theory in digital spaces. In assessing the politics of location she questions what “feminist politics of location mean for diasporically grounded positionalities and forms of belonging that are already mobile, nomadic, displaced?” While by “diasporically grounded”, she meant those with no country or whom feel de-centralised, her thesis is useful in discussing this research when considering the differences in the context of the tweets shared by Nigerians in Nigeria and those in the diaspora. In investigating the feminist politics of location, and locational feminism, she invites us to move away from gender as a primary focus of analysis. So we can appreciate the various gender systems, how they converge “different and changing societal stratifications and movements for social justice” (Friedman 1998, 5, in, Tuzcu, 2016; 151), and embrace the “intercultural exchange and hybridity” (ibid).

Feminism is already considered a “transcultural interaction” (Friedman 1998, 5) of cultures and experiences. In the context of this research, there is another dimension to this transcultural interaction: the transcultural experiences of Nigerians in the Diaspora who have some lived experiences, be it in Nigeria itself, or through the home dynamics of their upbringing with parents who impart the ‘Nigerian culture’. This amalgamation of cultures and the participation of Nigerians in the Diaspora using the #BeingFemaleinNigeria hashtag offers up an opportunity to consider the translocality of the individuals and their tweets. The virtual space (Twitter) through which they are participating in the discourse, even though they are not actively living in Nigeria, and by extension not sharing these experiences under the hashtags in the same cultural environment as those users of the hashtag living in Nigeria. Their actual

engagement with cultural discourse is different and to an extent limited, and yet their tweets under #BeingFemaleinNigeria suggests a shared experience.

Their intersecting identities formed by their Nigerian heritage, the fact that they are Nigerians in the Diaspora, their location in the UK, USA and South Africa (the three countries represented in the sample I analysed). These among all the other elements that make up their sense of self, making their histories and positionalities comparably different from fellow females in Nigeria.

I am a Nigerian, living in the UK, whose secondary and postgraduate education was in the UK. The reasons why I would consider a remark as sexist could not be the same as my friend who is Nigerian, born, raised, and living in Nigeria, and a graduate with a professional occupation. Our ideas about gender roles differ, even if we find some commonalities on what we consider sexist and what we consider acceptable. Yet through Twitter, our grievances with gender inequality and discrimination in Nigeria present as shared. All you see on Twitter is the message, not the makeup of the messenger. This coming together of Nigerians from all over the world makes the discourse under #BeingFemaleinNigeria a transnational and transcultural form of activism.

The hashtag itself describes a state of being locked in one geographical location #BeingFemaleinNigeria, and yet the transnational participation through the virtual space distorts that description. My contribution to the hashtag (being told I would not 'find' a husband if I pursued a PhD #BeingFemaleinNigeria) spoke of an experience I once had in Nigeria. Am I just as likely to have this experience in my current locality in the UK?

As Tuzcu (2016, 152) puts it:

“The specificities of locationally situated experiences make generalizations difficult, while narratives of commonality and translocal community keep these experiences connected”.

In the following section, I have explored my methodological approach in using Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis in researching and analysing the tweets under the #BeingFemaleinNigeria hashtag. I have also discussed my approach of using tweets and the challenges of this approach.

## **Methodology**

### ***Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis***

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is interested in the relationship between language and power, and Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) in particular has a focus on social (in) justice and gender transformation (Lazar, 2007). For discourse analysis to be truly critical, it must identify the social conditions from which the production of the text comes, and the social context in which the participants “as social historical subjects” (Wodak, 2001, 3) interact with and create meaning from the texts. As Arslanian-Engoren (2001) argues, through words, one is able to take a glimpse into the lives and experiences of women. In using this method to analyse the tweets under the #Beingfemaleinnigeria hashtag, the research aims to critically analyse the kind of discourses that emerge from the participants of this hashtag in expressing the social inequality faced by women in Nigeria. These tweets will be analysed in the context of gender inequality in Nigeria and how this social structure has given rise to the kind of lived experiences being expressed under this hashtag. This in turn contributes to discussions around the defining of African feminism(s).

This research is interested in the discourse in the sense of what participants of the hashtag use it to say about social practices and cultural ideologies around gender equality and roles in Nigeria. It departs from the central focus of feminist critical discourse analysis which is on the analysis and critiquing of discourses which facilitate a “patriarchal social order” (Lazar, 2007; 145). However, by achieving the aim of this article - which is to contribute empirical data to defining what African feminism(s) is/are - it aligns with the aim of FCDA. By analysing the words of Nigerian women using the hashtag, it is able to critique the gendered social structures in Nigeria in order to realise a step towards the social transformation of dominant ideologies around women’s rights.

It is important to note that some of the women using the hashtag have explicitly expressed that their participation is not to be understood as a feminist action (*see figure 1 for example*). This is an example of the rejection of feminism, or perhaps fear of the feminist label, I mentioned earlier. Whether not

wanting the label is because of social conditioning or a thought-through decision on their part is another area to investigate.

[#BeingFemaleInNigeria](#) is not about feminism, it is about common sense. We all know our society makes being a woman a tough job!

8:17 PM · Jun 30, 2015 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)

**327** Retweets **66** Likes



**Figure 1**

It also perhaps supports Lazar's (2007) argument that speaking from the perspective of a woman does not equate to offering a feminist perspective. With the former, she argues that one is speaking within the structure of gender, while the latter assumes a "critical distance on gender and on oneself" (ibid, 145). This argument then makes it necessary for this research to discuss the parameters of what it means to be engaged in feminist activism, versus simply describing the use of the #BeingfemaleinNigeria hashtag, as actions that exposes gender inequality and seeks to empower women, but without the label of feminist activism. In other words, what is the difference between when a self-acclaimed feminists tweets under the hashtag, and when a non-feminist tweets on issues around women's rights?

Discussing praxis-oriented research, Lazar (2007) argues that while academic feminists are often associated with theory, and grassroots feminists with practice, her perspective is that academic feminists are actually engaged in academic activism: “raising critical awareness through research and teaching” (ibid, 146). As such she says that rather than being a research approach that takes a “neutral stance” (ibid, 146), FCDA is an analytical activism as it theorizes and analyses practices of gender discourses. She concludes that FCDA can be considered as being more objective than other forms of research because it considers various social dimensions that are often excluded from other types of research.

### ***Researching Twitter***

Gathering tweets under #BeingFemaleinNigeria was retrospective and manual, ensuring that I gathered key information like location, gender and username where possible. Retaining the username was important when cross-referencing the original tweets during analysis. It is however possible to live curate Tweets using automation tools like Zapier.

There were a number of limitations to using Twitter as a platform for gathering the lived experiences of Nigerian women, particularly for this research, which set out to compare diaspora and home tweets.

Not everyone gives their location, not everyone gives the right location, and not everyone updates their location if they relocate. The research originally aimed to look only at the Nigerian Diaspora community in the UK, but based on the number of tweets from this region in the sample, the focus changed to Nigerian Diaspora communities anywhere outside of Nigeria. Users also tend to change their name or Twitter handle so going back to look for these users on Twitter in order to identify their location was not always straightforward. There is always the question of how many tweets is enough for this kind of research, this research focused on a timeframe 6 July - 31 August 2015, which produces 92 tweets. Like in the cases of the men in the gender roles theme discussed below, determining the intentions of the owner of the tweet for those that could be either sympathetic or sarcastic, was not straightforward. Consideration was given to how to refer to the owners of the tweets, and thus this article interchanges between users, person, participants and owners of the tweets.

Finally, there was the question of 'is it ethical to identify the owners of the tweets without their expressed permission'. In journalism, for example, it is common practice to embed tweets into the narrative of a story, as it is argued that they are in the public domain for public consumption already.

Mann (2014) provides an argument that serves as a starting point in ethical considerations of how we should be using and investigating the words of marginalised groups who use social media to share their messages. Her argument is centred on the notion that a feminist approach would be to question and critique the conventions and rules of copyright, fair use and academic citation. These she argues do not consider the potential harm citing and quoting the words of these voices, could cause to their owners. It is important then to not regard these words and their owners as resources, but be sympathetic to "their own goals and desires about how their words are used" (Mann, 2014; 295). To disregard this would be reinforcing the patterns of power they are trying to break from. In her research, Mann asked for permission from key feminist voices on Twitter, to cite them as examples, only two obliged, which in my opinion limited the opportunity to gather empirical data from Twitter for this kind of research. In this article, I did not taken permission to analyse the tweets, but where I found it important to use some tweets to illustrate key points, these are anonymised.

### **Analysis of the tweets and what they tell us about gender inequality in Nigeria**

This article sits among scholarship focused on how activism and feminist theory meet online, as it analysed the tweets under the #BeingFemaleinNigeria hashtag in the context of gender inequality in Nigeria and its patriarchal social structures give rise to the kind of lived experiences expressed under this hashtag. The aim is to contribute empirical research towards defining what African feminism is.

In analysing the tweets, 13 themes emerged. Each theme underwent a feminist critical discourse analysis on what the tweets tell us about Nigerian feminism. I have also compared the differences and similarities of the focus of tweet by Diaspora Nigerians and home Nigerians. To achieve the comparison, the locations stated in the users' Twitter profile was relied on. The tweets gathered were posted between 6 July - 31 August 2015. In total 92 tweets were analysed that were relevant to this research. The criteria used to determine relevance was they had to share or relate to experiences of Nigerian women.

Keeping with this criteria meant it also allowed for tweets from users who were not individuals (e.g. companies), and shared content (not retweets).

Of the 92 tweets, 75 were tweets shared by an individual about experiences, and it was not always clear if they were experiences that the owners of the tweet had directly themselves. The other 17 tweets were a combination of shared content from news sites (5), companies using the tweets (2), and tweets responding to a single tweet. Overall, 37.33% were tweets from Nigerians in Nigeria, while 22.66% were tweets from Diaspora Nigerians (all of whom were based in one of three countries: UK, USA and South Africa). Thirty percent of the tweets had undisclosed locations.

The top three themes were tweets relating to experiences around cultural expectations relating to marriage and relationships (which made up 37.33% of all the tweets, of which 21.42% were from Diaspora Nigerians, 25% from home Nigerians, and, 39.28% had unspecified locations). Following this was irritation towards prescribed gender roles (62.5% were from users in Nigeria), and gender biases experienced in career/professional environment (this had an equal amount of contribution from the diaspora and home Nigerians and those with no locations listed).

My findings shows Diaspora Nigerians tweets were most prominent in three areas: the tension between career and marriage, expecting women to stay in a bad marriage instead of divorce, and the male gaze. Choice, and the option of it, appear central to these tensions. When we consider the perspectives on divorce in Nigeria for example, because a woman does not just marry the man, but marries his whole family, in-laws are often deeply involved in the marriage. Parent-in-laws have inputs on decisions; therefore, divorce is not a decision solely about detachment from one's spouse, but from the family. This again stems from patriarchal structures that values the attachment of a woman to a man. When a woman has a child out of wedlock, the Yoruba tradition for example accepts that child as the child of its grandfather, whose house the child's mother is attached, because tradition says women move from their father's house to their husband's house. This patriarchal ownership of women therefore means a divorced woman is an embarrassment for her family (see Staveren and Ode bode, 2007; Princewill et al, 2017). For the Nigerians in the Diaspora, the physical immediacy of the immediate family is perhaps far enough for the process to be less pressured – at least to the extent that any divorce could be. Perhaps though this differs between diasporic generations.

[#BeingFemaleInNigeria](#) "he beats you and doesn't treat you right but he feeds you. What did you even do to make him hit you? "

10:08 AM · Jul 10, 2015 · [Twitter for BlackBerry](#)

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1 Retweet 1 Like

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What follows is my analysis of the themes, each starting with an initial descriptive overview of the kinds of discourse that emerged and a percentage quantification of the differences and similarities between diasporic and home participants. Following this is my analysis of the emerging discourse, some of which I have discussed at greater length than others are as there were many overlaps. I have used some of the tweets as examples and left them in their original form. I note that most of the tweets spoke of a 'you', a 'you' of whom they are speaking.

***Theme: Marriage/family/relationships***

Under the first theme, the importance placed on being married was the most popular theme. Only 10% of these tweets were from users in the Diaspora, 40% from Nigeria, and 50% unspecified location. This was closely followed by the expectations that wives are expected to perform the role of a domestic heroine - to borrow from Betty Friedan – and, enduring domestic violence was more favourable than getting divorced. All users tweeting about divorce were from either the Diaspora (33.33%) or unspecified location (66.66%). Location was unspecified for all the users who tweeted about prescribed roles of wives, except one from the USA. Interestingly all those tweeting on domestic roles of wives were female. Tweets on societal expectation for women to be married by the age of 30, prioritising this over career ambitions, came mainly from Nigerians in the Diaspora who posted 50% of these tweets. For the other 50%, their location is unspecified. There was also an equal 50/50 split in the sex of the owners of these tweets.

The grievances around the importance placed on being married is connected by some tweets with career ambitions. Being married often equating to a sacrificing of other dreams, which connects with the gendered role expectations. Had my participation in #BeingFemaleinNigeria been included in my sample, it would also have fallen under this category. My tweet recalled reactions of some friends in Nigeria, who on discovering my plans to pursue a Master's degree and PhD, advised I would not 'find' a husband if I had a PhD. The tweets under this category expressed similar accounts that conjure up the feeling that marriage is weighted with a badge of achievement that outweighs accomplishments in other aspects of life, most especially careers. One tweet reads, *"So you are the CEO of a FTSE 100 company. So what, you are not yet married, look at your mates, useless girl"*. Perhaps the marriage badge is a symbol that her accomplishments can be owned in some part by the support of her husband. Alternatively, does this marriage badge mean that she is somehow more grounded than the single accomplished woman is?

This portrayal of career accomplishments as a repellent to would-be husbands is one of several types of 'husband repelling behaviours' shared in the tweets. Age being one, *"U re over 30 and single, probably doing well, when are you getting married is the most asked question"*.

I note that none of the tweets spoke of being excluded from education. This perhaps speaks to the makeup of the users, they are however concerned about the attempts at conditioning women to be cautious of ambition. These examples illustrate this, with the latter extending this to a custodianship of the man's ego:

*"after al ur degrees n yrs wel spent in educatin urslf n afta yhu get married yu nw be made 2 b a full housewife"* [after all your degrees and years well spent in educating yourself and after you get married you now be made to be a full housewife].

*"Being told not to buy a nice car so you don't intimidate a potential husband"*.

Aug 26, 2015

**Nigerian girls should not be allowed to have money** because it will make them stubborn. [#BeingFemaleInNigeria](#)

 said...

Linda I really appreciate Ur kind gesture God bless u richly, buh on the very serious notes u want to make this girls start stubbornness cos wen some of this small small girls get their own money they start misbehaving. #THAT AKWA IBOM BOY#

August 26, 2015 at 7:32 AM



Religion and religious leaders also receive criticism for the ways in which they perpetuate patriarchy through their teaching. Particularly important because of the respect afforded religious leaders in Nigeria. One tweet reads: *"the pastor @ a wedding said, "women have nothing to say&do. Their lives must revolve around their husband"*.

This mindset is undoubtedly disempowering also for men. A husband who does not envision a life of sacrificed dreams for his wife also finds himself fighting a socially imposed positioning of him as breadwinner and holder of his wife's freedom. One tweet reads, *"If your husband is very caring and help you with house chores, you've cooked efo for him"*. 'Efo' is a traditional spinach sauce, when used in this context though means the wife is being accused of witchcraft, essentially saying "you've put some magic in his food to control him and that is why is his exhibiting this unmanly trait of doing chores and loving you".

The narrative of the witch wife, witch mother-in-law set out to destroy her son's wife and marriage, is one of the stereotypes perpetuated by Nigerian TV dramas and Nollywood films (see for example Okafor, 2017; Saibu, 2018), and one that many women find themselves having to contend with throughout their marriage. One tweet reads: *"Your hubby dies and your made to drink d water used in bathing his dead body to prove your innocence"*.

**Theme: Gender Roles**

Grievances shared under this category fell, for the most part, under two areas: household roles (50%0 and finance roles (37.55%). The former being attributed as the exclusive domain of women, whilst the latter, the domain of men. The narratives shared in relation to financial roles, illustrated the interference

and forceful societal placement of men as finance providers. None of the tweets focused on what happens inside the household, but more about people outside and their reactions to women taking financial leadership.

[#beingfemaleinnigeria](#) being d one that made all d enrollment arrangements at ur child's school and having d 1st bill addressed to Mr Daniel

7:26 PM · Jul 6, 2015 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)

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2 Likes

For the most part the narratives around this reaction spoke to assumptions that belittled the woman's display of financial independence by categorising her as an 'ashewo' (prostitute), as one tweet reads:

*"When you bring out your ipone6 and you hear oloshi ashewo your sugar daddy don buy am for you"*

On the domestic domain imposed on women, one tweet described the reaction of her husband's friend, on seeing him help with their baby:

*"So my husband's friend seeing him helping out with the baby and exclaims, "madam get a nanny and free this man"*

All users that tweeted under this theme were female. 62.5% were from users in Nigeria, one in the UK, and two unspecified locations.

A tweet, coming from a male user read:

*"Females want to be pampered but do not want to [play] their primary role as a woman #beingfemaleinnigeria".*

Almost suggesting a transactional relationship. What I found interesting was that I could not quite decide if the tweet was stating a belief of the user, or being sympathetic through sarcasm, and again this was another challenge with using tweets for this research.

**Theme: Career/Professional environment**

Tweets in this category focused on the professional environment, shared experiences of gender-biased hierarchy and the societal perception that certain jobs were for men and others for women. Participants found it equally ironic that while society expects women to be married by a certain age, and on the one hand single women sometimes find it hard to get jobs, managers also use not wanting to interfere with the 'marital responsibilities' of a married woman as a reason not to give more responsibilities at work.

When patients refuse to see you because you can't be the real doctor.

You are Aunty Nurse, your MBBS notwithstanding.

[#BeingFemaleInNigeria](#)

9:35 PM · Jul 6, 2015 · [Twitter for iPad](#)

[#BeingFemaleInNigeria](#) means as a woman not being allowed to apply for a job unless you're married, doesn't apply to men

4:41 PM · Jul 13, 2015 · [Twitter Web Client](#)

[#beingfemaleinnigeria](#) Opportunities are taken away from you to 'help' you maintain your marital stability.

2:46 PM · Jul 31, 2015 · [Twitter for BlackBerry](#)

In the context that increased responsibilities is often the prerequisite to promotion, this is an important problem to challenge. Gender bias in professional environment is important to consider, also in the context of equal representation of women in a given industry, and the impact of the lack of this. In my field of practice, the news media for example, the professional status of women is often discussed in the spectrum of soft news versus hard news (see North, 2016, for example). The assumptions that female journalists prefer to cover entertainment, fashion, health, as opposed to, what is termed the 'hard news' of business, politics and security - and yet CNN's Nima Elbagir, ChannelsTV's (Nigeria) Maupe Ogun, Citizen TV's (Kenya) Asha Mwilu, and Juba Monitor's (South Sudan) Anna Niminiaro are valid examples of how wrong this notion is. This example demonstrates the importance of knowing the gender representation across industries. If women in media are not present in the construction of narratives, if, as the International Women's Media Foundation (2011) discovered, women represent only one third of the full time employees of more than 500 media organisations across 59 countries, how can we effect change on representation? Limited participation of women in media, contributes to the narrow characterisation of women, and the extent to which the media works to make women aware of their economic rights, which is an essential part of building egalitarian societies.

The significance then of such prejudices in professional environments that impact employment, progression, pay, should not be underplayed and has been the subject of many scholarly work (for example, Aulette & Wittner, 2015; Ismail & Ibrahim, 2008; Thanacoody et al, 2006; Stroh, Brett & Reilly, 1992;).

All tweets in this theme came from women, and there was an equal sharing of tweets among Nigerians in the diaspora, at home, and in unspecified locations, in this category. Those from Nigerians in the Diaspora under this theme related to this issue of hierarchy of men over women in the workplace.

### ***Theme: Appearance***

A majority of tweets in this category considered societal ideas about 'respectable dressing', and the lack of freedom, and some hypocrisies, in this regard. The hypocrisy also emerged in tweets on the association of beauty with light skin, and condemnation of women and girls who use skin-lightening

products. All tweets from participants in the diaspora in this category relate to the male gaze (Laura Mulvey, 1975).

[#BeingFemaleInNigeria](#) a random guy on the road has never complimented you? You should be ashamed

5:46 PM · Jul 8, 2015 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)

***Theme: interactions with the opposite sex***

The dominant theme in this section was societal perspectives on male/female friendships and the automatically assumption that these are only of a sexual nature. One tweet lamented not being able to express her feelings to someone she likes because she would be considered “being cheap for telling him”. Marriage was also a theme in this section. There was an equal contribution to this category by Nigerians in the diaspora and those at home.

"At 5, "stay away from boys!" At 12, "boys are dangerous!" At 25, "so, when are you getting married?"  
[#BeingFemaleInNigeria](#)

7:22 PM · Jul 18, 2015 · [Twitter for BlackBerry®](#)

***Theme: promotion of male superiority***

Societal positioning of the male child has contributed to the education marginalisation of girls, forced marriages and several other gendered consequences including inheritance and land ownership rights of girls and women (Aluko, 2015). As one tweet recounts: “Your 11 years old half-brother being considered the sole heir to your deceased father's estate by his "traditional" family”. The logic stems again from the idea of ownership of a woman by her husband, and thus if a woman was to inherit her father's wealth, it is the husband that inherently has the power over its use. Therefore, situations like the one described in the tweet above, is considered the norm.

This ownership afforded the husband, also means that for a majority of Nigerian women, keeping their last name instead of changing it to their husbands once they get married is not even something for consideration. The man owns the marriage and everyone in it, wife and children, and thus seeking permission from one's husband to do basic things like cutting ones hair short is commonplace. Two of the five tweets under this theme described the same scenario: requiring written permission from one's husband to gain passports for one's child, or to take them on international travel.

[#beingfemaleinnigeria](#) in case you don't know, immigration requests a consent letter from husband to get a passport for kids.

5:24 PM · Jun 30, 2015 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)

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**267** Retweets   **99** Likes

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This demonstrates societal perceptions on 'the family unit', and a discrimination towards other family structures like single parenthood.

***Theme: singular face***

As mentioned earlier, the tweets received media coverage, including from Western media. It was interesting that in all except one tweet that were of the Western media coverage of the hashtag, there was a singular image used - the photo of the multi-award winning writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Adichie's book had inspired the conversation at the book club in Abuja resulting in the creation of the hashtag. Since her TED Talk titled "*We should all be feminists*" (which became a book), for the world, Adichie became the face of African feminism, yet at home in Nigeria, her feminist critiques are often met with criticism (mostly undeserved in my opinion) much like those of African feminism.

## **Conclusion**

This article set out to contribute to scholarly that seeks to define what African feminism(s) is/are through the lived experiences of African women. It explored the potentials of using experienced shared via a twitter hashtag that went viral in 2015, under which Nigerian women and men shared their grievances on societal positioning of women. It also asked about the differences and similarities between the experiences shared by Nigerians at home and those in the diaspora.

My analysis revealed more similarities than differences in tweets exchanged by diaspora Nigerians and home Nigerians. Areas in which diaspora participants tweeted more than home participants related to divorce, tensions between career ambitions and being married, and the hierarchy of men in the workplace. It also demonstrated the unreliability of the location tool on Twitter as the determiner on who was in the diaspora and who was not.

There were some distinction between female and male participants. Only female participants tweeted about gender roles and gender bias in the workplace for example. Perhaps because the male beneficiaries of the status quo are quite fine with not raising objections to these conditions.

The tweets are both useful for the picture they paint of the lived experiences of women in Nigeria, and thus the factors that underpin Nigerian feminism and the focus of resistance to patriarchal structures and ideologies the participants of the hashtag imagine a future without. The picture painted by the tweets is, for lack of another word, demoralising. These tweets in a way show how far we are from truly addressing gender equality in Nigeria.

In conclusion then, new media for these voices on the #BeingfemaleinNigeria hashtag has facilitated them to voice their opposition to the societal structure that subordinates them even if they don't plan to do anything about it offline. It is an opportunity to voice their stories as a counter narrative to their imposed representation by the gatekeepers of the mainstream media.

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