The problems and intersectional politics of "#BeingFemaleinNigeria"

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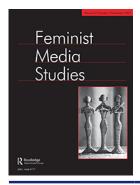Version: Published Version

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The problems and intersectional politics of "#BeingFemaleinNigeria"

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ABSTRACT

In June 2015, Nigerian women on Twitter convened around the hashtag "#BeingFemaleinNigeria" (#BFIN) to represent their experiences, observations, and critiques of patriarchal oppression in Nigeria. This article parses the content and internal politics of #BFIN as a Nigerian feminist hashtag campaign. Given that there is no singular Nigerian female experience, and that experience is not unmediated, the article asks: as represented by participants in the #BFIN campaign, what are the issues involved in being a woman in Nigeria, and for whom exactly, for Nigerian women occupying what kinds of discursive-material subject positions? Based on a thematic and intersectional analysis of 700 #BFIN tweets, I argue that the predominant representations are of the voice, experiences, and concerns of a type of subject that I call "the empowered Nigerian woman," an educated, capacious, and confident urban career woman belonging to the country's higher socio-economic strata. The campaign made urgently important claims about mundane sexist attitudes and practices that impede this type of Nigerian woman. However, marked by a lack of intersectional consciousness, the predominant story of the campaign was unrepresentative of the problems and experiences of the vast majority of Nigerian women.

Introduction

On the 30th of June 2015, the hashtag "#BeingFemaleinNigeria" (henceforth #BFIN) trended on Twitter internationally, appearing over 62,000 times in less than 12 hours, in about 7,000 original tweets, 7,000 replies and 48,000 retweets.[1] The hashtag was started by a group of women after their reading of the feminist manifesto by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists*, sparked discussion of the many challenges and injustices involved in being a Nigerian woman (Ayodele Olofintuade 2017; Yemisi Akinbobola 2020). It grew rapidly into a case of "hashtag feminism" as thousands of other Nigerian women active on Twitter convened around the hashtag to voice their experiences, observations and critiques of patriarchal power in Nigerian social and cultural life. The discussion focused "on everyday sexism [and] also addressed norms, cultural beliefs and practices as well as government policies that have led to the

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oppression of women in all spheres of national life" (Ayodele Olofintuade 2017, 163). It drew much commentary and contestation too, from national and international media coverage to tweets of solidarity from users who identified themselves as non-Nigerian women, to sexist backlash and trolling, even inciting a competing hashtag, "#BeingMaleinNigeria," used to insist that it is harder to be a man in Nigeria.

Proceeding from a conceptual understanding of feminist hashtag campaigns as net-worked counterpublic events, that is, events in which women leverage digital media technologies to voice and publicise their typically subordinated and silenced gendered experiences and knowledges, this article is concerned with what participants in the #BFIN campaign had to say of what it is like to be "Nigerian and female." It must be emphasised at once that there is no singular Nigerian female experience, subject, or standpoint; "women constitute a hugely diverse group in Nigeria, being differentiated not only by ethnicity and religion but also by class, age, marital status, region, and so on" (Charmaine Pereira and Jibrin Ibrahim 2010, 921). As such, the article also considers exactly what kinds of Nigerian female experiences were represented in the #BFIN campaign, and what types of Nigerian women have these experiences. In sum, the research questions are: according to participants in the #BFIN hashtag campaign, what are the gendered problems and injustices involved in being a Nigerian woman, and for whom exactly, for Nigerian women occupying what kinds of subject positions?

The article takes a discursive approach to these questions: the concern is with the textual representations, the story, put forth in the #BFIN tweets, not with who and what lies behind them "actually" or empirically. I argue on the basis of a thematic and inter-sectional analysis of 700 tweets from the campaign that its predominant representations are of the voice, experiences, and concerns of a heterosexual, educated, and capacious urban career woman belonging to Nigeria's higher socio-economic classes. I call this type of subject "the empowered Nigerian woman." Campaign participants report a disjunctive experience in which, despite her empowerment, this subject is expected to submit to male authority and patriarchal codes of respectability, particularly in and for the purposes of heterosexual marriage. There is rare attention in the tweets to the intersecting of gender with social structures other than youth. Conspicuously absent is consideration of how class bears upon the dominant narrative that the campaign weaves, and upon Nigerian women's lives more broadly. I argue, therefore, that the #BFIN hashtag campaign was a Nigerian feminist opportunity both seized and missed. On the one hand, the campaign made urgently important claims about mundane attitudes and practices that impede among the most socially enabled types of Nigerian women. Its counterpublic discourse challenges any easy notion that the solution to patriarchy is "women's empow-erment." But ultimately quite elite in its horizons, and betraying a lack of intersectional consciousness, the campaign was unrepresentative of the experiences and stories of the overwhelming majority of Nigerian women, and thus came to function as a further site and enactment of their marginalisation.

"Women's issues" in Nigeria are myriad, complex, and deeply structured, historicized, and interlocking. As brief context for both the #BFIN campaign and the intersectional reading of it that the article proposes, I offer in the next section of the article a summary overview of the major lived issues that Nigerian women face, as identified and prioritised in Nigerian feminist and other scholarship. But what is effectively a cataloguing of problems and injustices below should not be read, either, as "a single story"

(Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie 2009). Apart from the fact that there is no uniformity or inevitably in what Nigerian women actually experience, to be "female in Nigeria" is, of course, not just a tale of oppression.

Women's issues in Nigeria: a brief overview

In Nigeria, as across Africa, women face gendered constraints imposed "not only by patriarchy, but also by histories of slavery, colonialism, structural adjustment, land dispossession, militarism, and neoliberalism" (Robtel Pailey 2020, 1). Also as in the wider African context, there are debates amongst Nigerian feminist scholars about if and to what extent patriarchy is an indigenous or traditional social system versus colonial import (e.g. Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí 1997). But origins notwithstanding, it is quite evident that Nigerian society and culture today—more exactly, the hundreds of ethnic societies and cultures that comprise Nigeria—are male-dominated. It has also been shown that highly essentialist and selective constructs of "tradition" and "custom" are mobilised commonly against women, to patriarchal ends (e.g. Phil Okeke 2000; Charmaine Pereira 2004). Indeed this is effectively countenanced by law in Nigeria, to the extent that the national constitution distinguishes between civil and customary law, and women may find the latter invoked to deny or undermine rights and protections to which they are entitled by the former.

The kinds of rights most typically called into question or denied Nigerian women in the name of custom—an experience mediated by women's social status, to be sure, as well as varying across ethnoreligious lines—include those to do with property, standing and, relatedly, "indigineity": the right to own land, the right to inherit through lineage or marriage, the right to stand for representative political office, and so on (e.g. see Pereira 2004). Pereira identifies a further range of "discriminatory socio-cultural practices" often justified as customary, such as "male preference, child marriage, forced marriage, female genital mutilation [and] wife beating" (2004, 101). In addition to these forms of gender-based violence, against which Nigerian civil law is also quite inadequate, women experience particular gendered vulnerabilities to the state, political, ethnic, and religious fundamentalist violence endemic in the country (e.g. see Sokari Ekine 2008; Cheluchi Onyemelukwe 2016). Endemic, too, and also enabled by institutional cultures of impunity, is sexual harassment, in the workplace, in schools and universities, and in public space.

The state of mass extreme poverty and under-development in Nigeria is also a hugely significant factor in the lives of Nigerian women. Indeed it is fair to say that the ultimate face of poverty in Nigeria is female. For instance, women are less educated and own fewer assets than men on average; with their children, they suffer the greatest degrees of food and housing insecurity; the parlous state of health and other infrastructure in the country results in some of the worst maternal mortality rates in the world, and so on (e.g. see Mandy Jollie Bako and Jawad Syed 2018). Conversely, the face of power is male. Women are grossly under-represented in political office for reasons including the masculinism and violence that characterise electioneering in Nigeria, the very high financial barriers to entry, earlier mentioned culturalist challenges to their very right to contest, and sheer, banal sexism (e.g. see Damilola Taiye Agbalajobi 2021; Irene A. Pogoson 2012). Women also occupy fewer and less powerful positions of traditional and religious authority than men.

Certainly, in the 7,000-plus original tweets from the first day of the #BFIN campaign that I collected and read and sorted through, mention can be found to almost all of the crucial issues mentioned above. However, as the article will show, with the exception of domestic violence and sexual harassment to a lesser extent, these issues were not among the campaign's main themes of discussion. Firstly, the lens of the campaign was hardly trained on the "macro" problems of Nigeria, nor, relatedly, was the state much in view. The discussion was also little about culture in the form of reified "custom" or "tradition." Instead, in tweet after tweet, the topic was everyday life, and culture as made and located there, thus culture as lived daily practice. And even here, again as the article will show, most often the focus was on the decidely "*micro*," on the commonplace, passing, often banal and little-actionable attitudes, remarks, rationalities and practices that put women down in the course of their everyday activities and interactions. To recall Olofintuade's (2017) first summation of what the #BFIN hashtag campaign was about, cited at the outset of the article: "everyday sexism."

The "micro" of women's oppression in Nigeria, or what I will continue to follow Olofintuade (2017) to call "everyday sexism," has not been a focal object of feminist research. This is not to say that it is therefore unknown or unconsidered in the literature. It surfaces invariably in considerations of the "macro" issues, for one, being a constitutive factor, part of the "cultural scaffold." For instance, among the factors that Irene A. Pogoson (2012) implicates in the structural marginalisation of Nigerian women from formal politics are mundane sexist attitudes, such as that ambitious women may be considered "morally loose." Everyday sexism also comes into view in the literature on textual representations of women and gender relations in Nigeria, and on the cultural construction of Nigerian femininities more broadly (e.g. see Adedayo Abah 2008; Grace Adeniyi-Ogunyankin 2014; Oluwakemi Balogun 2020; Simidele Dosekun 2020; Stephanie Newell 1996; Phil Okeke 2000). In her work on representations of women in Nollywood film, for instance, Adedayo Abah finds what I argue was a central claim of the #BFIN Tweeters, namely that independent and upwardly mobile women are disciplined and diminished via constant reminders "that everything they have worked hard to achieve is irrelevant without conforming to the cultural construct of a good woman in their domestic lives" (2008, 235). In the scholarly literature as well as in the depictions of the #BFIN tweets, the dominant cultural construction of the "good Nigerian woman" is deeply patriarchal and conservative. It is a woman subservient to men ultimately and dutiful to family, assuming the traditional gendered roles of motherhood and domesticity, and maintaining bodily, especially sexual, "respectability."

This article adds to existing knowledge of everyday sexism in Nigeria by foregrounding Nigerian women's own accounts and representations of it. With the exception of another article on the #BFIN hashtag campaign, by Akinbobola (2020), I am not aware of other published feminist scholarship that centres such accounts by not only Nigerian women but African women. The research gap is not delimited to Africa, though. Women's accounts of everyday sexism are under-researched generally, including because of the methodological challenge, for feminist researchers, of generating "data" from women about that which they may experience as precisely fleeting and forgettable (Fiona Vera-Gray 2017). Feminist hashtag events offer one way around this challenge.

Feminist networked counterpublics

Women around the world increasingly are using the hashtag function on Twitter for what can be read—but may not always be named—as feminist purposes, such as to share their personal experiences of gendered injustice or to mobilise around a particular case or event. Women in Africa are no exception. In addition to #BFIN, recent cases of feminist tweeting from Nigeria alone include #BringBackOurGirls, #ArewaMeToo, #marketmarch and #JusticeforUwa. The feminist literature on hashtag feminisms is also fast growing, concerned with questions such as the nature, technocultural processes, and discursive strategies of the new form and site of feminist activism (e.g. Hester Baer 2016; Rosemary Clark-Parsons 2019); its political potential and limitations, including if and how it connects to offline action (e.g. Amanda Gouws 2018; Candi Carter Olson 2016); and the kinds of feminist publics convened, and excluded (e.g. Sarah Jackson and Sonia Banaszczyk 2016; Sonora Jha 2018; Verity Trott 2020). African cases are under-represented in this literature thus far, and even where they do appear, it is not always the case that African women are meaningfully in the frame because one strand of research concern has been with the reception, uptake and meanings of their campaigns *in the global North* (e.g. Helen Berents 2016; Shenila Khoja-Moolji 2015; Meredith Loken 2014; Mary Maxfield 2016). Joining, then, a very small subset of the literature on hashtag feminisms that centres African women as the agents and authors of their own campaigns (e.g. Yemisi Akinbobola 2020; Amanda Gouws 2018; Awino Okech 2021; Tamara Shefer and T. Tigist Shewarega Hussen 2020), the article makes an important empirical, and indeed epistemological, contribution to the wider field of research.

Feminist hashtag campaigns can be understood as networked counterpublic events (Jackson and Banaszczyk 2016). They comprise networked "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Nancy Fraser 1990, 67). As the campaigns make quite evident, counterpublics are not enclaves—"safe spaces" for their members, purposively hidden from the sight and hearing of non-members, and so on (Fraser 1990). To the contrary, counterpublics are fundamentally "*publicist*" in orientation (Fraser 1990, 67 original emphasis). They address their counterdiscourses to wider and more dominant publics, challenging, seeking to shift, and thereby also politicising dominant knowledges and representations of the issues and actors with which they are concerned.

Hyperlinked metatext that any Twitter user may create or cite at any time and in so doing initiate or join a themed discussion with other users, hashtags play a constitutive role in both the formation and publicist orientation of networked counterpublics. They enable potentially massive numbers of Twitter users to assemble as a discoursing collective in the first place, and aggregating tweets, help to raise their collective profile or visibility. For feminist purposes, the hashtagged aggregation of tweet upon tweet attesting to some aspect of women's gendered experience has further potential epistemological and political value beyond simply drawing public attention. It also helps to evidence that the experience in question is systemic and patterned rather than individual or random, and helps to generate and circulate politically productive, if also likely painful, affects too (Clark-Parsons 2019; Jessalynn Keller, Kaitlynn Mendes and Jessica Ringrose 2018).

Many #BFIN "meta-tweets"—tweets commenting upon the hashtag campaign itself (Clark-Parsons 2019)—spoke of the campaign in the conceptual terms being outlined here, as a counterpublic discursive and epistemological intervention, and therein deeply political. For example:

> The #BeingFemaleInNigeria is the reality that I've only heard whispers of finally coming together into a loud voice. Keep it up. #SpeakTruth

Tweets like these, together with the fundamental feminist insistence that women's knowledges and accounts of their own oppressions matter and must be heard, inform and affirm the concern in this article with what #BFIN campaign participants had to say of the experience of Nigerian womanhood. But in posing and seeking to answer this question, it is crucial not to reify or romanticise women's voices and self-representations, and feminist counterpublics by extension, as if they are somehow unmediated and pure, as if they, too, are not riven by power, and not engaged in the construction and contestation of "reality." Counterpublics are not monolithic and unified, nor are they "always necessarily virtuous" (Fraser 1990, 67). Jackson and Banaszczyk (2016) provide a case in point in their study of the US-centered hashtag campaigns "#YesAllWomen" and #YesAllWhiteWomen." While the first hashtag was used to assert that "all women" are forced to anticipate and fear the possibility of male violence in their daily lives, the second was mobilised to critique the feminist counterpublic making this assertion, and the evidence and commentary being proffered, as racially exclusionary. Jackson and Banaszczyk (2016) thus propose a distinction between what they call "traditional" and more "oppositional" feminist counterpublics in terms of how intersectional a view of power they take. Their study also illustrates the import of an intersectional *analytic approach* to feminist hashtag campaigns and counterpublics, that is to say, an approach concerned with the "overlapping and conflicting dynamics of race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, and other inequalities" *within* these formations (Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw and Leslie McCall 2013, 788).

The literature on feminist hashtag campaigns has not taken intersectionality into consideration sufficiently. #MeToo, for instance, has been broached little through this analytic lens, and this despite the fact that there has been a lot of public commentary about the race politics of the initial campaign. Verity Trott (2020) offers an exception, and critique. In my reading, we tend to find an intersectional approach to hashtag feminisms in three broad cases, the first two of which are interrelated. One: when intersectionality is raised directly by the campaign participants, as in the case of "#YesAllWomen" and "#YesAllWhiteWomen" already mentioned or, similarly, "#SayHerName" (e.g. Melissa Brown, Rashawn Ray, Ed Summers and Neil Fraistat 2017). Two: when the campaign centers on contextually minoritised women, like African-American women or transwomen (e.g. Mia Fischer 2016; Sarah Jackson, Moya Bailey and Brooke Foucault Welles 2018). Three: when it is a case of women in the global North tweeting and retweeting a feminist cause from the South. "#BringBackOurGirls" is an exemplary case. Coined by a Nigerian Twitter user in 2014 in protest against the terrorist kidnapping of almost 300 girls in Northern Nigeria that year, existing intersectional readings of the explosive uptake of the hashtag in the global North include that it was a case of "imperialist feminist appropriation" (Maxfield 2016), and one thoroughly premised upon the longstanding gendered and racialised pathologisation of the global South, and of Muslim men (e.g. Berents 2016; Khoja-Moolji 2015).

My contention, in short, is that analytic attention has tended to be paid to questions of power and positionality within feminist hashtag campaigns when these are *glaring* features of the campaigns themselves, but hardly otherwise, hardly when the campaigns seem to concern and interpellate a contextually unmarked or even universalised category of "women." This is a major ommission in the literature because it means that central and in fact constitutive aspects of the politics and complexities of hashtag feminisms are being missed or glossed over. Sonora Jha (2018) provides an instructive exception in her study of the Indian feminist campaign "#whyloiter," which informs this article. It could be said simply that #whyloiter consisted of "Indian women" protesting violence against women in urban public spaces, but Jha shows, specifies, that the participants were largely "urban middle class, English-speaking, and digital-native" types (Jha 2018, 73), and argues that these are actually the types of Indian women with most privileged and securitized access to the spaces in contention. Thus by not attending to gender in isolation but rather considering its locally salient articulations with other variously global and local structures of power, Jha (2018) shows how an intersectional lens can usefully complexify feminist understandings of feminist hashtags events.

Methodology

This article is based on a random sample of 700 original #BFIN tweets that, in my reading, used the hashtag to make critical claims and representations about problems and injustices that attend womanhood in Nigeria. The sample derives from a set of just over 7,000 original #BFIN tweets published on June 30 2015, which I downloaded from Twitter in January 2017, of which 5,946 used the hashtag in the minimally feminist manner described above.

The analysis of the 700 tweets sampled for this article involved two stages, and is informed, too, by my initial reading and sorting of the 7,000-plus original tweets. The first stage of the analysis comprised inductive thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is an interpretive method for systematically identifying and analysing the patterns of meaning within a body of qualitative data (Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke 2006). Condensing the data into overarching themes, it lends itself to a qualitative analysis of relatively large bodies of text. The article presents the most prevalent and salient themes that I found in the sample of tweets. I arrived at these themes by reading each tweet closely to identify what it was about, and coded accordingly using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. In particular, I read and coded the tweets for the types of gendered scenarios and issues being discussed (e.g. sexual harassment), the actors and relationships directly involved (e.g. mothers-in-law), the spatio-temporal context, if stated or directly pertinent (e.g. nighttime leisure spaces), and any analysis or commentary proffered about the causes of, or remedies to, the issue at hand (e.g. the law).

The second stage of the analysis was the intersectional one. Understanding subject positions as discursive-material positions that are constituted by, and variously reflect and refract intersectional power dynamics, I read the data closely for the Nigerian female subject positions written into the tweets, whether explicitly or implied. In other words, I read each tweet asking who and where a Nigerian woman would have to be, in terms of the intersecting of gender with structures and dynamics of age, education, class, sexuality, and so on, to be the subject of, or indeed subjected to, the various experiences and

rationalities of patriarchal power represented in the tweet. It was the combination of the two levels of analysis that led me to the article's central argument that the campaign centered thematically on often "little" ways in which a relatively privileged and empowered type of Nigerian woman is diminished and disparaged as she goes about her everyday.

Findings

Two overlapping themes dominated the #BFIN tweets analysed in this article: heterosexual marriage, and the routine sexist denial and delegitimation of a very particular type of young Nigerian woman that I conceptualise and figure as "empowered." In what follows, I discuss two aspects of each of these themes: (1) the primacy of marriage for young Nigerian women; (2) the injustices of the "typical Nigerian marriage"; (3) the sexualised delegitimation of the "empowered young woman"; and (4) public reassertions of male authority over the "empowered young woman." I present the tweets below as they appeared in the campaign, unedited for errors or quirks of spelling, grammar or formatting, but without any associated Twitter usernames to respect participants' privacy.

The primacy of marriage

As Akinbobola (2020) also found in her discursive analysis of #BFIN tweets, marriage and heterosexual relationships were the single largest theme of discussion. According to the tweets, in Nigeria women are not fully respected or recognised until they are married, and promptly thereafter mothers, and this is conveyed to them continually through mundane remarks, attitudes, and practices. One participant caricatured the reported cultural mindset with the tweet:

> #BeingFemaleInNigeria I cured HIV I am a Billionaire BUT Are you married? Do you have children?

Another put the point more plainly:

> #BeingFemaleInNigeria we're made to feel like if we're not married, we have failed.

Campaign participants claimed that because of the utter primacy placed on heterosexual marriage for Nigerian women, from about their mid-twenties women face immense pressure from a range of actors to get married. This pressure was said to take the form of persistent expectation, advice, and material action or inaction by others for women to make marriage their utmost priority, to subsume all other desires, plans and ambitions to it, and to be careful to not diminish or jeopardise their "marriageability." Perceived threats to a young Nigerian woman's marriageability, of which many of the #BFIN Tweeters reported being warned personally, include being or seeming "too sexually liberated," leaving marriage "too late," lacking domestic skills or sensibilities, being educationally or professionally "over-ambitious," and having and, more importantly, exhibiting significant social and financial independence. The advice, in a nutshell, was not to be or become, or at the very least not appear, "too empowered." For example:

> Smart young lady, successful in her career and very outspoken gets vibes like: "You talk too much.Who will marry you?" #BeingFemaleinNigeria

> A relative of mine told me few years ago NOT to have/drive a car, so as not to drive potential suitors away #BeingFemaleInNigeria

> #BeingFemaleInNIgeria Having your father starve you, financially because he'd rather u were married than pursuing a masters

A related dilemma reported in the tweets is that even as women are encouraged to make marriage their ultimate goal and made to believe and feel that it will be their greatest achievement, and warned that their biological and social "clocks" are ticking, they are discouraged from taking action to initiate romance with men or to steer existing relationships towards marriage. In their accounts, to be a marriageable young Nigerian woman also requires being passive about marriage with actual or prospective male partners, ceding agency, authority, and choice over the matter to men.

The injustices of the "typical Nigerian marriage"

Tweet after tweet described what I will call "the typical Nigerian marriage" as one in which women suffer greatly. Both directly and indirectly, the tweets blamed "the typical Nigerian husband." But other actors and forces were very much implicated too, from women's natal families and in-laws to religious authorities to "the culture" at large. In fact, overall, participants' critiques of the typical Nigerian marriage, and what read often as expressions of pain and betrayal, were directed less at "the typical husband" than at the cast of external characters said to support and excuse his unjust behaviour, and expect and exhort the typical Nigerian wife to "endure."

In addition to domestic violence and infidelity, which were significant themes in their own right in the data (also Akinbobola 2020), the reported conditions that a Nigerian wife is likely to face and be expected to endure include her husband's chauvinist attitudes and behaviour, mistreatment by her in-laws, and, alongside a demanding and potentially "bread-winning" career outside the home, near sole responsibility for the domestic, parental, emotional, and even spiritual labours of keeping her marriage and family intact. For example:

> #beingfemaleinnigeria endure your husbands cheating/abuse because "you're not the first" and because "the kids"

> #beingfemaleinNigeria you have put in the time at work and still come home to house chores

> #BeingFemaleInNigeria even if you are the bread winner of the mArraige you will still be treated as less than an equal from your husband

As in the first tweet above, a recurring contention was that domestic violence is normalised in Nigeria as women's common lot, hence something that the individual woman must come to accept. Participants also claimed that not only are women blamed for this violence, they are expected and counselled to make amends for it. The typical Nigerian husband is also not held accountable for cheating on his wife, participants alleged. Instead, ready to excuse his actions is a "male sex drive discourse," which positions men as naturally driven by, and unable to control, their sexual urges (Wendy Hollway 1984),

and articulating with this, they claimed, are sexist notions that it is ultimately a woman's responsibility to keep her husband faithful by keeping him satisfied—and not only sexually. What was painted as, overall, a grossly unfair absolution of male responsibility in the typical marriage extended to infertility and the lack of male children, both of which were named in the tweets as major problems that a Nigerian wife might face, and, once again, be blamed for disproportionately.

Divorce, some Tweeters opined, is not really a socially and culturally viable choice for a Nigerian woman. Others considered that it can be an option, but only if a woman were sure that she could bear the steep psychological and social costs, that she may be "SEEN AS ENTIRELY HOPELESS," for instance, one tweeter declaimed.

Sexualised delegitimation of "the empowered woman"

The tweets were peppered with derogatory sexual names for women: "*ashewo*," "runs girl," "slut," "whore," "hoe." "*Ashewo*" is lingo in Nigeria for "prostitute," for a woman figured as trading sex. "Runs girl" designates a particular "*ashewo*" type, namely a young urban woman who engages in transactional heterosexual relationships, typically with older, wealthy men, and less to escape poverty than to enjoy a consumerist lifestyle and social mobility (e.g. see Oludayo Tade and Adeshewa Adekoya 2012).

A number of tweets reported that breaching conservative gendered codes of "embodied respectability" (Balogun 2020) is reason for a Nigerian woman to be deemed the *ashewo* type. For example:

> Being an 'ashawo' if you wear revealing clothing #beingfemaleinnigeria

However, much more than the politics of embodied respectability, the greater claim and concern in the tweets about the sexualised slandering and typologising of Nigerian women pertained to the politics of "women's empowerment," and to a particular type of Nigerian woman that, figuratively, I call "empowered." As represented and voiced in the tweets, "the empowered Nigerian woman" is educated, capacious, and confident. Independent-minded, she earns and exercises discretion over her own money. To borrow Pumla Gqola's description of a similar type in the "new South Africa," she is an "urban, upwardly mobile woman. She has a career, and she is ambitious and driven" (Gqola 2016, 123; see also Dosekun 2020). The tweets alleged that, in everyday Nigerian life, myriad signs and examples of an empowered young woman's success or achievement in her public endeavours may be read and "explained" as the fruit of her engagement in private heterosexual transacting. Unspecified was whether this alleged, deeply sexist mode of reading successful and achieving women is based on an actual and literal belief that women simply cannot get ahead without male favours, or whether it is just a convenient trope to delegitimate them. Whichever the case, according to the Tweeters, it means for the empowered Nigerian woman that she is haunted by the name and concept of the *ashewo*. Her very empowerment becomes the putative sign that she might be the morally disreputable type. For example:

> #BeingFemaleInNigeria you must be using your body to get good grades at school and then promotion at work

> When a single female is living large even when she has a genuine source of income, dey wil term her *a runs gurl* #BeingFemaleInNigeria

> #BeingFemaleInNigeria if you travel frequently to Dubai, you must be an escort or must have a sugar daddy. No two ways

Participants complained about the moral insult of what they depicted as a mundane cultural commonsense, especially that it refuses to recognise or credit women for their talents, skills and hard work. The ramifications in the workplace are not merely that women are not given their fair dues, some noted. More fundamentally, the notion that women always have the additional resource of heterosex, and thus of men ("provider husbands" included), may mean that their ambitions and material need to advance in the workplace may be overlooked. Yet another possible outcome of the sexualised conceptualisation and suspicion of the empowered young woman discussed in the tweets is that it may force women of this type to compromise their very empowerment and independence by resorting to men to provide them with a "respectable" front. One participant gave an example:

> #beingfemaleinnigeria my friend couldnt rent a 3bedroom house untill she presented her fake husband to her landlady

Public reassertions of male authority over the empowered woman

#BFIN Tweeters described scene after scene of agentic, capacious, and assertive women being silenced, subordinated and invisibilised in the course of their routine public lives. Crucially, as a number of examples below will show, the reported modality of these processes of sexist diminishment was often by way of reference to the patriarchal order of the private sphere. Thus what participants were describing were scenes of women being put "*back*" in their putative position, being reminded that as empowered as they may be in some domains or spheres of their lives, and in their own self-estimation or aspiration, the final, fundamental and also normative order of things remains one of female subordination to men.

A number of the campaign participants cast the problem in terms of "voice," claiming that Nigerian women are expected to mute themselves in public, especially to and for men, at the same time that men do not hesitate to speak for and over them. For example:

> #beingfemaleinNigeria means even male strangers assume they have the right to speak before you in any conversation

> #BeingFemaleInNigeria you can't raise your voice to show you're disgruntled in public, or even scold a man because women don't do that:)

Describing scenarios in which women do challenge men in public, a number of tweets were strikingly uniform in claiming that, as already briefly stated, women's culturally subordinate private status is invoked to discipline them, to cut them back to size:

> When you are upset & raise your voice at a man in public,they'll ask if thats the way you talk to your husband at home #BeingFemaleInNigeria

> #BeingFemaleInNigeria, I heard men say of female co-workers "why's she upset? So, if she were my girlfriend I wouldnt be able to scold her?

> #BeingfemaleinNigeria Him: How dare you talk back!I have your kind at home washin my clothes!Useless Akowe woman.Just because I hit ur car

The last of the tweets above is written in the voice of a man who is at fault in a car accident with a woman and admits as much, but nonetheless dismisses the woman's protestations, indeed her very right to protest, by reminding her that ultimately she is not a subject to him, but an object: a woman, of which he "possesses" one himself, back at home doing his chores. "*Akowe*" is Yoruba for "educated," "learned." Indicated in the depiction of this scene then, and arguably implied in the tweet preceding it about men assuming as much a right to scold women in the workplace as at home, is that, from the male point of view, the "problem" is women's so-called empowerment: it is being an "*akowe*" type that causes a Nigerian woman to forget her place vis-à-vis men.

In addition to such assertive enactments of male supremacy, authority and proprietorship over the empowered Nigerian woman in public, participants reported more quiet and implicit assumptions and performances of the same by third parties. For example:

> #beingfemaleinnigeria is tipping the restaurant worker with YOUR money from YOUR bag but the worker thanking your male companion instead

> #beingfemaleinnigeria u walk into an office with a male PA, and they acknowledge the man b4 u

According to such tweets, for the mere fact of being or appearing in public with a man, in Nigeria a woman may find denied not only her voice, agency and standing, but her personhood, even her mere presence, even when, as in the last example above, she has a higher social status than the man.

Discussion

The viral hashtag campaign "#BeingFemaleinNigeria" brought to Nigerian and more global public attention Nigerian women's accounts and views of gendered oppression and injustice in their everyday lives. Focused on the most prevalent issues and problems and Nigerian female subject positions represented in the campaign, *per force* not retelling the whole story of it, the thematic and intersectional analysis undertaken in this article has shown that the campaign's representations centered a type of young Nigerian woman who, although a product of her socio-cultural environment, finds that she comes to be and do, and have and want, "too much" for it, more than is deemed acceptable, and respectable, for a woman. One participant summed up this type of Nigerian woman's problems thus:

> You're guilty of having aspirations different from what society expects. #BeingFemaleInNigeria

Whether pursuing a master's or PhD degree, driving a Range Rover, travelling abroad, aspiring less to marriage than a professional career or earning more than her husband, to cite but a few further examples from the tweets, as told by the Tweeters the Nigerian woman able and inclined to do such things is subject to patriarchal and sexist restraint,

diminishment, and delegitimation. The forms that her disciplining and disempowerment were said to take include male violence and authoritarianism, sexualised suspicion and slander, and overweening pressure to assume the "proper" subject position and mentalities of the submissive and long-suffering wife.

In a country where over 40% of population lives in extreme poverty, GDP per capita is less than US$3,000, and almost half of adult women are said to be functionally illiterate,[2] it is quite obvious that the dominant textual subject of the #BFIN tweets is very far from representative of Nigerian women as a whole. She is distinguished by clear, often immense, socio-economic advantage, and by an also structural embodied disposition, a habitus, of empowerment, both of which enter constitutively into the fabric and logics of much of the everyday sexism of which the tweets told. Consider, for example, that all the tweets critiquing sexist notions that Nigerian women detract from their marriageability if they become "too educated" concerned their pursuit of *postgraduate* education specifically, which is to say, a level of "too educated" very far beyond the material reach of most and "average" Nigerian women.

But if class is glaring as an analytic without which the predominant themes, claims and textual voices of the #BFIN hashtag campaign cannot be understood, also glaring was its absence or invisibility as a critical consideration within the tweets themselves. The relatively or in some cases extremely privileged material conditions contained within and often necessary to many of the scenes and logics of everyday sexism depicted in the tweets went unnamed, unacknowleged, and unreflected upon. The lack of reflection upon the mediations of class in what was being tweeted included a lack of consideration of class *difference*, that class mediates differentially. One critical result, I argue, is that there was a missed opportunity in the campaign to trace and consider the points of connection and continuity, but also divergence, between the kinds of stories, the kinds of tweets, that Nigerian women across the class spectrum might write. For instance, while, as shown, the patriarchal curtailment of Nigerian women's education was a line of discussion and concern in the campaign, in the 700 tweets I analysed there was no reference to or consideration of the fact that, for most Nigerian women or indeed girls who experience this problem, "grinding poverty" is the single largest causal factor intersecting with the sociocultural structure of male dominance (Tope Alabi and Stephen Olabode Alabi 2013, 10). Likewise, while there was nothing in the tweets to suggest that it is only privileged "empowered" types who may find that their "success" invites sexualised suspicion and slandering, there was also no reflection on if and how such constructs are relative. Research from across Africa, not just Nigeria, has shown that working class urban women and girls deemed "too independent" and "haughty" for their social station have long been imagined, called and acted upon as sexually disreputable, including, quite crucially, *by elite women* (e.g. see Saheed Aderinto 2015; Abosede George 2014).

A small number of the tweets were actively elitist, where part of the problem being described and regretted was that a Nigerian woman might find herself pushed by patriarchal norms towards gendered subject positions, practices and modes of embodiment "inferior" to her own, belonging ordinarily to working class or even immiserated others. For example:

> #BeingFemaleInNigeria means all the house chores responsibility is on you alone unless you employ a house girl

> #BeingFemaleInNigeria U dare not say you don't like cooking or even be lazy abt it. ur manicure even tells alot about hw domesticated u r

As I have already begun to indicate, like material privilege, also unnamed and unreflected upon in the tweets was the converse matter of poverty. This is an utterly striking omission given how large and central poverty is as a social issue in Nigeria, and how manifest, how visible it is, arguably even for those who might not live it personally. Of the 700 tweets upon which this article is based, *only two* explicitly addressed the intersecting and imbricating of gendered and classed oppressions:

> #BeingFemaleInNigeria girls from poorer homes had to hawk on the street, and suffered being groped by entitled men

> #BeingFemaleInNigeria Being very unfair to domestic female domestic workers

As I read it, the subject of the last tweet is not the mistreated domestic worker, rather the subject is the antagonist, the one *being* "very unfair." If so, the tweet gestures towards the fact that, for some Nigerian women, the experience of Nigerian womanhood includes the experience of oppressing less powerful or opportuned Nigerian women. Thus the tweet surfaces as one factor in the gendered subjugation of Nigerian women unequal power relations between said women themselves.

Except where maternal figures were being blamed for imposing patriarchal values on younger women, the findings of this article are that consciousness of "the vexed dynamics of difference and the solidarities of sameness" (Cho et al. 2013, 787) within the social and identity category of "female and Nigerian" appears tended to be absent from the #BFIN campaign. So too was "awareness of one's disadvantage on one dimension of identity intersecting with advantage on another dimension" (Ronni Michelle Greenwood and Aidan Christian 2008, 406). This last point is particularly pertinent given that, as the article has sought to show, the tweets tended to enunciate and problematise gendered disadvantage from other social positions that were quite advantageous and normative. Thus in addition to being unrepresentative of and for the larger Nigerian context, on balance the campaign's representations showed a lack of intersectional consciousness and reflexivity about this context, around social class especially.

Yet that the #BFIN campaign may not have told of all, most or even "typical" Nigerian women, that its predominant voice tended to be unreflexive about the mediations of class and privilege, does not simply nullify its feminist political and epistemological import. Women's stories of what we might perhaps now need to qualify as "elite everyday sexism" are still stories of sexism, and for them to be told and publicised, and aggregated and archived, matters. They are also instructive. One of the many things the relative elitism of the representations and discourses of the #BFIN campaign allows us to consider is that patriarchal power does not simply retreat as women advance.

But also of utmost import for how this campaign is researched, understood, and represented, by feminists especially, is to not miss or minimise its various exclusions, contradictions, even oppressive contentions and ommissions for different kinds of Nigerian women, rendering it a simple, and simply to-be-celebrated, case of Nigerian and African feminist counterpublic activism and knowledge production. It is obvious that just because a hashtag campaign challenges patriarchal power does not mean that, whether in its very conception or as a result of its virality, whether inadvertent or deliberate, the

campaign may not at the same time reinscribe other sites and structures of social power and injustice that bear adversely on some women's lives and stories. It follows that feminist scholars of these crucial and burgeoning sites of feminist activism and self-representation must pay critical attention to their internal politics and constitution, to the fact of power relations, gaps, even hostilities, between women. To not do so is to risk complicity in these dynamics, such that our scholarship joins and undergirds "structures of knowledge production that can themselves be the object of intersectional critique" (Cho et al. 2013, 796).

Notes

1. According to the data I downloaded from Twitter in January 2017.
2. Statistics retrieved on June 19 2020, from https://ourworldindata.org/country/nigeria

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