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IN THE GRIP OF TRADITIONALISM?

How Nigerian Middle-Class Working Mothers Navigate Normative Ideals of Femininity

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Changing socioeconomic conditions are enticing more and more Nigerian mothers to work and pursue careers. This article explores how middle-class professional women navigate working mother subjectivities in the context of Nigeria's strong patriarchal culture, where traditional notions of maternal femininity prevail. We argue that the working mother's subjectivity is a key site where the struggle over gendered cultural meanings takes place. Drawing on 32 qualitative interviews, we demonstrate how a small group of women refused traditional feminine subject positions; however, most mothers either

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embraced or reluctantly acquiesced to traditional femininity, despite having access to broader cultural repertoires and material resources. By unveiling the complexities of the cultural appeal of traditional femininity and social penalties for breaching it, the article extends our understanding of how patriarchal cultures resist gendered change and the nuances and limits of individual patterns of resistance.

Keywords: *working mothers; Nigeria; patriarchy; gendered subjectivity; gendered resistance; traditionalism*

In the last decade, a substantial body of literature has explored how working mothers, particularly those in demanding careers, navigate "competing devotions" of motherhood and career, and the implications this has for gender (in)equality (Blair-Loy 2005; Christopher 2012; Dow 2019). In response to recent criticisms of the Western-centric focus in much of this theorizing, more analyses have begun to emerge that explore working mothers' experiences in the Global South, including sub-Saharan Africa (e.g., Adisa, Abdulraheem, and Isiaka 2019; Adisa et al. 2021; Ajonbadi, Mordi, and Adekoya 2023; Amah 2021; Epie 2023; Odunsi and Hosek 2024; Stumbitz and Jaga 2020). These studies have documented multiple organizational, social, and family factors that exacerbate mothers' work–family conflict. However, little attention has been paid so far to understanding the implications that these conflicting experiences may have for traditional gender-role configurations prevalent in these patriarchal contexts. Given the rapidly increasing number of women in sub-Saharan Africa's workforce (Statista 2023), and that the incompatibility of motherhood responsibilities with employment has been shown to change women's traditional gender attitudes (Evans 2014; Zhou 2017), such analysis is particularly pertinent. In this article, to further understand the constraints and possibilities of reconfiguring gender in patriarchal contexts, we aim to explore how working mothers in demanding professional jobs in Nigeria navigate traditional ideals of motherhood and femininity.

To address this question, we draw on feminist analysis that approaches femininity as a vital site of gendered power dynamics and suggests that various constructions of femininity can both reproduce and resist the gendered status quo (Heath 2019; Kamran 2021; Moore 2015). Whereas several studies have explored how women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds navigate traditional femininity in patriarchal contexts, we focus on the accounts of more privileged middle-class working mothers in Nigeria, to deepen the understanding of these dynamics. Nigeria offers an interesting context to explore this. On the one hand, it is characterized by

a strong patriarchal culture, where traditional ideals of femininity are firmly associated with motherhood, submission, and domesticity (Adisa, Abdulraheem, and Isiaka 2019; Adisa et al. 2021; Mordi et al. 2023). However, economic conditions are driving more women to pursue careers, with approximately 80 percent of Nigerian households reporting both partners working (Amah 2021). Furthermore, the global discourse on women's rights (Tripp et al., 2009) and the rise of social media have given voice to popular African feminisms (Adichie 2014) and exposed Nigerian women to the Western cultural representation of successful career women, empowerment, and choice (Bawa and Ogunyankin 2018; Dosekun 2015). Professional middle-class women, in particular, have wider access to this broad range of cultural repertoires to interpret their experiences (Swidler 2001) and possess material resources that may enable wider social choices. By exploring how they navigate conflicting ideals of femininity, we aim to extend understanding of how traditional cultures resist or may be influenced by new gendered ideals for change (Jung and Moon 2024).

Drawing on 32 qualitative interviews with professional working mothers in Nigerian urban centers, we extend the growing analysis of the lived experiences of working mothers in sub-Saharan Africa (Adisa, Abdulraheem, and Isiaka 2019; Adisa et al. 2021; Epie 2023; Odunsi and Hosek 2024) by arguing that working mother's subjectivity—the unique perspectives, experiences, and interpretations that shape women's lived realities as mothers and workers—represents a key site of the gendered power struggle for Nigerian women, where both disruption and reproduction of the patriarchal culture can occur. We show how these middle-class mothers make sense of themselves vis-à-vis traditional ideals of femininity in three ways: some embrace traditional maternal femininity, some ambivalently acquiesce to it, and only a small minority refuse it in favor of new repertoires of emancipation. Our analysis extends the current understanding of micro-politics of women's resistance in patriarchal societies (Heath 2019; Jung and Moon 2024; Kamran 2021; Moore 2015; Oktaviani, McKenna, and Fitzsimmons 2021) by showing how adopting the more traditional position is shaped by both its social appeal and the harsh social penalties for divergence, which most women middle-class women were unable or/and unwilling to accept, despite (and sometimes because of) possessing better material and cultural resources. By demonstrating how the refusal of traditional maternal femininity is culturally and socially policed among middle-class women in Nigeria, we add further nuance to sociological knowledge about how patriarchal societies resist change.

WORKING MOTHERS IN NIGERIA AND WORK–LIFE CONFLICT

Nigeria is one of the most populous countries in sub-Saharan Africa, and the share of women in Nigeria's labor force has grown progressively to 53 percent in 2023 (Statista 2023). The country's 2020 Voluntary National Review on sustainable development goals underscored gender equality as a focal issue requiring concerted attention (United Nations 2020). However, although Nigeria has committed to various global and regional treaties promoting gender equality, significant gender disparities persist in politics, education, and employment (Ayodeji and Ade-Ibijola 2022).

Nigerian mothers face significant career progression obstacles, discrimination, and widespread hostility in professional and managerial jobs (Adisa, Abdulraheem, and Isiaka 2019; Adisa et al. 2021; Amah 2021; Odunsi and Hosek 2024). Professional working environments are characterized by a rigid system of strictly enforced gender roles, "hypermasculinity" or an inflated sense of male dominance, and a propensity for gender-based exploitation and abuse (Adisa et al. 2021). Furthermore, even in urban dual-earner Nigerian households strong societal expectations persist about women's primary roles as caregivers and homemakers, and mothers bear the disproportionate burden of domestic and childcare responsibilities (Adisa, Abdulraheem, and Isiaka 2019; Mordi et al., 2023). The Nigerian Labor Act does not include any provisions allowing employees to request flexible working hours (Paul and Sadanandan 2022), and there is also a lack of state support such as housing subsidies, child benefits, and income support, which are common in most Western countries (Mordi et al. 2023). Consequently, working mothers depend significantly on extended family and community support (Amah 2021) or rely on relatively cheap labor of domestic workers, which is not unproblematic (Adisa, Abdulraheem, and Isiaka 2019; Adisa et al. 2021; Mordi et al. 2023). Thus, professional working mothers experience severe pressures when balancing careers and family (Ajonbadi, Mordi, and Adekoya 2023).

Existing analyses have focused predominantly on unveiling how patriarchal culture translates into workplace inequalities, exacerbating working mothers' work–family conflict or identifying mothers' coping strategies. However, navigating work–family commitments is not just a technical exercise, but is profoundly linked to how women construct their subjectivities or a sense of self and as good workers or good mothers

(Adamson, Muhr, and Beauregard 2023). In the Western context, for instance, many professional women continue to chase a socially appealing ideal of a successfully balanced working mother (Adamson 2017) who "has it all," even though the pursuit of this cultural fantasy tends to result in burnout and maternal guilt and can push women to opt out of successful careers (Orgad 2019). Yet, Western working mothers also creatively reframe the meanings of "good mothering," thus undoing at least some of the dominant gendered meanings (Christopher 2012; Dow 2019). As more and more professional Nigerian mothers experience severe conflict between traditional ideals of motherhood as a primary woman's calling and new visions of career success, it is important to understand whether or how these experiences may reconfigure the traditional feminine gender roles in this patriarchal context. To explore this, below we build on the recent analysis of femininity and social change.

FEMININITY CONFIGURATIONS, RESISTANCE, AND GENDERED SOCIAL CHANGE

The relationship between configurations of femininity and social change has been the focal point of much feminist analysis, which shows that femininity is a site of regulation and negotiation of gender norms (Dosekun 2015; Heath 2019; Kamran 2021; Moore 2015; Oktaviani, McKenna, and Fitzsimmons 2021). Some forms of femininity, often described as traditional, are "characterized by compliance with women's subordination and an orientation towards accommodating the interests and desires of men" (Connell 1987, 184), which reproduce patriarchal structure. However, women may resist patriarchal culture by adopting different forms of femininity (Kandiyoti 1988). Moore (2015), for instance, shows how some rural women in South Africa adopted ambivalent femininity, which involved "passive" resistance—adhering to traditionalist expectations but displaying dissatisfaction with oppressive practices. Others adopted alternative femininity using more active strategies of challenging subordination. Jaji's (2014) study of refugee women in Kenya reveals a similar typology. For instance, many poor married women performed traditional femininity to remain in marriage, but some displayed an "agitated" femininity, which manifested as disgruntlement and questioning the gendered norms of marriage and submission. Unmarried women, on the other hand, demonstrated rebellious femininity, which worked as a resource to challenge stereotypical views of gender.

Kamran (2021) further argues that working-class women market traders switched between the traditional and more stigmatized forms of femininity when trading, and thus were "undoing" some constructions of gender. Overall, these studies show the value of developing a contextually situated understanding of the micro-politics of resistance or how everyday practices and construction of new meanings may challenge the structures of domination in patriarchal cultures (Heath 2019; Kandiyoti 1988).

Most research on femininity configurations and resistance in the context of the Global South has, understandably, focused on women who inhabit marginalized or lower socioeconomic class positions or come from rural areas (Balogun 2012; Dosekun 2015; Jaji 2014; Kamran 2021; Moore 2015; Stumbitz and Jaga 2020). Less consideration has been given to understanding how more privileged and middle-class women navigate traditional femininities (Oktaviani, McKenna, and Fitzsimmons 2021). This lack of attention may be underpinned partly by the assumption that middle-class women hold more economic and cultural capital and power and consequently may suffer less oppression. Indeed, all our interviewees were well educated and held relatively privileged and well-paid jobs. Furthermore, middle-class women also have access to broader and more diverse cultural capital and resources through access to higher education, social media, wider international networks, and so on; hence, they possess a wider range of cultural repertoires to interpret and reconfigure their feminine subjectivities (Swidler 2001). This makes this population theoretically interesting, because it allows us to explore whether these women are better able to resist traditional configurations of femininity or/and whether different resources may potentially translate into different strategies of resistance that challenge traditional femininity. In doing so, we aim to expand our understanding of how patriarchal cultures resist or may be penetrated by the new gendered ideals (Jung and Moon 2024).

Given this more privileged group of women, resistance or adherence to traditional roles must be understood beyond explicit coercion. Therefore, we analyze femininity from the feminist poststructuralist perspective because it is a particularly useful way to understand why individuals comply with certain oppressive practices in the absence of direct physical force or the threat of violence (Gavey 2011). In fact, although existing research explores the different forms of femininity that may constitute resistance (Jaji 2014; Kamran 2021; Moore 2015), more analysis is needed on what entices women to adopt these. The feminist poststructuralist approach, underpinned by Foucauldian understanding of power (Foucault 1982), suggests that competing social discourses offer

individuals various subject positions or ways of being in the world, and that individuals make sense of themselves through adopting these socially and historically specific subjectivities (Weedon 1987). While the dominant discourses construct subject positions that sustain the status quo, social change arises out of contestation between discourses, as new discourses offer alternative subject positions that may be more appealing (Weedon 1987). Hence, resistance may depend on the availability of alternatives in the broader cultural repertoire of discursive resources (Oktaviani, McKenna, and Fitzsimmons 2021; Swidler 2001). For instance, Balogun (2012, 357) has illustrated how African women are constructed "as cultural bearers of tradition through tropes of domesticity, motherhood, and modesty," yet they are also "symbols of modernization through discourses of work, politics, and sexuality." In theoretical terms, the presence of these competing discourses opens the space for change to the dominant femininity ideals. New discourses may be marginalized; for instance, feminist discourses are often considered "un-African" (Adichie 2014). Yet, the emergence and presence of alternative repertoires offer subjects new vocabularies, creating the potential for destabilizing certain traditional configurations of femininity.

Motherhood, in particular, is a strongly regulated feminine subjectivity in patriarchal societies. In Nigeria, the traditional ideal of femininity is strongly linked to maternity, domestication, and subordination (Adisa, Abdulraheem, and Isiaka 2019; Mordi et al. 2023). Marriage is seen as a key identity and aspiration for women, and divorce incurs significant stigma and social penalty (Lazarus et al. 2017). This ideal of motherhood as a primary woman's role is underpinned by a complex mix of cultural, historical, and religious discourses: Postcolonial Africa is often described as having a "triple heritage" of indigenous practices, colonization, and the spread of Christianity and Islam (Jaji 2014; Mazrui 1983). It is rooted in cultural customs of prioritizing communal childrearing and strong family bonds (Dow 2019). It is also reinforced in both Islamic and Christian teachings, which emphasize motherhood as a sacred duty of women along with submissiveness to men in the private and public domain (Kaunda and Pokol 2019). Moreover, in a complex entanglement of postcolonialism and nation building, traditional maternal femininity is also about representing and belonging to the national community (Balogun 2012; Lazarus et al. 2017). For instance, Western feminist discourses remain marginal as feminism is perceived as a "man-hating philosophy" that rejects marriage and motherhood, promoting emasculation of men, which is "un-African" and at odds with traditional African values (Adichie 2014; Norwood 2013).

However, new discourses are also emerging, offering women alternative ways of making sense of themselves as working mothers. National and international advocacy organizations have popularized the discourse of women's equality and economic rights (Tripp et al. 2009). Nigerian women are increasingly cognizant of the existing gender gap, experiences of marginalization, and social injustice (Omontese 2023), and such awareness can be key to resisting subordination (Evans 2014; Moore 2015). The burgeoning social media has been pivotal in popularizing the new vocabularies of women's empowerment and career aspirations. Social media and digital platforms have amplified the voice of women's movements that advocate for greater inclusion of women across societal spheres (Chiluwa 2022) and have offered space for grassroots campaigns that challenge entrenched gender norms and stereotypes (Omontese 2023). Media platforms allow women to debate and learn about the complexities of African womanhood and African feminism (Lawal, Salisu, and Bappa-yaya 2022; Norwood 2013). Social media also circulates transnational popular feminist imagery of an empowered and successful career woman, and while these discourses filter in complex ways into local culture (Bawa and Ogunyankin 2018; Dosekun 2015), they, nonetheless, offer new alternative cultural repertoires of constructing femininity and motherhood. Against this complex sociocultural background, we investigate how professional Nigerian women make sense of themselves and negotiate the dominant traditional ideals of maternal femininity and emerging discourses of career and emancipation.

METHODS

The study draws on qualitative analysis that enables an in-depth exploration of women's accounts. We used purposive sampling to recruit and interview 32 working mothers in Nigeria. We were interested in the dynamics of navigating the self while balancing career and family, so we sought participants who worked in professional and managerial jobs and who had a spouse or partner and (at least one) dependent child. The participants were recruited in major urban cities across four states in Nigeria, including Lagos, Abuja, Kano, and Rivers, because most middle-class professionals tend to be concentrated in major urban centers. The initial call was circulated through social media and personal and professional networks, particularly within Nigerian WhatsApp groups dedicated to academic discussions, where some authors are active participants—with subsequent snowball sampling through referrals from our initial contacts. As indicated in Table 1 (describing participants' demographic profiles),

TABLE 1: Participants' Demographic Profile

Participant names (pseudonyms)	*Age (years)*	*Number of dependent children*	*Job title/company classification*	*Religion*	*Working arrangement*	*Education qualification*	*Participant location*
Mary	30	3	Accountant/advertising services	Christian	Full-time	Graduate	Abuja
Juliana	37	2	Nursing associate/medical services	Christian	Part-time	Graduate	Lagos
Zainab	32	3	Manager/financial services	Muslim	Full-time	Postgraduate	Lagos
Abigail	30	3	Teacher/primary education	Christian	Part-time	Diploma	Lagos
Margaret	33	3	Customer services manager/telecommunication	Christian	Part-time	Graduate	Abuja
Aisha	27	2	Commercial executive/manufacturing	Muslim	Full-time	Graduate	Lagos
Christine	36	3	Senior associate/financial services	Christian	Full-time	Postgraduate	Rivers
Cynthia	28	2	Sales and marketing lead/manufacturing	Christian	Full-time	Graduate	Rivers
Emmanuella	33	3	Marketing executive/manufacturing	Christian	Full-time	Graduate	Lagos
Nurat	35	2	Senior lecturer/tertiary education	Muslim	Full-time	Postgraduate	Lagos
Becky	30	2	Senior tax consultant/financial services	Christian	Full-time	Postgraduate	Lagos
Shade	27	1	Digital services manager/advertising services	Christian	Part-time	Graduate	Lagos
Farah	31	3	Procurement officer/manufacturing	Muslim	Full-time	Diploma	Lagos
Sandra	30	3	Strategic partnership lead/financial services	Christian	Full-time	Graduate	Lagos
Florence	38	2	Credit risk manager/financial services	Christian	Full-time	Postgraduate	Lagos
Aaliyah	25	1	Human resource manager/manufacturing	Muslim	Full-time	Graduate	Lagos
Chidinma	31	2	Teacher/secondary education	Christian	Full-time	Graduate	Rivers
Zara	32	3	Teacher/secondary education	Muslim	Part-time	Graduate	Kano
Kate	37	2	Business analyst/retail	Christian	Part-time	Graduate	Lagos
Khadija	30	2	Project manager/IT	Muslim	Part-time	Graduate	Lagos
Amina	36	4	Financial analyst/financial services	Muslim	Full-time	Postgraduate	Abuja
Farida	27	1	Credit controller/financial services	Muslim	Full-time	Graduate	Abuja
Hafsa	29	2	Assistant manager/manufacturing	Muslim	Full-time	Graduate	Lagos
Rebecca	38	3	Lecturer/tertiary education	Christian	Full-time	Postgraduate	Abuja
Dorcas	33	2	Systems manager/telecommunication	Christian	Full-time	Graduate	Lagos
Esther	28	2	Pharmacist/medical services	Christian	Full-time	Graduate	Rivers
Halima	31	2	Teacher/secondary education	Muslim	Full-time	Graduate	Kano
Karimah	30	2	Managing director/retail	Muslim	Full-time	Postgraduate	Lagos
Sylvia	36	3	Senior auditor/financial services	Christian	Full-time	Graduate	Abuja
Nusrat	28	2	Corporate team lead/telecommunication	Muslim	Full-time	Graduate	Lagos
Elizabeth	34	3	Credit analyst/financial services	Christian	Part-time	Postgraduate	Rivers
Sadia	30	2	Production manager/manufacturing	Muslim	Full-time	Postgraduate	Kano

our interviewees were highly educated and worked in professional jobs in different sectors of the economy.

Our backgrounds and experiences may shape our interpretation of the data, yet our team had a unique blend of perspectives and a complex mix of positionalities. Whereas four authors who identify as Black Nigerians could relate as insiders to cultural nuances, a white British second author brought an outsider perspective. We could all relate to participants as fellow professionals; yet, for coauthors who are men, this work also offered an opportunity to pursue important feminist allyship by offering a voice to gendered work–life concerns. While not representative of the differing social and economic realities of all Nigerian women, our sample is consistent with the aim to explore and tease out the patterns and complexities of how a more privileged group of mothers navigate career, family, and spousal roles within a context of rapid urbanization and growing professional class.

After we received the signed informed consent forms, the interviews were conducted virtually, primarily via Zoom and WhatsApp video for those who preferred this contact method. Virtual interviews, while limiting access to some nonverbal cues compared with in-person interactions, offered a more cost-effective and convenient way to connect with busy working mothers (Lobe, Morgan, and Hoffman 2022). Interviews were carried out by the lead author and two research assistants, who also transcribed all the interviews. Each semi-structured interview was conducted in English and lasted for 30–60 minutes. The conversation was initiated with two key questions: (1) How do you see yourself as a working mother in Nigerian society? (2) As a working mother, how do you manage your work and motherhood responsibilities? Follow-up questions were then asked to further explore mothers' experience, such as: How did that make you feel? Why did you make that choice? What or who influenced your decision about that?

Given the exploratory nature of the study, we adopted thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). Preliminary inductive coding was done separately by the first two authors following discussions with co-authors. We used manual coding to identify patterns of words, phrases, and sentences related to how women construct themselves as working mothers, followed by organizing the codes into themes. We then collaboratively refined each of the themes, going back and forth between theory and data in an iterative process. The application of our theoretical framework meant that when refining the codes into themes, we noted the different discursive repertoires that underpinned femininity constructions on which our participants

drew when making sense of themselves as working mothers, noting the patterns of how they engaged with these different discourses. This resulted in the identification of three key patterns in which women negotiated the ideals of traditional femininity: *embracing traditional femininity*, *reluctantly acquiescing to*, and *refusing*. In the next phase of analysis, driven by our theoretical pursuit to understand why women adopt particular femininity constructions, we identified the different appeals and penalties that shaped how women navigated their sense of self as working mothers.

FINDINGS: NAVIGATING TRADITIONAL FEMININITY

When our interviewees were asked how they see themselves as working mothers, almost all started by reiterating how challenging it was to combine the two roles. The presence and pressure of the dominant cultural ideals came through strongly: Virtually all interviewees acknowledged that, as Farah, a 31-year-old procurement officer, put it, "society dictates much of who we are as women." However, the ways in which women engaged with these dictates were complex.

Embracing Traditional Maternal Femininity

Despite having successful careers and well-paid jobs, a significant proportion of our interviewees constructed themselves primarily through the traditional repertoire of motherhood, suggesting that family and children come first, despite their careers, and that they would rather be viewed as good mothers. At a closer look, for most women in this category, these interpretations of "good womanhood" and the role of men and women were underpinned by religious discourses. For instance, Mary, a 30-year-old mother of three, explained:

> In Nigeria, culture and religion support that women should submit to men. As a Christian, the Bible states that I must submit to my husband in everything as a wife because he is my "head." I'm a fervent believer in the gospel . . . I can't go against God's command, so I must see myself as being under my husband's lordship.

Similarly, religious tenets also guided how many Muslim interviewers made sense of the kind of femininity they should aspire to, as illustrated by Farida, a credit controller:

> As a Muslim, it is taught that we can't do work that stops us from fulfilling our domestic work at home . . . The Muslim religion, for example, reserves some exclusive leadership positions for men. So, as a woman, you can't even think of aspiring for those positions.

As Farida's statement indicates, compliance with these traditional repertoires seemed to reduce potential conflict of who they are, because women simply did not feel pressure to aspire to certain careers.

Aisha, who is a commercial executive in manufacturing, also explained:

> My faith is my anchor . . . I know many interpretations of the cultural expectations of men and women exist. Regardless, my personal interpretation of the Holy Qur'an makes it clear that women are to be submissive to men. I don't know why we keep fighting against what Allah has called us to be.

Interestingly, Aisha's statement shows awareness of other ways of interpreting the scripture, possibly reflecting the existence of feminist theology that emphasizes reducing women's marginalization (Kaunda and Pokol 2019). Yet, Aisha is unwilling to draw on these possibly less conservative discourses. Hence, some women we interviewed were clearly aware of alternative cultural discourses, so compliance with traditional ideals cannot be solely interpreted through a lack of alternative vocabulary or direct coercion (Gavey 2011). Instead, the appeal of defining oneself as a good religious subject also shapes women's self-discipline to comply, echoing some existing arguments that women's adherence to religious practices is often motivated by a desire for personal fulfillment and spiritual connection, rather than solely external pressures (Avishai 2008).

Traditional maternal femininity was appealing in other ways too. For instance, like many interviewees, Esther, a 28-year-old pharmacist, argued that "culture allows women to be valued for what we can contribute to the upbringing of our children and taking care of others." Thus, compliance entailed positive outcomes, both personal and, more broadly, feeling part of upholding tradition. Aaliyah, a 25-year-old HR manager explained:

> I think our culture is beautiful regardless of its limitations. . . . As I said, my mother's my role model when it comes to being a good mother and wife . . . I am reaping the fruits today despite still being very young because I have learned that men, and particularly my husband, are happy when you consult them before making decisions or hold them in high esteem . . . I don't get carried away with what's happening out there, especially on social media, because it's often fake lives. . . . We shouldn't lose our religious

> values and traditions because we want a civilized country or because other countries are doing so.

Aaliyah is clearly aware of alternative cultural constructions of femininity circulating on social media, but maintaining family happiness shaped her desire to strive for traditional maternal femininity. She also echoes some existing literature that links the maintenance of traditional gendered subjectivities to nation building through sustaining the sense of pride in cultural values (Balogun 2012).

In fact, some interviewees, such as Dorcas, a 33-year-old systems manager, interpreted the slowly occurring change of the gendered norms as a loss:

> Here in Nigeria, you are required to not just care for your children but also other people's children. I would call it a "community of care," at least, that was how I was brought up by my parents. But I think in our current times, we may be gradually losing those values because, as women, we are much busier than our mothers were years ago.

Furthermore, in circumstances where the workplace remains a gendered environment (Adisa, Abdulraheem, and Isiaka 2019; Adisa et al. 2021), traditional femininity was a much more attractive alternative in contrast to what the "new" career drive had to offer. For instance, like some, Sandra, a 30-year-old mother of three, remarked on the lack of government and workplace support, suggesting that juggling work and motherhood is "both a physical and emotional battle" and involves juggling "many emotions and guilt of not wanting to fail as a mother and career woman." Farida also added:

> Some women in these [top managerial] positions don't even have a life, it's either they are divorced, separated or have issues at home because the industry has this culture where time spent at work is equal to your level of commitment. . . . I don't really see myself doing that because I want to have a life. I can't be leaving home when my children are asleep and then come back late at night.

Both Sandra's and Farida's sentiments echo the tradeoffs of pursuing career-orientated femininity highlighted in the analysis of "competing devotions" (Blair-Loy 2005) for mothers in the Western context, including feelings of guilt and frustration associated with not living up to either motherhood or career ideals (Adamson 2017; Orgad 2019). However, although career-related sacrifices were high, as Karimah, a 30-year-old

managing director, articulated, “The pressure women feel as a failed employee is usually lesser than as a failed mother or wife.” Hence, in the Nigerian context, where traditional maternal subjectivity still affords women an opportunity to achieve a positive sense of self, it is not surprising that many professional working mothers continued to define themselves primarily in these terms.

However, compliance with traditionalism also meant accepting the limitations that come with it. Most interviewees admitted that their husbands did not participate in household and childcare duties and that they alone were shouldering the burden of the “second shift” (Adisa, Abdulraheem, and Isiaka 2019; Adisa et al. 2021; Epie 2023; Mordi et al. 2023). Moreover, as Farah explained, adhering to traditional ideals did not shield women from workplace sexism and discrimination:

> I don’t go about disrespecting men. I think men like it when you are respectful and won’t challenge you if, as a woman, you also don’t challenge them unnecessarily. Some men need rehabilitation, though, because they sometimes do things that make you wonder if they are in their right senses. I remember having an argument with a male colleague at work. . . . .I was trying to make him see his mistakes in a respectful way, but he told me to shut up and said some awful things, which made me upset, and I reported this to HR.

Farah’s example indicates that by simply occupying a professional role women could be perceived in breach of gender norms, even if they endorse them. Farah interprets this paradox through the trope of “exception,” suggesting that only “some” men who are “not in the right senses” would behave like this. Interestingly, this resembles the rhetorical excuse of sexism as an “outdated exception” in the Western context, which scholars argue works to obscure the ingrained inequalities (Adamson 2017). Here, Farah continues to self-discipline, to strive for traditional feminine ideals without further questioning or dissonance.

To sum up, a sizable group of interviewees seemed to embrace traditional motherhood as a central part of their identity due to religious and cultural influences. This brought them a sense of fulfillment and social value, despite facing unequal domestic duties and workplace discrimination.

Reluctant Acquiescence to Traditional Femininity

Although some accepted traditional femininity relatively eagerly, a significant proportion of women did question traditional assumptions.

For instance, Emmanuella, a 33-year-old marketing executive, suggests that "It is scary to know that in 2023, many Nigerian men still think women should solely be responsible for childcare and general household chores . . . all because culture positions them as the head of the family." She implies that these ideals are outdated. Many interviewees agreed, suggesting that family socialization and culture perpetuated these. However, despite reflexive awareness and at least partial disagreement, many women felt they had to comply—albeit reluctantly—due to intense social pressure and the threat of penalties. As Cynthia, a 28-year-old sales and marketing lead, puts it:

> Sometimes, there is nothing we [women] can do about it because you don't want society to say all kinds of stuff about you . . . . They will call you terrible names because they think you altered tradition by disrespecting men; the way they will treat you will be worse than someone who killed or committed murder. Women are suffering in this country, but all we can do is play along if we don't want to face the negative repercussions.

The prospect of such social repercussions as social ostracization and "everyday backlash" (Jung and Moon 2024) was a strong disciplining force that prevented women from openly striving for alternative femininity and defining themselves through discourses of career ambitions or equality. Resisting traditional norms was described as a "constant fight" that required energy and emotional labor. Chidinma, a 31-year-old secondary school teacher, stated:

> I believe women deserve independence and fulfilling careers. However, society's judgment stings because they whisper behind your back, questioning your commitment to motherhood just because you have ambition. . . . Trust me, it was part of the pressure that led me to become a teacher even though I studied mechanical engineering at university. . . . That constant family pressure led me to become a teacher . . .

Chidinma clearly does not agree with the gendered status quo. In fact, later in the interview, she calls patriarchal ideas that women should be confined to motherhood and home "nonsense," suggesting that society "needs to go past it." Many others, like her, were fully aware of alternative repertoires of feminism, career ambition, and equality. Yet, society's judgment, as manifested in day-to-day realities like family pressure, often took its toll.

Too much resistance also had other material consequences like relationship breakdown. Zara, a 32-year-old secondary school teacher, explained:

> One of the most difficult decisions I've had to make after giving birth to my first child was whether or not to return to work after my maternity leave. . . . Eventually, I gave up work for three years. . . . I wanted to bond with my child, and I also couldn't bear the grumbling of my husband and relatives, who kept raising concerns about the consequences of not being around as a mother. It was a hard choice, but I had to give in because it was beginning to threaten my marriage.

Zara clearly did not wish to define herself through traditional maternal femininity tropes, and later in the interview, she says that she loves her job. Yet, the potential breakup of her marriage was the price she was not willing to accept, which is unsurprising given the ostracization of divorcees (Lazarus et al. 2017). The intensity and emotional investment involved in everyday resistance and harsh social penalties served as a significant disciplining force that made women reluctantly acquiesce to traditional norms even if they did not agree with it. As Becky, a 30-year-old senior tax consultant, puts it:

> I advise other women who continue to challenge cultural norms to be happy with being feminine rather than feminist. . . . I would like to see us being treated fairly, but if not, I don't have the energy to fight tradition. I'd rather be seen as submissive than rebellious.

In addition to reluctantly adhering to traditional motherhood identity, women also felt they had no choice but to comply with traditional feminine ideals of being subservient at work. Accounts of workplace sexism were ample. Yet, despite holding professional or managerial positions, these attitudes were not openly challenged, partly for fear of losing their job or clients, and partly due to seeing this resistance as ultimately futile. For instance, Sandra stated:

> I remember being called "uncultured" because I disagreed with my boss' decision despite being quite courteous [laughs]. So, you can either accept the fact that a woman will continue to be perceived as confined to the home or kitchen, or you continue in an endless battle for equality. . . . I didn't have a choice but to let it go, especially because he was my oga [boss]. I need the job to be able to support my family.

Becky also shared her struggles:

> I don't force it, I mean wanting to fight for gender equality. I have had to maintain it [my career] by acting respectfully or, as some might say,

> submissive. I think it's all about knowing when to keep quiet and when to talk. . . . My role is not something that you can find many women doing, so if I don't want to get kicked away [sic], I maintain a low profile, especially when dealing with male bosses.

Becky's position reflects that of several other women who held senior roles. She was a senior tax consultant in financial services, a position that was clearly difficult to achieve. Hence, the threat of losing a successful career was restraining her rebellion. Furthermore, being a token in these positions puts more pressure on women to blend in (Kanter 1977). Consequently, many women who did not want to conform to the traditional idea of submissive femininity reluctantly complied with it due to the social and practical difficulties of resisting the pushback. As Juliana, a 37-year-old mother of two, said:

> We shouldn't have to sacrifice our personal identities or career aspirations to fulfil societal expectations, but if you want peace, you need to adapt to the culture.

To sum up, many women were frustrated with traditional norms but felt compelled to comply due to fear of social ostracism, potential damage to personal relationships, or damage to careers they have painstakingly nurtured. Despite (and sometimes because of) the relative privilege and success the women managed to achieve within the system—having a stable and affluent household and a good job—many felt unable or unwilling to openly resist traditional femininity, instead accepting tradeoffs such as scaling down on ambition or enduring sexism.

Refusing Traditional Femininity

A small minority of interviewees showed resistance to traditional femininity. For instance, Zainab, a 32-year-old manager in financial services, explains how she did not wish to define herself in traditional norms of femininity and had to find creative ways to resist:

> I knew that I wanted to be a career woman because I've always seen myself as one. But in Nigeria, a woman, at a certain age, is defined by her marital status; so, while I didn't give up on my dream, I decided to get married young [19 years old], started a family as a housewife, gave birth to my three children within the first six years of marriage and started my career at 30. . . . I had to make it work this way because I refused to be seen as a housewife for the rest of my life.

Zainab clearly aspired to femininity that is different from the traditional one. Her resistance of the gendered system manifested through finding a way to navigate material contextual circumstances to achieve what could be seen as the Nigerian version of "having it all." However, several interviewees expressed refusal of traditional femininity in much stronger terms. For instance, Karimah stated:

> I'm no man's slave, so even culture can't force me to be submissive to any man, which is why I run my own businesses. Forget all the cultural or religious statements that a woman is a man's property. I'm my own property. . . . Women will no longer accept this treatment and will leave to flourish because we believe more in ourselves now that we are more enlightened, which is not just because of social media and what is happening in some developed countries, but because that is who we want to be, at least speaking for myself. . . .

Rebecca, a 38-year-old university lecturer, shared a similar sentiment:

> I am one of the few lucky culturally rebellious women who still gain the respect of some people, especially among women who can't afford to speak for themselves. . . . At work, I've been nicknamed "obinrin bi okunrin" ["a woman like a man"] because people know me for being fearless [laughs]. . . . I won't place myself as inferior because someone thinks I should be inferior to them.

The statements above are all characterized not simply by resistance, but by what can be seen as a refusal to continue as before. McGranahan (2016) suggests that refusal happens when a limit has been reached, and these women clearly refuse to continue in the old ways. Rather than using resources to navigate the patriarchal system, they move toward transforming traditional meanings (Honig 2021). While the rhetoric of "progress" or "enlightenment" that underpins some of these accounts is not unproblematic in a postcolonial context (Dosekun 2015), it allowed women to articulate the desire for broader social change. These participants constructed themselves in explicitly feminist vocabularies of empowerment. For instance, Sylvia, a 36-year-old senior auditor, states:

> I have heard people call me a feminist, and I don't mind being called a feminist because I always advocate for women's rights. We can't keep allowing the old traditions to interfere with reality today. . . . If you allow men to trample over you, you will only have yourself to blame . . . For me, I'm not allowing any of such oppressive behaviors.

Sylvia's statement reflects an awareness that there is a significant stigma associated with feminism (Adichie 2014; Norwood 2013)—the consequences she seems prepared to accept to ensure change. Others, like Karimah, also saw it as a responsibility of being a new type of role model:

> I think that as a working mother, you are a role model for other women who are aspiring to combine work and family. . . . All I can say is that the tables are turning, and men can't continue to oppress women forever. I will keep fighting for gender equality even if people want to tag me as a feminist.

Being labeled feminist, however, was not the only repercussion of refusing traditional femininity. In fact, most endured much more severe penalties, such as separation of social ties and divorce. For instance, as Florence, a 38-year-old credit risk manager, shared:

> I have suffered enough to know that, as a Nigerian woman, you need to fight for your independence . . . I divorced my ex-husband because he stifled my professional ambition with his toxic masculinity. I've remarried, and my current husband doesn't believe the nonsense about "a woman must submit to a man" because he believes in my competence as a mother, wife and professional.

Florence firmly defines herself through vocabulary of feminism and empowerment, for which she was clearly prepared to sacrifice a lot. Interestingly, increasing rates of divorce was mentioned by others as a sign that more women are challenging traditional roles. Florence's case also illustrates other penalties for refusing traditional norms, particularly the difficulty of being a divorcee:

> After my first divorce, some of my then-close friends became a little distant because they were warned by their husbands to distance themselves from me to avoid learning bad behaviors. . . . I am also a Christian, and I can categorically say that I didn't go to church for over a year after my divorce because I couldn't face being looked at in a disgusting way by others. . . . When I decided to go back to church, I went to a new church in another location.

Social isolation, loss of social ties, and being ostracized or even expelled from other communities, such as church, is clearly a strong punishment for digression. Yet, for Florence, refusal was also generative because she gained a like-minded partner without compromising her beliefs. For others, like Karimah, refusing traditional ideals meant

withdrawing from the workplace and starting her own business. As she says, "I am now my own boss, I can decide what I want to do with my time without being questioned unreasonably."

High socioeconomic status of these women, to some extent, may have helped to buffer the consequences of their choices. Florence was a departmental manager in a bank, a position that offered economic security. Karimah was a managing director and used existing family resources to enable her success, an option that may not be available to less well-off women. Yet, the fact that only five women among our participants refused traditional constructions indicates that resource is not the only condition of possibility for change, and for most, the hefty social price for challenging tradition outweighed the desire for open change.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

To understand the conditions in which gendered transformations can occur in patriarchal societies, we must understand the context and nuances of women's experiences in different social locations (Kandiyoti 1988). In this article, we offer such analysis by explicating how middle-class Nigerian working mothers navigate traditional cultural ideals of maternal femininity. In doing so, we make several important contributions to the sociological understanding of possibilities and constraints of the gender role (re)configuration in patriarchal societies, and how patriarchal cultures resist gendered change.

We extend emerging empirical analyses of the lived experiences of working mothers in sub-Saharan Africa (Adisa, Abdulraheem, and Isiaka 2019; Adisa et al. 2021; Ajonbadi, Mordi, and Adekoya 2023; Amah 2021; Epie 2023) by shifting the focus on what exacerbates their work–life conflict to how professional working mothers make sense of traditional gendered ideals in light of these conflicting experiences, as some studies have argued that such conflict may change women's traditional gender attitudes (Evans 2014; Zhou 2017). Middle-class Nigerian mothers negotiate the dominant patriarchal ideals of femininity in several ways: Many embraced or reluctantly acquiesced to them both at home and at work, despite working in professional jobs and possessing richer cultural and material resources, with only a small minority refusing traditionalism.

The article contributes to the sociology of gender by extending the current theorizing of femininity (re)configurations and possibilities of gendered resistance in patriarchal societies. Specifically, by explicating the patterns of middle-class working mothers' resistance and nonresistance to

patriarchal constructions of gender, and what conditions these, we extend current sociological analyses that have focused mainly on how women in more marginalized positions (re)configure femininity (Jaji 2014; Kamran 2021; Moore 2015; Stumbitz and Jaga 2020). Drawing on the poststructuralist feminist approach (Gavey 2011; Weedon 1987), we have argued that working mother subjectivity is one of the key sites where the struggle over the gendered cultural meanings of femininity takes place, and that middle-class women's compliance was often achieved through the appeal of traditional repertoire and self-discipline, rather than explicit coercion or the lack of feasible alternatives. Unlike in the West, where neoliberal ideals of femininity increasingly dictate that women should aspire to a balanced "have it all" subjectivity (Adamson 2017; Orgad 2019), Nigerian women can still achieve a positive sense of self through adopting traditional maternal subjectivity while treating career as secondary. Traditional femininity, therefore, remained desirable because it also allowed them to define themselves as good religious subjects or bearers of cultural tradition. The conflict of juggling work and family, therefore, did not always result in women changing their attitudes toward traditional roles (Zhou 2017).

When the conflict of ideals did lead to questioning traditional femininity, "passive resistance" (Jaji 2014; Moore 2015) was prevalent among middle-class working mothers, as it often is among their less-privileged counterparts. Despite discontent, many still reluctantly acquiesced to traditional ideals to avoid harsh social penalties such as social ostracization, exclusion from communities, and stigma associated with the refusal of traditional femininity. Thus, possessing richer cultural resources and material resources, including working in professional and highly paid jobs, did not immediately enable women to openly challenge traditionalism at work or at home. In fact, we argue that sometimes having better work positions and resources created higher stakes in terms of subjective losses, making middle-class women reproduce traditionalism, at least on the surface. The emotional labor of fighting the cultural backlash (Jung and Moon 2024) at home and work, or the fear of losing a successful and painstakingly achieved career or relatively comfortable family life through divorce all acted as strong disciplinary mechanisms that kept these women operating within a patriarchal system and reproducing it, albeit reluctantly.

By examining the constraints that shaped middle-class working mothers' patterns of gendered resistance, we extend existing sociological analyses of how patriarchal contexts resist the infiltration of new gendered meanings through a complex mix of discourses and practices that

uphold the appeal of traditional femininity and police its transgression. New meanings of equality and career femininity, indeed, increasingly penetrate the cultural fabric of Nigerian society (Adichie 2014; Bawa and Ogunyankin 2018; Dosekun 2015), resulting in a quiet dissent (Oktaviani, McKenna, and Fitzsimmons 2021) that begins to destabilize traditional constructions of femininity. Yet, our findings reaffirm the argument that recognizing contradictions and raising awareness of possibilities (Evans 2014; Moore 2015) is only the first stage in the struggle to transform gendered meanings. Weedon (1987) argues that the development of a different sense of self and the strategies for changing existing institutions and practices are needed. Only a few women in our sample were able to embrace the new sense of self, and most saw little possibility of influencing institutional change as they tried to navigate their already challenging day-to-day life.

However, a small number of participants did demonstrate a clear refusal of traditional femininity, despite the penalties of social ostracization, exclusion, and stigma. Understanding this strategy as refusal rather than resistance (Honig 2021; McGranahan 2016) may be useful. Rather than fighting on existing terms, refusal was characterized by severance of ties and a move toward transformation (McGranahan 2016). It meant refusing relative power gained on the terms and conditions of compliance with patriarchal institutions. This was difficult, but often generative of new ventures, relationships, and sense of self. For our middle-class participants, this strategy was enabled partly through the possession of resources such as better education (all but one of the "rebels" had postgraduate degrees), having senior, higher-paid jobs, or family affluence. Hence, resources may be both enabling and restraining the challenge of traditional constructions of femininity. The number of these women in our sample was too small to draw any further generalizations of the conditions that enabled them to refuse and reframe traditional meanings. Therefore, we call on further research to further explore this strategy and the circumstances that lead women to adopt it.

To conclude, our research has exposed the mechanisms that reproduce the grip of traditionalism among relatively privileged middle-class mothers in Nigeria. However, we are cautious in suggesting that alternative femininity constructions are necessarily emancipatory. Global neoliberal capitalism has been critiqued for co-opting feminist ideas of work as empowering to mobilize more women as a cheap resource (Orgad 2019), and "have it all" ideals of femininity have proven culturally oppressive for working mothers in the West (Adamson 2017). The links between

femininity configurations and social change should continue to be contextually understood (Dosekun 2015; Kandiyoti 1988). We call on further sociological research to go beyond identifying forms of rebellious femininity to understanding the circumstances under which women shift from one repertoire to another to further understand gendered transformation.

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