

## CONTEMPORARY ART AND SOCIO-CULTURAL ISSUES: IMPACT OF NIGERIAN FEMINIST ART EXPRESSIONS ON GENDER SENSITIVITY

**Otonye Bille Ayodele**

Department of Creative Arts  
University of Lagos, Akoka, Nigeria  
[bayodele@unilag.edu.ng](mailto:bayodele@unilag.edu.ng)

**And**

**Deborah E. Jonathan**

Department of Visual and Creative Arts,  
University Lafia, federal  
Nasarawa state, Nigeria.

---

### Introduction

In recording contemporary art history, socio-cultural and gender issues cannot be ignored. Chadwick (1996, pp. 1-30) believes that gender differences are often inscribed within both the art objects of the historians' enquiry and the conditions in which the artworks are interpreted and analyzed. Gender, a word coined from Middle English of the French era in its simplest meaning refers to "kind, type or sort", which definition is already obsolete in relations to contemporary application and use. The etymological historical meaning for gender differentiates between male and female entities without considering the biological or sociological traits (McGill, 2023). However, in recent times, there is a clear distinction between biological sex and gender as a role socially, or in cultural functions. Gender roles vary from identity to social constructions, whether real or perceived. These also include cultural expectations. Schultz and Lavenda (1998, p. 447), confirm that anthropologists have tried to distinguish gender from sex by referring to gender as the cultural construction of beliefs and behaviours considered appropriate for each sex. In line with this, Oladeji (2005, p. 126) explains that the gender pattern in Nigeria (pre-colonial, post-colonial, and contemporary), trains and views the male as the head and superior to the female. These cultural values have predisposed females to limited participation in labour, power-sharing, education, and skill-acquisition, economic and professional practices. It is no wonder that due to the subordinate positioning of females, the "gender" condition of being male and female has sympathetically shifted over time to focus on the feminine. Gender sensitivity has been sentimentally redefined to feminist appeal: the assumption of giving equal rights, privileges and opportunities to females who are in this context, vulnerable. This paper is about the female gender in art, the impact of art produced by female artists that advocate for females (feminist art), and the brief history of feminist art in Nigeria.

Aronson (1991, pp. 550-574) and Cowen (1996, p. 1) are feminist art historians (those who record feminist artworks) who believe that art historians had chosen to ignore or undermine most artworks done by women artists in the past. Studies by Aronson (1991, pp. 550-574) show that gender issues in the production and meaning of African art have only recently been addressed from the 1980 when scholars started to pay attention to the role of African women artists and the significance of their spheres of artistic production within society as a whole. These include the relationship to men's art, domestics, economics, design and techniques. Cowen (1996, p. 1) establishes the fact that differential gender achievements appear in the visual arts and most renowned artists have been men. This differential according to Cowen (1996, p. 6), is not due to cognitive or creative inferiority of the female artists but to social and cultural norms. In Nigeria women artists constitute a cherished part of a proud legacy of creative people: sculptors, painters, ceramists, textile artists and other forms of art expressions. They have skillfully contributed through personal works and family fraternities and lineages. External barriers and social discrimination according to Germain (1979, p. 5) are responsible for holding women artists traditionally from achievements, and they have faced lower

returns from investing their energies into art. For this reasons, art history needs to pay attention to the recording of female art positively and correlating with measures of available opportunities. For instance, educational opportunities, skill-acquisition privileges, encouragements from family, funding, availability of studio and tools, cultural non-inhibitions and sexual non-discrimination are some aids to the few female artists who have made achievements in their chosen creative endeavors. Until the nineteenth century, Cowen (1996, p. 12) notes that nearly all female artists came from homes where art was already practiced and generally, most women did not have the opportunity to develop or even become aware of their artistic talents. According to Chadwick (1996), many male artists at the mention of “feminist art” are repulsed. They assume that feminist art themes centre mostly on revolution, rebellion against male domination, restoration of the dignity of womanhood and family values and others that connect to the joys or pangs of womanhood. Much as this may be true, such assumption limits and narrows the social functionality and impact of many feminist arts. The feminist artworks considered in this paper exceed such limitations. Wider issues such as the state of the nation, nationalism, ethnicity, politics, economy, terrorism and other life-threatening crimes, poverty alleviation, HIV/AIDS and gender sensitivity, are themes that have created impact and changes. The paper attempts to trace the historical efforts of Nigerian female artists since the 1970’s, their themes, their feminism, the issues they address and how gender sensitivity has been affected, both on the art scene and other areas of Nigerian life.

Impediments to a history of feminist art in Nigeria are numerous. First, there is little devotion to the study of female art and artists. Historically, few Nigerian women have been sufficiently recorded as artists. By the 1980s the few women artists recorded were Clara Ugbodaga, Afi Ekong, Ladi Kwali, Theresa Luck-Akinwale, Elizabeth Olowu, Nike Davies, Sokari Douglas-Camp and Colette Omogbai. Most often, literature on other practicing female artists have been merely a scanty mention. Nigerian art history has been based more on chronology and training, and classifications have been based on style and the type of arts produced by artists generally (Fosu, 1986; Kelly, 1993; Akinwande, 2015). This probably could be attributed to the number of female artists available for review and their previous low impact on art practice locally. Frankenthaler (1987, pp. 1-5) discusses the rareness of female artists. She considers the historical disadvantaged position of women within society as one of the probable reasons for this. It may also be that women artists were often deliberately omitted from the historical recording. Berns (1993, pp. 129-148) records that even when women dominated the clay arts and crafts such as pottery in West Africa, they were not considered as the likely creators of excavated figurative ceramic sculptures recovered by archeologists across the savanna. She attributes this non-reference to the gender biases that privilege men’s ‘high’ art over women’s ‘low’ craft. Rosen (1989, 7) mentions the exclusion of African-American women from the centre of the activities in the contemporary art world inspite of the impact few of them such as Harriet Powers (1837-1910) made in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. LaDuke, (1991, p. 13) who studied twelve female artists from Africa emphasizes outstanding artistic achievements of these artists inspite of several challenges they have had to surmount. Women were restricted by cultural and traditional settings from venturing into certain arts that were seen as male vocations. These restrictions were testified to by the likes of Elizabeth Olowu (Obododinma, 2003, p. 14) and Sokari Douglas-Camp. Filani (2004) argues that it is an erroneous assumption to state that men have been dominant in African art practice. He believes that this stems from a Eurocentric definition of art. He mentions the fact that traditionally in Africa, creative works such as pottery, weaving, body decoration, embroidery, wall painting and coiffure have been exclusive to women only. However, Filani (2004, p. 150) himself admits that even traditionally, women were not known or permitted to create arts such as sculpture whether in wood, terracotta, metal or stone. This practice in itself is a discriminating stance. He also admits that there is a dearth of female presence in contemporary Nigerian art.

Female participation in active art practice still needs more social support, funding and sponsorship. Presently in Nigeria, there is no museum or gallery that is put in place both by government or privately owned, solely devoted to works and achievements of female artists. The National Gallery of

Art, a federal government parastatal, despite its efforts at promoting visual art in Nigeria has organized and funded only few art exhibitions solely for female art. In the forty years under study, less than ten art exhibitions have been devoted to female artists by the National Gallery. This is only a drop in the ocean comparative to the number of similar art exhibitions sponsored by the same gallery which is often dominated by male artists. Women artists personally struggle to achieve artistic identity as the odds against them are high. It is by personal efforts that they acquire private sponsors for solo or group exhibitions. Other factors affecting the low turnout of female arts include matrimony and the demand of maternal responsibilities. Marriage is culturally so important in Nigeria that most women sacrifice anything including their careers in order to keep home and make their marriages work. This attitude sometimes creates domestic and social encumbrances and physical limitations for female artists. Child bearing and rearing takes a great toll on the practice of most female artists. Many female artists practice intermittently. They only produce art towards upcoming exhibitions. They do not maintain regular studio practice and are often engaged in other non-artistic employment to support their families. These leave them very little time for studio work. Some males have criticized female excuses for not practicing. Oshinowo (2004) thinks female artists avoid the stress, strain, wear and tear of studio work. He believes that any artist, male or female, must be ready to face the hard work that studio practice demands. He however admits that social and cultural pressures could cause lack of concentration and focus in female artists. Ikwuemesi (2004) thinks that Nigerian female artists are marginalized by themselves in the sense that the art training they received is not gender-specific, but the women are in conflict created by the dichotomy of traditional and contemporary roles. Non-feminist initiatives by males in the critique of female art have also doused female enthusiasm. On the international scene, Nzegwu (2000) arguably blames a Euro-American gender-stereotyping of African female artists, for their non-extended participation in international art exhibitions outside their home countries. She thinks that there is a gender misrepresentation by male dominated curatorship and critique.

### **Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

This paper is basically art-historical even though it is also sociological and anthropological. A qualitative method was considered most appropriate for the research. The methodology therefore collected primary data from field investigation comprising of observations at female art exhibitions and art galleries and studios that curated and housed artworks of female Nigerian artists. Other sources of data were interviews conducted with some purposively selected female artists working in different specializations and mediums of art; recording and collection of photographs of the relevant artworks and review of relevant literature. Internet search engines were employed in the process of gathering historical information and other archival records. This research is hung on the theories of social change, feminism and aesthetics. In the application of the theory of social change, Karl Marx (1818-1883) is the foremost proponent of the theory of social change, even though several other philosophers expanded and applied it. According to this theory, a society evolves into higher levels or a more complex society through external influences or by generating change within itself. The processes of change can be (a) evolutionary (b) cyclical (c) economic (d) functionalist or (e) conflict. The application of the theory of social change in this paper shows that the external influences on Nigerian female artists through education and travel have affected their responses to issues of feminism and feminist concerns; and they exhibit these in their arts. The theory of feminism by Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) which advocates for the vindication of the rights of women was used to extract women's social roles and lived experiences and how they affect the arts of female artists. According to Arinder (2020), the core concepts of feminist theory are sex, gender, race, discrimination, equality, difference and choice. These helped in the recognition and analysis of the themes of the works in this study. The aesthetic theory by James Joyce (1882-1914) which states that all art, be it comic or tragic is the apprehension of beauty, was applicable in the analysis of the formal and thematic aspects of the artworks in this study by extricating the message from the visual representations.

## **Discussion**

### **Nigerian Feminist Art: 1970s to the Present**

Oyelola (1981) records that in the pre-colonial era (pre-1900), women in the geographical entity known as Nigeria today, excelled in various traditional arts. Most of their arts were utilitarian and were connected to the dignity and well-being of the human persons. These arts included body decorations, coiffure, mat-making, wall-painting, calabash-decoration, pottery and textile arts. Angelou (1990, p. 7) describes these arts as arts that delighted the eye, consoled the troubled mind, appeased the highest authority and educated children in the way of the world. The aims according to her, whether or not articulated were meant to influence and sustain the family in an appreciation for life and the expectation of beauty. These goals seem to define even contemporary feminist art. Many women artists today produce art about women and their world, even when they unconsciously or unintentionally do so. In this respect, the functions could be regarded as feminist even when these women only followed instinctive creativity. Apart from these artists producing arts for local appreciation and uses, women such as Azume (d. 1950), Felicia Adepelu (b. 1932), Ladi Kwali (d. 1984) were accomplished potters who were highly talented and achieved exceptional success in form, style and function of pottery. In textiles, hand-woven cloths and pattern-dyed indigo cloth (Adire), were areas where many women excelled in skills, particularly in their various communities.

Madam Samuroh (d. 1970) was a well-known Adire textile designer whose cloth can be found in museums in Britain and America. Post-colonial 1960s and pre-1970s saw few pioneering female artists who were academically trained. Very few women had access to tertiary education; therefore, in the 1960s very few women had any formal training in arts. Such few graduates included, Afi Ekong (b. 1930), Clara Etso Ugbodaga (later Ugbodaga-Ngu) (b. 1921), Theresa Luck-Akinwale (b.1930), A. Akindeinde, Ego Uche-Okeke (b. 1943), C.I. Adun, Onyebuchi Okadigwe and Agboola Oshinowo. From the famous art workshop at Osogbo in the 1960s by Ulli Beier, emerged Senabu Olayede and Kikelomo Oladepo (b. 1951), who were prominent pioneers in decorative indigo batik. Presently the most prominent practitioner of Adire and Batik is Nike Davis-Okundaye, also an offshoot of the Osogbo workshop. These were the women who practiced and exhibited also in the early 1970s. In the 1960s, some non-Nigerian females encouraged women in the arts by actively producing art and exhibiting. The most outstanding ones were Eve de Negri, an Italian, Georgina Beier, a German and Susanne Wenger, an Austrian who stayed on in Nigeria on active practice until her death in 2008. Probably because they were very few and more concerned with sustaining an enduring art practice in a male dominating terrain, and had many factors militating against them, they did not champion nor even express any form of feminism in their works. Many of them embraced painting and textile design and decoration. Only about three of them were sculptors. Their works were stereotypical and thematically not different from their male counterparts. Today, in the 2020s, the choice of practice for women in the arts follow this order: textile design, painting, ceramics, graphic design, digital arts, and sculpture. The 1980s were more dynamic for Nigerian female arts and artists. The number of females who trained as artists increased sharply. More art schools had emerged and art promotional activities such as exhibitions, seminars, conferences, workshops and lectures increased. These helped female participation in art, yet minimally when compared to the performance of male artists. The National Gallery of Art (N.G.A) and the Society of Nigerian Artists (S.N.A), the national association housing Nigerian visual artists, have topped the list of sponsors and organizers who encouraged many female solo and group exhibitions. Others include The Goethe Institute (German Embassy), Italian Cultural Institute, Alliance Francais (French Embassy), British Council, Soviet Cultural Centre and the National Museum. Despite the tempo of art exhibitions, the percentage of females participating was still very low. According to Dele Jegede, a popular Nigerian artist and art historian, in 1988, "those of us with feminist sympathies (I belong to that group) cannot but note the very lame impression which is made by our womenfolk... the lameness of their impression is of course not in the quality of their works". In the particular exhibition Jegede was commenting on, only two females participated out of forty-five artists featured on the show. By the end of the 1980s only about twenty

females were actively practicing and exhibiting nationally. In the 1990s more patronages and heightened cultural activities from financial corporations like banks enabled more female participation in art exhibitions and a few more female artists appeared on the art scene. Altogether there were about ten solo exhibitions by women during the 1990s and many more group exhibitions. In spite of this however, Oshinowo, (2004, p. 147) records that out of twenty group exhibitions recorded and sponsored by the National Gallery of Art within this period, only forty-seven women participated alongside a total of three thousand, two hundred and fifty-six male artists. Since the 2000s there has been an increasingly conducive atmosphere for female artists. Discrimination against women has been decreasing which has brought an explosion in the arts for women in Nigeria.

From the archives of the defunct Bendel Arts Council (1986), the first ever all-female art exhibition was in 1986 titled "All Women Art Exhibition". It was organized and sponsored by the Bendel Arts Council, Benin City. This arts council was a Bendel state parastatal. The aims of the exhibition were to focus attention on female art and artists from the Bendel state (now Edo and Delta state); also to stimulate, encourage budding female artists and to inform the general public about the various art forms existing in the state. In 1987, "Nigerian Women in the Art" exhibition was organized by the National Council of Women Societies (NCWS). "Better Life for Rural Women" a non-governmental group led by the then president's wife, late Mrs. Mariam Babangida, organized another all-female art exhibition in 1988. In the same year during an International Conference on women in Africa and the African diaspora titled "Bridges Across Activism and the Academy", an art exhibition of seven female artists from Nsukka (eastern Nigeria) was mounted. This perhaps, is the first exhibition with a tone of feminism. The same year, 1988, a group of female artists emerged from Zaria (northern Nigeria). The group was called "Kinesis". The initiator and leader was Adele Garkida. According to Garkida (2001), the Kinesis was an outcome of the participation of some of its members in an earlier exhibition organized by "Catalyst Women Art and Sciences", an international organization based in England. Kinesis put up three successful all-female art exhibitions in 1999, 2000 and 2001, all in Nigeria. The 2001 exhibition was supported by the National Gallery of Art and Abuja Council of Art and Culture. Prior to this year, the group struggled for about ten years on self-sponsorship, to organize regional conferences and exhibitions. In 1990, the National Council of Women Societies again sponsored "Women Now" in Lagos, featuring about ten popular female artists, among who were Felicia Adepelu, Afi Ekong, Oyewumi Fagbenro, Kaltume Gana, Lara Ige, Ladi Kwali, Sonia Omoighe and Mariam Oyewoye. The council (1990) stated that in this particular exhibition it aimed at providing awareness and also to give visibility to women. In the same year 1990, the Soviet Cultural Centre in Lagos exhibited works of three female painters from northern Nigeria. In June 2000, a four-member female group, all painters, exhibited at the Goethe Institute, Lagos. The exhibition was one of early and outstanding ones that focused and addressed issues on feminism such as inequality, abuse, male dominance and dehumanization of women. The four female artists were Juliet Ezenwa Nge, Ebele Okoye, Nkechi Nwosu-Igbo and Angela Japhet. In 2000 and 2001, another four-member female group namely Ndidi Dike, Marcia Kure, Sokari Douglas-Camp and Atilier Iyabo Abiola, exhibited their artworks at Indiana State University, the Table Arts Centre, Eastern Illinois, University of Chicago and at the Hearst Art Gallery, Moraga, C.A. The exhibition was curated by a male Nigerian artist, Dele Jegede. The exhibition was also pioneering in the female artist's elocution on matters regarding social, political and economic changes in Africa particularly Nigeria, from a feminist angle. The big step in Nigerian feminist art was the formation of a national association as an umbrella for all Nigerian female artists. The group, presently known as Female Artists Association of Nigeria (F.A.A.N), was called National Association of Female Artists (N.A.F.A) at inception. It was formed on 20<sup>th</sup> September 2001 and formally launched on 28<sup>th</sup> February 2002. It was in collaboration with the National Gallery of Art in Abuja, Nigeria. Its first leader, Prof. Bridget Nwanze, clearly states its aims as: organizing art exhibitions regularly to encourage female art practice, to expose the creativeness, innovativeness, and multi-talentedness of female artist members and to eventually build a comprehensive compendium of Nigerian female visual artists. Art

for the female artists from this point started to look inwards, towards feminism and the plight of women. The first exhibition by N.A.F.A was in 2002 tagged "Creative Femininity". Forty-eight female artists exhibited. According to Dike (2002, p. 5), "Creative Femininity" is a story of feminine endeavors, of women whose aspirations are propelled by an ideology of national development and regeneration.

The intellectual dimension of female visual art was dynamically expressed in the exhibition by several women who have pursued and achieved higher degrees in art. These female artists are mostly those who have formal training in art from either university or other colleges such as polytechnics or colleges of education. They are also either in paid employment or practice a financially rewarding profession as studio artists. These engagements provide basic funds required for purchase of materials and tools necessary for their art. They also have opportunities of exposure to other art styles through travels, wide scope of patrons, media publicity and sponsors. F.A.A.N has had many successful outings in the past nine years. In 2007 exhibition titled "Echoes of Experience" fifty-two female artists exhibited one hundred and thirty-six works. Nwanze (2002, pp. 6-7) says that female artists themselves have greatly contributed to this trend. She commends the efforts of the contemporary Nigerian female artists for their tremendous efforts, to reduce the imbalance between male and female artists through the production of quality arts and exhibitions. Much as it is difficult to attain popularity, many contemporary female artists are actually making spirited efforts at attaining it. By 2010, new names have emerged and have been exhibiting and can be considered as new breed but have made their marks on the Nigerian art scene. These include, Nkechi Nwosu-Igbo, Olufunke Ifeta, Bridget Nwanze, Titi Omoighe, Chinwe Uwatse, Peju Layiwola, Nike Adenaike, Ndidi Dike, Sade Thompsom, Yemi Oye, Odun Orimolade, Folu Folorunso, Patience Anthony-Euba, Otonye Bille Ayodele, Gbemisola Momoh, Gbemisola Areo, Hilda Woods, Chinyere Ndubuisi, Victoria Ukpera, Stella Awoh, Veronica Otigbo and Ronke Adesanya. The list is more expansive. These are the new crop of female artists that show a successful grasp of modern and post-modern art trends in Nigeria and are also well informed about their society. From 2002, female art exhibition turned in a new direction. Female artists now exhibit from a feminist perspective. The exhibitions specifically cater for women and gender relations. Examples of such exhibitions include "Women about Women" held at Goethe Institute, Lagos, where the likes of Angela Isiuwe and Nkechi Nwosu exhibited; "Identities and Labels" which exhibited the works of Lara Ige-Jacks, Chinwe Uwatse, Nkechi Nwosu-Igbo, Titi Omoighe, Peju Layiwola; "Bronze and Prints" by Elizabeth Olowu and Peju Layiwola. "Echoes of Experience" and "Female Artists in the Academia" organized by FAAN, exhibited works by a very large number of female artists. These exhibitions are innovative in feminist art and have opened opportunities for female artists to be expressive.

### **Feminist Art Expressions: Style, Theme and Content**

The female artists and their artworks under discussion in this paper, are products of various art schools in Nigeria and the peculiarities of their schools are revealed in their works. For instance, Zaria Art (Ahmadu Bello University Zaria) is characterized by cultural assertion, the Nsukka School is recognized by Ulism (an adaptation of Igbo linear art), Ife School is dominated by Onaism (the inculcation of Yoruba motifs) and Auchi School is characterized by color particularization or synthesis as a design ideology. The newer schools affiliate their ideas to any of the older schools. There are however also cases of cross-fertilization, adoptions and adaptations evidenced in their works. Apart from the artists producing arts with diversified styles, their works are also influenced by individual peculiarities. These range from the artists' personality, exposure, location, contacts and challenges. Their themes and the content of their works are developed from their immediate environment, social events and their travels. They pick symbols and objects from around them such as architecture, people, landscape and the social conditions like economic effects, vices, crime and such likes. These are the items that form the content of their expressions. All these are portrayed with feminist sentiments.

Early rendition of women in the artworks of male pioneers of Nigerian art belonged to the traditional genre. In such artworks, the woman was depicted as a mere object of artistic interest. In the late 1960s and early 1970s the woman was depicted as a mythic person. The paintings were innovated by Ben Enwonwu (a member of the Negritude Movement), and adapted from African/Nigerian mythology. This theme was later picked up by other artists, often showing the woman as archetype of motherhood, symbol of fertility and as a domestic object. These and stock images of women were common in the 1960s and 1970s. Examples showed women dancing, milkmaids, and fashion images and such likes. According to Oguibe (1989), such works lacked depth in reflecting any knowledge of womanhood, did not reveal the realities of the changing roles of women and the impact of socio-political changes or religion on the feminine society. Often the traditional woman depicted was idyllic and generic. Oyelola (1989, pp. 100-114) notes that the thematic categories and artistic choices were cultural and gives reasons for the idealized and stylized representations, as intentions to reflect certain values of respect, duty, hospitality and fecundity. Male artists leaned towards this cultural mindset.

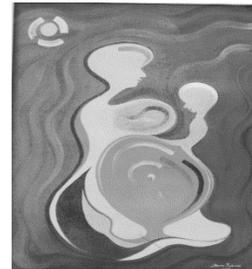
Oguibe (1989, pp. 52-60) notes that the movement of Negritude led by Ben Enwonwu in the 1970s, which borrowed European imagery, only presented romanticized women. The content did not change the status quo. It only used woman metaphorically for the social conditions and changes that were evidenced in the country just coming out of a civil war. This metaphorical woman dominated the 1970s. Themes such as “Lone Woman”, “Beggar Woman”, “Aged Woman”, “Poor Woman” were common. Few isolated artworks from male artists tended towards gender relationship, such as the works of a neo-traditional contemporary artist, Lamidi Fakeye. In his wood carvings, by using the traditional themes identifying the male as *esu* (darkness) and female as *Sango*, (light) he was able to express the moral tussle of male dominance and socio-economic inequality among the genders. Fakeye’s themes, according to Lawuyi (1988), show the male moral enterprise as the protection of its status while that of the female, the resistance of domination. Another work is “Queen Amina of Zaria”, by Ben Ekanem, in the early 1980s. The work is a public sculpture in front of the National Theatre in Lagos and has inspired many women. It shows a militant and warrior woman; legendary of a queen in the northern Nigeria where women were believed to be repressed. During the 1970s Nigerian female artists did not show any feminism in their works. It was only in the 1980s that some samples of feminist art emerged from female artists, particularly Sokari Douglas-Camp, who reflected individuality in her Kalabari identity. This could probably be due to her sojourn in Europe. Presently many female artists focus on women, even when they do not “intentionally” want to be feminist in their art. The examples discussed here are grouped thematically as follows:

**(I) Femininity and Feminism:** Oguibe (2004) accuses Nigerian female artists of showing little or nothing of feminism in their works by not addressing the patriarchal system around them. Probably as typical African women, they communicate their feminism less confrontationally. However, recent works show many themes that portray the state of the Nigerian women, in-between modern allowances and traditional restrictions. It appears every female artist, at one time or the other, is compelled morally to express the maternal instincts within her. Exhibitions by females are often dominated by the maternal theme. “The Burden We Bear” by Chyzoba Nwaozuru, (Plate 1) “Fertility” by Madumere Iheoma, (Plate 2) Fourth Month by Peju Layiwola, “Zero Hour I” by Princess Elizabeth Olowu, (Plate 3) “Mother and Child” by Chinyere Ndubusi, “Grandmother” by Vera Ekpei, “Exclusive Breast Feeding” by Stella Idiong (Plate 4), are a few examples. Other works not specifically maternal show deep patriotism for women and feminine causes. “Beauty in Feminism” by Betty Bassey (Plate 5), elevates womanhood. “Man and Woman” by Titi Omoighe and “Gender Wars” by Chinwe Uwatse, “Bridge” by Maureen Ekpeni (Plate 6) and “Arewa (Elegance)” by Matan Dare (Plate 7) are paintings that emphasize the different roles, peculiarities and expectations of the sexes. This realization can improve the compatibility of the sexes for better cohabitation. “Too soon to Be Seen” by Sade Thompson (Plate 8) is a monoprint depicting the emerging woman on the Nigerian social and political scene. Its message according to Sade, is to warn the society that the few women in public

view should not be used to judge the potentials of other Nigerian women who are still emerging, while “Girls Fight” by Angela Isiuwe advocates women integration and unity. “Keeping up Appearances” by Sade Thompson is a print which according to her, reveals the challenging status quo of women all over Africa, where women are expected to hide their agonies under make-up and attractive dressing. In the same vein, two works by Nkechi Nwosu – Igbo, “Beyond Silence” (Plate 9) is about female rape victims and survivors who are often stigmatized, abused and left to suffer in silence, and “Cry Me a River” (Plate 10) shows a murder scene depicting female-gender-based-violence, that she claims may be overlooked or never be solved, like many other such murders in Nigeria. “Polygyny” (Plate 11) and “Arugbo” are sculptures by Peju Layiwola, which she says, hinge on the challenges posed by polygamy and an exposition on the poor maternal care pregnant women receive in a poor healthcare system. “Arugba Osun” by Nike Davies Okundaye is a batik print revealing the overwhelming social burden on the woman which often receives no sympathetic gesture from society.



**PLATE 1** Chyzoba Nwaozuzu. *This Burden We Bear*. Oil on Canvas 4' x 3' (2002) Source: National Gallery of Art



**Plate2** Iheoma Madumere. *Fertility*. Oil on Canvas 3'x4' (2001) Source: National Gallery of Art



**Plate3** Princess Elizabeth Olowu, National Gallery of Art *Zero Hour I*. Bronze 4'x3' (1984)



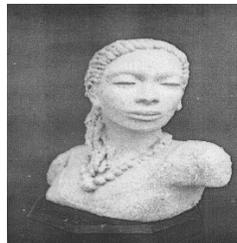
**Plate4** Stella Idiong. *Breastfeeding* source: National Gallery of Art Print 3'x4' (2001)



**Plate5** Betty Bassey. *Beauty in Feminism*. Pastel on Paper. 5'x4' (2001) Source: National Gallery of Ar



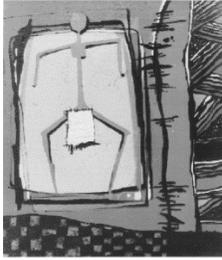
**PLATE 6** Maureen Ekpeni, *Bridge*. Oil on Board. 3' x 4' (1998) Source: National Gallery of Art



**Plate 7** Matan Dare, *Arewa (Elegant body)*. Glass Fibre. 4'x4' Source: National Gallery of Art



**Plate 8** Sade Thompson, *too soon to be seen*. Monoprint. 68x49cm (2004) Source: National Gallery of Art



**PLATE 9** Nkechi Nwosu-Igbo.  
*Beyond Silence.*  
Acrylic and Wood Dust on Canvas  
60"x 72" (2001) Source: FAAN



**Plate 10** Nkechi Nwosu-Igbo.  
*Cry Me a River. Mixed Media*  
3'x3' (2001)  
source: National Gallery of Art



**Plate 11** Peju Layiwola. *Polygyny.*  
Brass. 20"x10' (2002)  
Source: National Gallery of Art

## (II) Women Economic Empowerment

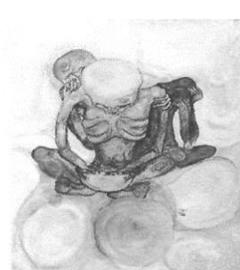
The economic empowerment of women had been seen as one of the foundations of feministic agenda. Women struggles to be economically independent had also been the theme of many female Nigerian artists. "Let Good Work Pay" by Sade Thompson (Plate 12), is a monoprint that is sympathetic with the labor unions' demands for better remunerations for workers which include a small percentage of women. Otonye Ayodele's "Valiants" (Plate 13) is a sculpture that reveals the inherent strength and survival spirit of Nigerian women to overcome depressive environmental calamities. Titi Omoighe's "We Plough the Land" and "The Hunter" reveal the input of physical labor by the female gender in the Nigerian economy and the little recognition she receives, despite all her efforts. Titi Omoighe's "Hard Times" and Chinwe Uwatse's "Bowl is Empty" (Plate 14) are the outcome of the female helplessness and vulnerability in her society despite her large contribution to the national economy.



**PLATE 12** Sade Thompson  
*Let Good Work Pay Monoprint.*  
68" x 49" (2004). Source: FAAN



**Plate 13** Otonye Ayodele.  
*Valiants Granite Stone.*  
H.20' (1980)  
Source: National Gallery of Art



**Plate 14** Chinwe Uwatse's  
*Bowl is Empty. Water Color 34'x50*  
(1998). Source: National Gallery of Art

These art works by Nigerian female artists are not only subjected to natural gender attributes or endowments that characterize womanhood, they are also considered as imports of the whole art and which make them worthwhile artistic experiments. In this close examination of these selected works, some common characteristics have been observed about the works. They are informative, socio-cultural, stylistic, and persuasive. The works always attempt to inform the observer by bringing out salient issues. Images, colours and general layout are all geared towards a deliberate message. This is a form of communication in which sometimes the expression of forms can be observed in the severity or mildness of the objects or mediums used. Culturally, the works identify artists of a particular geographical location and in some cases, ethnic affiliation and the popular culture. The uniqueness of the Nigerian culture is often displayed in many of the works using local or traditional motifs in the works. Where females are depicted, they are often attired in Nigerian cultural dressing and grooming. This creates national sentiments and can arouse a sense of belonging. The effectiveness of this kind of art cannot be relegated. The art works portray a stylishness that tends towards elitism. The art works show treatments and garnishing that symbolize good breeding of the artists. The techniques and finishing of the works reflect a purposeful intention to produce good art that is universally acceptable and not substandard. This is a good lesson from the women to

manufacturers of products in Nigeria, who can do the same. The works are persuasive by appealing to sentiments either subtly or vigorously. The imports of the themes are based on psychological premises that draw any observer to such arts. Artistically, the forms are strong, the colours extravagant and the messages often obvious.

### **Impact of Feminist Art on Gender Sensitivity**

In present-day Nigeria, the female artist's prospects are very bright due to new educational policies, professional liberation, erasure of sanctions and minimization of taboos. The first impact is on the female artists themselves. More females are venturing into art as a part-time vocation and even fulltime career. A specialization such as sculpture is witnessing more female practice. Some materials and tools females previously avoided in the production of art, are being used by them now. Female participation is more encouraged by males. More males show affirmative speech and action towards women empowerment, gender equality and enablement, which encourages female redefinition of their roles in the society. This breeds female radical entry and integration into every fabric of Nigerian society. Among artists, the Society Nigerian Artists (S.N.A) the only national body of Nigerian artists was led by a female artist, Dr. Olufunke Ifeta. She was a successful president for five years (1996-2001). This unusual opportunity given to her boosted the morale of female artists and due to her very successful performance male artists have come to appreciate and accept the qualitative position and partnership of female artists. Women artists consciously expect and sell their art to get profitable returns from their practice just as their male counterparts. This feat, though still toddling, removes the women from being economic parasites. Procreation, female dignity, rights and privileges, status, equality and physiology are new stimuli noticeable in the themes of Nigerian male artists. This is a new direction and is affecting the female perception of her positively. Visual impact is in most cases more lasting and with the frequency of exhibitions by female artists, more publicity and sponsorship; the public is increasingly being sensitized on female repositioning in all facets of Nigerian society. The formations of female oriented non – governmental organizations (NGO) are on the increase. Peju Layiwola said she started Women and Youth Art (WY Art) as a non-governmental project to further the interests of women in art production.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the efforts of female artists are being rewarded but much more is still desired to be seen. The ratio of female involvement to male is still comparatively low. Female artists need to take advantage of modern facilities; equipment and machines that will help create time for their studio practice. By so doing, quantity and quality of female art will improve. Up till now, the recording or documenting of female artists is below expectation. This is a challenge for female art historians and critics. Women should applaud women. It is easier for a female to appreciate the commitment, hard work and sacrifices female artists put into achieving their career goals. These should not be ignored. Sponsors and numerous art connoisseurs are required to promote female art and artists. Perhaps Nigerian feminist artists can consider the ideas of Carden (1974:2) that implies that, feminism should not be only about eliminating gender differences and achieving equal opportunities for the sexes, but also about the ability to create socio- cultural changes in the larger social order by first identifying their individual selves. Hence this goal can redefine the future direction of feminine art in Nigeria.

## References

- Akinwande, A (2015) "The Women Who Shaped Nigerian Art History" <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/The+Women+Who+Shaped+Nigerian+Art+History+pdf>
- Angelou, Maya (1990). "Foreword" to Margret Courtney's *African Canvas: The Art of West African Woman*, New York: Rizzoli, p.7
- Arinder, J. A. (2020) <https://opentext.wsu.edu/theoreticalmodelsforteachingandresearch/chapter/feminist-theory/>
- Aronson, Lisa (1991) "African Women in the Visual Arts: Reviews Essay" in *Sign: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. Vol. 16, No. 3. Chicago. pp. 550-574.
- Berns, M C. (1993) "Art, History, and Gender: Women and Clay in West Africa". *The Archeological Review* Vol. 11. Papers in Honour of Merrick Posnansky. pp. 129-148. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25130562>
- Carden, M Lockwood, (1974) *The New Feminist Movement*, New York, U.S.A: Russell Sage Foundation. p.2
- Chadwick W, (1996). *Woman, Art and Society*. London: Thames and Hudson
- Cowen, T, (1996) *Why Women Succeed and Fail in the Art*. Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers. pp. 1-12
- Dike, P C, (2002) "Introduction in Creative Femininity". Nigeria: National Gallery of Art. p.5
- Filani, K (2004). "Female Presence in Contemporary Nigerian Art: Gender issues and Classification" in Dike, P.C. and Pat Oyelola (Eds.) *Nigerian Women in Visual Art: History, Aesthetics and Interpretation*. Nigeria: National Gallery of Modern Art. pp. 149-154
- Fosu, K (1986). *20<sup>th</sup> Century Art of Africa*, Zaria Nigeria: Gaskiya Corporation.
- Frankenthal, H (1987) *Women Artists: A Reflection of their Times*. University of Albany Press and Catharine Brawner (Eds.)
- Garkida, A (2001). "Foreword" in *Kinesis: An Exhibition of Women Artists from Zaria, Abuja Nigeria*: National Gallery of Art and Abuja Council for Art and Culture.
- Germain, G (1979). *The Obstacle Race: The Fortunes of Women Painters and their Works*. New York: Ferrer Straus Giroux. p. 5
- Ikwuemesi K (2004) "Between Nkiru Nzegwu and the Politics of Gender Transmogrification: A metacritique" in Dike P.C. and Pat Oyelola (Eds) *Nigerian Women in Visual Art: History, Aesthetics and Interpretation*. Nigeria: National Gallery of Art. pp 162-170
- Kelly, B (1993) *Nigerian Artists: A Who is Who and Bibliography*. New York: Smithsonian Institution.
- LaDuke, B (1991) *Africa through the Eyes of Women Artists*, Trenton: Africa World Press
- Lawuyi, B. O (1988) "The Images of Women in Lamidi Fakeye's Work: an analysis of contemporary art" in *Yoruba Images: Essays in honor of Lamidi Fakeye*, Moyo Okediyi (Eds.) Ile-Ife Nigeria: Ife Humanities Society. pp 96-109
- McGill, C.A. (2023) <https://www.cs.mcgill.ca/~rwest/Wikipedia/wpcd/wp/g/Gender.htm>
- National Council of Women Society, (1990) "Women Now" Exhibition of Creative Works by Nigerian Women. 30<sup>th</sup> April-5<sup>th</sup> May. Lagos: The council
- Nwanze, B (2002). "Creative Femininity: A female sub-culture", Nigeria: National Gallery of Art.
- Nzegwu, N (2000). "Crossing Boundaries: Gender Transmogrification of African Art History" in Aniakor C and K. Ikwuemesi (Eds.), *Crossroads: Africa in the Twilight*. Abuja: National Gallery of Art pp 63-93
- Obododinma, O, (2003), *Bronze and Prints: Embodying Women Stories, the Dialogue with Femininity in the art works of Peju Layiwola and Elizabeth Olowu*. Nigeria Ibadan
- Oguiibe, O. (1989) *The Image of Women in Contemporary Nigerian Art: 1970 to the present*. M.A Thesis, University on Nigeria, Nsukka.
- Oguiibe, O (2002). *Women Feminism*. African World Press.
- Oladeji, M.O (2005) "Strategies for Increasing Women's Political Representation in Nigeria" in *Journal of Women in Technical Education* Vol. 4. Ibadan: Ibadan University, pp.125-128
- Oshinowo, K (2004) "Nigerian Women Visual Artists" in Dike P.C and Pat Oyelola (Eds.) *Nigerian Women in Visual Art: History, Aesthetics and Interpretation*. Nigeria: National Gallery of Art pp144-148
- Oyelola, P. (1989) "The Image of Women in the Yoruba Art of the Twentieth Century". Lagos: Nigeria Magazine, 57 (1-2) pp. 100-144
- Oyelola, Pat (1981) *Nigerian Crafts*, London and Basing Stoke: Macmillan Education
- Rosen, R and Catherine Brawner (Eds.) (1989) "Moving into the Mainstreams, Making their Mark". New York: Abbeville Press.
- Shultz E and R. Lavenda (1998) *Anthropology-A Perspective on Human Condition*. California: Mayfield. p. 144