

**THE POLITICS OF SILENCE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON
HOW INSTITUTIONALISED PATRIARCHY AND HIGH-POWER
DISTANCE CULTURE SUPPRESS FEMALE EMPLOYEE VOICE
IN NIGERIAN WORKPLACES**

Hope Imuetinyan Iguodala-Cole^{1*}, Joseph Chinedum Nwanne² & Monica Alexander Ankeli³

¹Department of Sociology, Bingham University, Karu, Nasarawa State, Nigeria

*cole.hope@binghamuni.edu.ng

²Department of Political Science, University of Delta, Agbor, Delta State, Nigeria

³Directorate of Linkages and Transnational Education, Bingham University, Nasarawa State, Nigeria

ABSTRACT: This study examines how institutionalised patriarchy and high-power distance culture suppress female employee voice in Nigerian workplaces. The study explores the role of religious norms in reinforcing silence among female employees, thereby addressing a significant gap in existing literature, which has largely overlooked the intersection of religion and gender in shaping employee voice-out behaviour in non-Western contexts. The study is anchored in social dominance theory, which provides a robust framework for understanding how masculine hegemony perpetuates occupational segregation and silences women's contributions. A qualitative phenomenological design was employed, utilising primary data collected through 52 semi-structured interviews and 200 hours of non-participant observation across banking, engineering, information technology, marketing, customer service, and academic sectors. The findings reveal that contextualised religious teachings reinforce patriarchal norms and legitimise silence as a virtuous feminine trait, embedding voice suppression within moral and spiritual frameworks. The study concludes that cultural and religious factors operate as powerful, intertwined forces that systematically marginalise women's voices in Nigerian workplaces. It recommends that organisations implement culturally sensitive diversity policies that explicitly address patriarchal norms and partner with religious leaders to reinterpret teachings in ways that affirm women's right to speak and participate fully in professional settings.

Keywords: High-Power Distance, Nigerian, Patriarchy, Silence, Workplace

INTRODUCTION

Employee voice, defined as employees' ability to express concerns, share opinions, and contribute constructively to workplace decisions, is fundamental to effective organisational functioning. It enables employees to provide feedback without fear of retaliation and enhances organisational performance. (Adisa et al., 2024; Morrison, 2011). Although employee voice has been widely

studied in the Global North, evidence from the Global South remains limited, restricting understanding of the cultural barriers confronting female employees in contexts such as Nigeria. Western-derived explanations, therefore, have limited applicability in societies shaped by different cultural norms. (Adisa et al., 2024).

Consequently, in Nigerian society, traditional gender norms and societal stereotypes persist, resulting in increased male dominance in professional, organisational, and domestic settings. Men are typically regarded as natural leaders who demonstrate assertiveness, decisiveness, strength, and decision-making authority. Women continue to face patriarchal barriers that limit their effectiveness at home and work, often being relegated to roles perceived as less authoritative and more nurturing, such as caregiving and domestic responsibilities (Akanji et al., 2024). These stereotypes restrict women's opportunities for professional advancement and inhibit their ability to voice concerns or ideas in organisational settings (Adisa et al., 2024). For example, a male committee member may oppose a female candidate for Dean of Student Affairs because the role is too demanding, as she lives far from campus. Although presented as an operational concern, such reasoning reinforces stereotypes that women are unsuitable for leadership and discourages them from pursuing senior positions.

Statement of the Problem

While gender equality in the workplace is increasingly acknowledged, Nigerian female employees still face major barriers to expressing their opinions, with existing research often overlooking the unique challenges faced by women in non-Western environments. This is often linked to cultural context, which comes with a high-power distance orientation and deep-seated patriarchal norms that devalue women's contributions and mute their concerns. High-power distance culture is characterised by strict hierarchical structures and subordinates' unwillingness to confront their superiors, which is especially detrimental for female employees who must manage both hierarchical and gendered demands (Adisa et al., 2024). These impediments are worsened by patriarchal norms that champion male supremacy and propagate the idea that men are superior to women in decision-making, hence sustaining gender inequality in organisations (Akanji et al., 2024; Imhanrenialena et al., 2024).

These barriers operate through formal and informal organisational practices reinforced by patriarchal values, hierarchical structures, and religious expectations that encourage female acquiescence (Akanji et al., 2024). Consequently, women often hesitate to challenge authority or express alternative views, particularly in male-dominated occupations where they risk being labelled aggressive or unfeminine (Akanji et al., 2024; Imhanrenialena et al., 2024). Existing studies have largely treated employee voice as gender neutral, overlooking these intersecting cultural realities in African workplaces (Adisa et al., 2024). This study, therefore, investigates how institutionalised patriarchy, high power distance culture, and religious norms shape female employee silence in Nigeria while providing culturally grounded recommendations for more inclusive organisational practices.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective is to investigate the combined effect of cultural and structural barriers on women's voice behaviour in Nigerian organisations, while identifying the adaptive practices women use to overcome workplace silencing. The specific objectives are to:

1. Examine how patriarchal norms in Nigerian workplaces suppress female employees' voices.
2. Identify the specific ways in which high-power distance culture contributes to the silencing of female employees.
3. Explore the role that religious norms play in encouraging silence among female workers.
4. Uncover the strategies that female employees employ to navigate these cultural barriers.

Theoretical Framework: Social Dominance Theory

Social Dominance Theory (SDT) was created by Sidanius and Pratto (1999) to explain how societies create and maintain group-based hierarchies in which dominant groups enjoy better access to power, status and resources than subordinate groups. The theory holds that social institutions, cultural beliefs and individual attitudes interact to perpetuate these unequal relations through hierarchy enhancing processes that legitimize existing inequalities and reinforce the privileges of dominant groups while curtailing the opportunities of subordinate groups (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). The theory was built on the concept of Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), introduced by Pratto et al. (1994) as an individual propensity for group-based inequality.

The theory identifies gender as one of the most enduring forms of social hierarchy, with men historically occupying positions of greater power and influence. It argues that organizational structures, cultural norms and institutional practices legitimize male authority and reinforce traditional gender roles, making it more difficult for women to express opinions, participate in organisational decision making or challenge discriminatory practices because doing so threatens established power relations (Pratto et al., 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Social Dominance Theory is particularly applicable in the Nigerian workplace because patriarchal cultural norms and a significant power gap often reinforce male domination at the organizational level (Hofstede, 2001; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Such institutional and cultural frameworks encourage women to self-censor their ideas to avoid criticism, victimization, exclusion from decision making, career stagnation or other workplace consequences. Thus, the theory provides a powerful explanatory framework for understanding how organisational structures, cultural expectations and masculine hegemony restrict female employee voice and perpetuate gender inequality in Nigerian workplaces (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Ridgeway, 2011)

REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

Conceptualising Female Employee Voice

Employee voice is the discretionary communication of ideas and concerns aimed at improving organisational functioning. It is vital for healthy decision-making and allows employees to express views without fear of retaliation (Morrison, 2011). Research shows that group-level beliefs, or "group voice climate," significantly influence individual voice behaviour, with positive climates encouraging expression. Leadership and workplace culture shape these shared beliefs, particularly in settings with high levels of managerial undermining or snubbing, which can hinder the voice climate. Morrison, Wheeler-Smith, and Kamdar (2011) conducted a cross-level investigation of voice behaviour within 42 groups of engineers from a large chemical company, introducing the concept of group voice climate, shared beliefs among team members about the safety and efficacy of speaking up within their work group. Their findings revealed that group voice climate was highly predictive of individual voice behaviour and explained variance beyond individual-level factors such as identification, satisfaction, and procedural justice climate. Importantly, the effect of group identification on voice was stronger in groups with favourable voice climates, indicating that group-level beliefs can amplify or dampen individual tendencies to speak up.

In contexts with entrenched patriarchal norms, such as Nigeria, women face additional barriers to expressing their views due to unfavourable group beliefs and gendered expectations. Formal and informal voice mechanisms exist for women to share opinions; however, their use is heavily influenced by institutional structures like leadership styles and workplace policies (Cooper et al., 2021; Della Torre et al., 2021). A lack of supportive environment can lead to silence, especially among women in hierarchical settings, where fear of retribution and gender stereotypes prevail (Pinder & Harlos, 2001), particularly in patriarchal work environments where gender stereotypes and power imbalances discourage women from speaking up (Adisa et al., 2019a, 2019b).

High Power Distance Culture and Employee Silence

High power distance reflects acceptance of unequal power distribution and rigid organisational hierarchies (Hofstede, 1991). Such cultures discourage employees from questioning authority and particularly disadvantage women, who must navigate both hierarchical and gendered expectations simultaneously. In such contexts, communication styles are typically more formal, and employees often hesitate to openly challenge or question superiors (Brockner et al., 2001; Ravenswood & Markey, 2018). Prevailing cultural norms and values at the national level significantly influence organisational culture in ways that mirror broader societal expectations and attitudes (Hofstede & Bond, 1988; Aycan et al., 2000).

This dynamic creates particular challenges for female employees, who must navigate both hierarchical constraints and gendered expectations simultaneously. In the Nigerian context, high-power distance orientation has been identified as a primary cultural factor contributing to gender imbalance in the workplace. Consequently, this cultural disposition makes it especially difficult for female employees to express their opinions, suggestions, ideas, or complaints about important workplace issues (Adisa et al., 2024).

Patriarchal Norms and Gender Inequality

Patriarchal norms emphasise male dominance in societal roles and position men as superior to women in various aspects of decision-making (Walby, 1990; Adisa et al., 2019a). This cultural characteristic perpetuates gender inequality and creates an environment where women's contributions and capabilities are consistently undervalued and underutilised (Anyangwe, 2015). In Nigerian society, traditional gender norms and stereotypes remain deeply entrenched, resulting in increased male dominance across professional, organisational, and domestic settings (Adisa et al., 2019a). This cultural reinforcement of gender inequality extends into professional settings, where women are frequently relegated to roles perceived as less authoritative and more nurturing, while men occupy positions of authority and decision-making (Adisa et al., 2019a, 2019b).

The pervasiveness of patriarchal norms is evident even in everyday cultural practices. Personal naming practices in many Nigerian cultures actively activate gender differences and hierarchy. Male children are often bestowed with names reflecting power and the sustenance of patriarchy, while female children receive names depicting normative femininity and defining their roles in heterosexual marriages (Mensah et al., 2026). This cultural reinforcement of gender inequality extends into professional settings, where women are often relegated to roles perceived as less authoritative and more nurturing (Akanji et al., 2024).

Religious Norms and the Reinforcement of Silence

Beyond patriarchal norms and high-power distance, contextualised religious norms and teachings have been identified as significant factors encouraging silence among female employees (Adisa et al., 2024). Religious teachings emphasising female submission and deference to male authority are prevalent in many Nigerian communities, extending their influence into professional settings. This creates an additional layer of cultural constraint limiting women's voice behaviour (Adisa et al., 2024). This religious dimension is particularly significant in Nigeria, where religious beliefs permeate many aspects of daily life and social interaction.

Both Christian and Islamic traditions in the Nigerian context often contain interpretations legitimising male headship and female subordination, creating a powerful ideological framework discouraging women from asserting themselves in public or professional arenas. Moreover, the interaction between religion, culture, and gender creates a complex web of expectations constraining women's ability to express themselves freely in the workplace. Traditional religious interpretations frequently serve as legitimising myths, justifying the marginalisation of women's voices, and framing silence as a virtue and speaking up as a violation of divine or natural order (Adisa et al., 2024; Olotuah et al., 2024).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to examine how institutionalised patriarchy and high-power distance culture shape female employee voice, silence, and participation in workplace decision-making. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to participants, enabling open discussion of sensitive gender-related experiences while preserving the authenticity of their narratives.

Participants and Sampling

Using purposive sampling, 52 female employees were selected from banking, engineering, information technology, marketing, customer service, and academia. Participants had at least two years of continuous employment in their organisations to ensure adequate exposure to workplace culture and gender dynamics.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through 52 semi-structured interviews lasting 45-90 minutes and approximately 200 hours of non-participant observation. Interview questions explored experiences of speaking up or remaining silent, perceived barriers, gendered expectations, and coping strategies. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. Observations focused on meetings, informal interactions, decision-making processes, seating arrangements, turn-taking patterns, and responses to female contributions, providing contextual evidence that strengthened the credibility of the interview findings.

Table 1: Sectoral Distribution of Key Informants

Sector	Number of Participants
Banking	10
Engineering	8
Information Technology	8
Marketing	7
Customer Service	9
Academia	10
Total	52

Note. Source: Survey 2026.

The cross-sectoral sample captured diverse manifestations of gender inequality across organisational contexts, enriching the analysis of workplace voice and silence.

Organisation of Interview Data

Interview data were organised according to participant demographics and anonymised using pseudonyms. This enabled comparison across age, gender, sector, and religious affiliation while preserving confidentiality and strengthening thematic interpretation.

Table 2: Demographic Composition of Key Informants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Sector/Role	Religious Affiliation (where noted)
Claire	35	Female	Former employee (left due to harassment)	Not specified
Sean	45	Male	Employee (admitted to enforcing patriarchal norms)	Not specified
Stuart	38	Male	Employee (asserted women should be silent)	Not specified
Amina	32	Female	Employee	Muslim
Sarah	40	Female	Employee	Christian
Kate	32	Female	Employee (described organisational religious norms)	Not specified (worked in a Muslim-led organisation)

Source: Survey 2026

This demographic organisation enabled researchers to trace patterns across age, gender, sector, and religious affiliation, enriching thematic analysis with contextual depth. Testimonies of Amina and Sarah provided direct insights into how Muslim and Christian teachings, respectively, influenced women's self-silencing behaviours, while statements from Sean and Stuart illuminated how male employees actively enforced patriarchal expectations.

Non-Participant Observation

Approximately 200 hours of non-participant observation were conducted over six months across participating organisations. Observations documented meetings, informal interactions, organisational routines, non-verbal communication, participation patterns, and workplace power dynamics without disrupting normal organisational activities.

With organisational approval, audio recordings of selected meetings were obtained through an authorised insider to capture naturally occurring communication patterns. Observations revealed male-dominated discussions, frequent interruption or appropriation of women's contributions, exclusionary informal networks, and gendered allocation of nurturing responsibilities. Combined with interview data, these observations strengthened the credibility and richness of the findings while all ethical requirements were maintained.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of Bingham University (No: BHU/ERC/25/H008). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before any data collection. The consent form clearly outlined the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw at any time without consequence, and the data collection procedures. Audio recordings of interviews were conducted exclusively with participants' explicit, signed authorisation. At no point were any individuals recorded without their knowledge or consent. All names used in reporting are pseudonyms to protect the identities of participants and their organisations. Interview recordings were stored on a password-protected, encrypted device and permanently deleted upon completion of analysis. The authors confirm that all data reported were collected firsthand by the research team specifically for this project.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and themes related to patriarchal norms and their manifestation in the workplace, high-power distance dynamics, religious influences on employee silence, and strategies for navigating voice barriers. This analytical approach enabled a systematic examination of qualitative data to uncover how cultural factors suppress female employees' voices in Nigerian workplaces (Adisa et al., 2024; Akanji et al., 2024). The analysis followed systematic coding, category development, and theme identification, ensuring findings were firmly grounded in participants' experiences and observational evidence.

FINDINGS

This study uses existing empirical research and theoretical bases to reveal three key thematic barriers to female employee voice in Nigerian workplaces, namely, patriarchal hegemony and gender inequality, high-power distance as a cultural constraint, and religious norms that reinforce silence. The data also highlight the techniques women use to negotiate these interlocking hurdles.

Theme 1: Patriarchal Hegemony and Gender Inequality

The findings reveal a deeply entrenched system of patriarchal hegemony systematically undermining female employee voice across Nigerian organisational contexts. Male dominance in professional settings operates not merely as individual prejudice but as an institutionalised structure discouraging diverse perspectives and worsening difficulties women face when participating in decision-making processes. Women consistently encounter workplace environments where their contributions are undervalued, dismissed, or ignored, creating pervasive marginalisation extending beyond immediate interactions to affect long-term career advancement. This systematic devaluation manifests in tangible ways, including limited access to mentorship opportunities, exclusion from informal networks where critical decisions are often made, and disproportionate allocation of administrative or nurturing roles carrying less organisational influence.

The cumulative effect of these barriers is a significant dampening of women's motivation and engagement, as they increasingly perceive efforts to speak up or contribute meaningfully yield little recognition or reward. The findings highlight that patriarchal hegemony in Nigerian workplaces is not a relic of tradition but an active, living system continuously reproducing gender inequality through everyday organisational practices.

A senior engineer in the manufacturing sector described her experience:

"I remember a meeting where I proposed a solution to a recurring technical problem. My male colleague repeated the same idea ten minutes later, and everyone praised him as if it were his invention. I sat there and said nothing because I knew if I spoke up, I would be seen as difficult or emotional." (P07, Engineering, 12 years)

A bank manager echoed this sentiment:

"You learn to pick your battles. If you challenge every time your idea is stolen or ignored, you become 'that woman', the aggressive one. So, you stay quiet, and slowly you stop offering ideas altogether. What is the point?" (P14, Banking, 8 years)

Observational field notes captured this dynamic during a departmental meeting. A female staff member raised a concern about workflow inefficiencies. Her comment received no verbal response, but the meeting continued as though she had not spoken. Five minutes later, a male manager raised the identical issue and was met with enthusiastic engagement. The female participant made no further contributions.

Participants also reported disproportionate allocation of administrative or nurturing roles. An academic participant stated:

"I am always asked to serve on welfare committees, student advisory panels and things that are 'caring' and 'supportive.' But when it comes to curriculum development or research grants, they call the men. It is subtle, but it is very clear." (P23, Academia, 10 years)

Claire, a former employee, recounted leaving a previous job after being sexually harassed and discriminated against during a promotion exercise:

"I had no voice by which to report it. I didn't even have the guts to do so, because I was afraid of losing my job and the shame it would bring on me in the organisation and in society...I just left." (Claire, 35, Former Employee)

Theme 2: High-Power Distance as a Cultural Constraint

The findings establish high-power distance orientation as a critical cultural factor compounding gender imbalances and intensifying the silencing of female employees. In Nigerian workplace settings, where hierarchical structures are rigidly maintained and authority is seldom questioned,

female employees face a double burden. They are constrained not only by their subordinate position within organisational hierarchies but also by gendered expectations that discourage women from challenging or asserting themselves in professional spaces. This cultural disposition makes it exceptionally difficult for female employees to express opinions, suggestions, ideas, or complaints about important workplace issues, as doing so is perceived as a violation of both organisational protocol and cultural propriety. High-power distance culture normalises deference to superiors and discourages upward communication, but for women, this norm is intensified by societal expectations that women should be agreeable, accommodating, and silent.

Consequently, women often internalise the belief that speaking up is futile or risky, leading to a self-reinforcing cycle of silence perpetuating their marginalisation. The intersection of high-power distance with gender creates a uniquely constrained environment where women's voices are systematically muted through both structural and cultural mechanisms.

A public administration participant explained:

"In our culture, you do not question your boss—especially if your boss is a man. And if you are a woman, it is even worse. You are seen as disrespectful, not just to the manager but to the entire system. So you keep quiet, even when you know something is wrong." (P31, Public Administration, 15 years)

This was observed during a team meeting at a government agency. When a female junior staff member attempted to suggest an alternative approach, her male supervisor interrupted: "We will do it my way." She lowered her gaze and did not speak again. Other female staff also remained silent.

An IT participant described how power distance intersected with gender:

"It is not just that I am junior—I am also a woman. So I have to be twice as careful about how I say things. If I am too direct, I am rude. If I am too soft, no one takes me seriously. Either way, I lose. Most times, it is easier to just say nothing." (P39, IT, 6 years)

A marketing participant stated:

"I have seen women who spoke up and were punished for it—transferred to less desirable posts, given poor performance reviews, or just frozen out. So you learn. You watch, you listen, and you keep your mouth shut. It is survival." (P46, Marketing, 9 years)

Male employees explicitly enforced patriarchal and hierarchical norms. Stuart asserted:

"Women should always maintain silence in public places, including the workplace. Doing so means that such a woman is cultured and reserved...A man should always do the talking and make decisions." (Stuart, 38, Male Employee)

Sean admitted:

"I often prevent giving women a chance to voice their opinions because when I allow them to talk in decision-making meetings, it makes me feel weak and unmanly." (Sean, 45, Male Employee)

Theme 3: Religious Norms Reinforcing Silence

The findings also highlight contextualised religious norms and teachings as a potent force encouraging silence among female employees. Religious teachings emphasising female submission and deference to authority, prevalent across both Christian and Islamic traditions in Nigeria, extend their influence seamlessly into workplace settings. These teachings frame female silence as a virtue and speaking up as a violation of divine or natural order, creating powerful ideological constraints that women must navigate in their professional lives. Religious norms operate through multiple channels, including direct prescriptions about gender roles, community expectations and social sanctions, and internalised beliefs about appropriate feminine behaviour. Women who defy these expectations may face not only professional consequences but also social and spiritual censure from religious communities.

This multifaceted reinforcement of silence makes religious norms particularly effective in suppressing female voice, as they draw on deeply held beliefs and identity commitments not easily set aside in professional contexts. Religious norms do not merely coexist with workplace dynamics but actively shape them, creating additional barriers distinguishing the Nigerian context from more secular or less religiously influenced settings.

A Muslim academic participant explained:

"I am a Muslim, and so I believe that men should lead, make decisions and do the talking. Women really should not talk much, especially in the gathering of other non-related men... Personally, these and other circumstances are responsible for my attitude of staying quiet on many matters at work." (Amina, 32, Muslim, Academia)

A Christian banking participant stated:

"I really don't like speaking out too vocally at work, especially during departmental meetings, where we have senior male colleagues and managers. I think it's against Christian teachings because the Bible says women should be submissive. Women are meant to be quiet and supportive of the males in church, family, and social settings." (Sarah, 40, Christian, Banking)

Kate described how religious norms were embedded in organisational culture:

"This organisation is privately owned, but the CEO, the managing director, and many senior managers are Muslims who will not consent to women interacting closely with them or having contrasting opinions and views to theirs. They expect the women who work here to be submissive and not subversive. So, I understand that, and I often maintain a decent silence." (Kate, 32, Employee in Muslim-led Organisation)

Observational notes recorded a male supervisor remarking approvingly: "She is a good woman—she knows her place and does not cause trouble."

A customer service participant described social and spiritual censure:

"If I am seen as too outspoken at work, word gets back to my church. People will say I am not being a good Christian woman. That is a heavyweight to carry. It affects not just my career but my standing in my community." (P41, Customer Service, 5 years)

An information technology participant described the internal conflict:

"My faith teaches me to be humble and quiet. But my job requires me to speak up, to lead, to take charge. I feel torn every single day. Sometimes I cannot sleep because I am trying to figure out how to be both a good Christian woman and a good professional. Most days, I choose silence." (P50, IT, 13 years)

Theme 4: Strategies for Navigating Barriers

Despite formidable barriers, some women develop and employ various strategies to navigate the gendered constraints they encounter. These strategies reflect a spectrum of responses, ranging from active resistance to reluctant accommodation, revealing the agency and resilience of female employees even within highly restrictive environments.

The first strategy involves confronting masculine hegemony through active resistance. Women employing this approach deliberately challenge gender stereotypes and assert their presence in male-dominated spaces. They speak up despite risks, demand inclusion in decision-making processes, and refuse to accept marginalisation as inevitable. This strategy requires considerable courage and personal conviction, as women adopting it often face backlash, labelling, or social isolation. However, for some, the pursuit of professional fulfilment and self-respect outweighs these costs.

The second strategy involves embracing or reluctantly complying with traditional feminine subject positions. Women adopting this approach navigate workplace barriers by conforming to expected gender roles, sometimes strategically and sometimes out of necessity. They may present themselves as agreeable, nurturing, and non-threatening to gain acceptance or avoid conflict. While this strategy can facilitate workplace survival and even advancement within certain parameters, it often comes at the cost of suppressing authentic voice and limiting career aspirations. Some women experience significant emotional dissonance reconciling professional ambitions with constrained roles they are compelled to occupy.

The third strategy, intersecting with both above, involves expressing concerns about experiencing emotional dissonance as they contend with occupational segregation based on gender. Many women report feeling torn between the desire to speak up and the fear of consequences, between professional identities and societal expectations, and between personal values and organisational

realities. This emotional dissonance manifests as stress, anxiety, and exhaustion, representing the high psychological cost of navigating patriarchal and high-power distance cultures. While women employ diverse strategies to cope with these barriers, the burden of navigating gendered constraints remains excessively theirs, pointing to the need for systemic rather than individual solutions.

Finally, these findings paint a comprehensive picture of complex, intersecting forces silencing female employees' voices in Nigerian workplaces. They reveal that silence is not a simple absence of speech but a product of deeply embedded cultural, religious, and structural dynamics systematically marginalising women. At the same time, they highlight the agency and resilience of women who, despite formidable barriers, find ways to assert their presence and contribute to their organisations.

Some participants deliberately challenged gender stereotypes. A senior engineer stated:

"I refuse to be silenced. I know the risks; I have been called difficult, aggressive, and unfeminine. But I have worked too hard to get here to let them push me into the corner. I speak up, I demand to be heard, and I do not apologise for it." (P07, Engineering, 12 years)

Another IT participant echoed:

"I had to learn to be louder than my fear. In the beginning, I was terrified of speaking up in meetings. But I realised that if I did not, no one would speak for me. So I made a conscious decision to fight back, to take up space, to make them hear me." (P34, IT, 8 years)

However, resistance often faced backlash. A banking participant noted:

"The men I work with do not like it when I am assertive. They call me aggressive behind my back. Some of my female colleagues have even told me I am making it harder for them by being 'too strong.' But I cannot be someone I am not just to make people comfortable." (P19, Banking, 10 years)

Others conformed to expected gender roles. A public administration participant explained:

"I know how to play the game. I smile, I nod, I agree with the men. It is exhausting, but it keeps me safe. If I want to get promoted, I cannot afford to be seen as a troublemaker. So, I play the role they expect, even though it feels like I am losing a part of myself every day." (P31, Public Administration, 15 years)

An academic participant described the emotional disagreement:

"I present myself as soft, agreeable, non-threatening. It works because my male colleagues are comfortable with me, and I have been promoted. But inside, I am screaming. I know I am capable of so much more, but I am trapped in this performance." (P23, Academia, 10 years)

Across both strategies, participants reported significant emotional disagreement. A marketing participant captured this tension:

"Every day, I feel like I am caught between two worlds. At work, I am expected to be professional and vocal. But my culture and my religion tell me to be quiet and submissive. I cannot be both. It is exhausting, mentally and emotionally. Sometimes I think about leaving my job just to escape the pressure." (P46, Marketing, 9 years)

A customer service participant described the psychological toll:

"I am constantly second-guessing myself. Should I speak up or stay quiet? If I speak, what will they think of me? If I stay quiet, will I regret it? This internal battle never stops. I go home tired, not because of the work, but because of the constant vigilance." (P50, customer service, 13 years)

Observational notes confirmed these accounts. Female employees were observed hesitating before speaking, speaking softly, or prefacing contributions with qualifying statements such as "I am not sure if this is right, but..." or "This might be a silly idea, but..." No similar hesitation was observed among male colleagues.

DISCUSSION

The findings systematically address each research objective by demonstrating how patriarchal norms, high power distance culture, and religious teachings collectively silence female employees' voices in Nigerian workplaces. The study fulfils the first objective by showing how patriarchal ideology shapes workplace interactions, the second by explaining how hierarchical social distance discourages upward communication, and the third by revealing how religious interpretations reinforce gendered silence. Participants' testimonies strongly align with existing literature, providing lived experiences that substantiate previous studies. Collectively, the findings demonstrate that barriers to women's workplace voice are rooted in broader socio-cultural and organisational structures within Nigerian society.

The first objective, which examined the role of patriarchal norms in suppressing female employee voice, was comprehensively achieved. Findings revealed that patriarchy operates through both institutional structures and everyday workplace interactions, creating environments where women's contributions are systematically undervalued and their voices suppressed (Adisa et al., 2024). This supports Walby's (1990) conceptualisation of patriarchy as a system of social structures through which men dominate and exploit women. Within the Nigerian workplace, patriarchy extends beyond individual prejudice to shape organisational policies, decision-making, and daily interactions.

Participant testimonies clearly illustrated these realities. Claire, a 35-year-old former employee, recalled leaving her job after experiencing sexual harassment and discrimination during a promotion exercise:

"I had no voice by which to report it. I didn't even have the guts to do so, because I was afraid of losing my job and the shame it would bring on me in the organisation and in society...I just left."

Her experience demonstrates how patriarchal workplaces make speaking up both professionally risky and socially costly. This resonates with Morrison and Milliken's (2000) concept of organisational silence, where employees withhold information because of fear of negative consequences. Claire's testimony equally supports Adisa et al. (2024), who argued that patriarchal structures deprive women of formal and informal channels for expressing grievances. Her account also reflects Pinder and Harlos's (2001) concepts of acquiescent silence, arising from resignation, and quiescent silence, driven by fear. Her concern about shame further reflects evidence that women who report harassment in patriarchal societies often face both workplace sanctions and social stigma (Olotuah et al., 2024).

Similarly, Stuart, a 38-year-old male employee, remarked:

"Women should always maintain silence in public places, including the workplace. Doing so means that such a woman is cultured and reserved...A man should always do the talking and make decisions."

This testimony directly reflects Adisa et al.'s (2024) findings that many male employees perceive female participation as a threat to masculine identity. His reliance on culture and tradition to justify excluding women demonstrates how patriarchal beliefs legitimise male authority and female obedience. His admission that women are deliberately denied opportunities to contribute confirms that patriarchal norms function as active practices of exclusion rather than passive cultural beliefs. These findings also resonate with Anyangwe's (2015) analysis of gender inequality in Africa, which documented the systematic privileging of male voices across social institutions. Collectively, these findings confirm that patriarchal norms suppress women's voices in both formal and informal workplace settings, thereby fulfilling the first research objective.

The second objective examined the influence of high-power distance culture on female employee voice. Findings revealed that hierarchical organisational structures create significant social distance between employees and authority figures, discouraging upward communication and reinforcing silence. From the perspective of Social Distance Theory, perceived inequalities reduce opportunities for dialogue, feedback, and disagreement between subordinates and organisational leaders. Claire's fear of reporting harassment because of possible job loss illustrates how organisational hierarchies amplify women's vulnerability. Her experience supports Adisa et al. (2024), who observed that employees in high power distance environments avoid challenging authority because of anticipated sanctions and career consequences. The study therefore confirms that gender inequality and hierarchical distance intersect to suppress women's workplace voice, thereby achieving the second research objective.

Regarding the third objective, participant testimonies demonstrated that religious teachings significantly influence women's workplace silence, consistent with previous scholarship. Amina, a 32-year-old Muslim participant, explained:

"I am a Muslim, and so I believe that men should lead, make decisions and do the talking. Women really should not talk much, especially in the gathering of other non-related men... Personally, these and other circumstances are responsible for my attitude of staying quiet on many matters at work."

Her testimony illustrates how religious beliefs become internalised, leading women to perceive silence as a religious obligation rather than merely a cultural expectation. This supports Olotuah et al. (2024), who documented the influence of religious teachings on women's workplace behaviour. Her reference to interactions with unrelated men reflects Islamic modesty norms that may restrict women's participation in professional discussions.

Christian beliefs also emerged as reinforcing female submission. Sarah, a 40-year-old participant, stated:

"I really don't like speaking out too vocally at work, especially during departmental meetings, where we have senior male colleagues and managers. I think it's against Christian teachings because the Bible says women should be submissive. Women are meant to be quiet and supportive of the males in church, family, and social settings."

Sarah's understanding reflects common interpretations of biblical passages such as Ephesians 5:22–24 and 1 Timothy 2:11–12. Although feminist theologians provide alternative interpretations, her perspective represents a widely accepted view in many Nigerian Christian communities and aligns with Adisa et al.'s (2024) findings that religious teachings reinforce cultural expectations of female submission.

Observations further indicated that religion influenced organisational interactions, with many male employees limiting close engagement with female colleagues. Kate, a 32-year-old employee, explained:

"This organisation is privately owned, but the CEO, the managing director, and many senior managers are Muslims who will not consent to women interacting closely with them or having contrasting opinions and views to theirs. They expect the women who work here to be submissive and not subversive. So, I understand that, and I often maintain a decent silence."

Kate's testimony demonstrates that religion functions not only as a personal belief system but also as an organisational influence shaping acceptable workplace behaviour. Her description of maintaining "a decent silence" illustrates the internalisation of gender norms through religious socialisation (Olotuah et al., 2024). These findings support Adisa et al. (2024), who argued that religious expectations become embedded within organisational cultures, creating both formal and informal constraints on women's voices.

The findings therefore reinforce existing literature identifying contextualised religious norms as significant drivers of female employee silence. Across many Nigerian communities, interpretations within both Christianity and Islam legitimise male authority and female submission, creating ideological frameworks that discourage women from asserting themselves in professional settings

(Adisa et al., 2024; Olotuah et al., 2024). From the perspective of Social Dominance Theory (Pratto et al., 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), these religious interpretations function as legitimising myths that sustain existing gender hierarchies by presenting silence as virtuous and male authority as divinely sanctioned. The findings also resonate with Mensah, Inyabri, and Aboh (2026), who demonstrated that everyday cultural practices reinforce gender hierarchy within Nigerian society. Accordingly, the third objective is comprehensively achieved, showing that religious norms extend beyond personal beliefs to become embedded within organisational cultures and social expectations, thereby creating powerful constraints on women's workplace voice.

The fourth objective, which explored the strategies women employ to navigate workplace voice barriers, was achieved through the identification of active resistance, strategic acquiescence, and collective networking as key coping mechanisms (Akanji et al., 2024). Despite persistent barriers, the findings demonstrate that women actively negotiate workplace constraints rather than passively accepting oppression. This supports Akanji, Mordi, and Ajonbadi's (2024) study of professional women in male-dominated occupations, which identified active resistance, strategic acquiescence, and emotional coping as the principal strategies used to manage career stereotypes.

Some participants challenged masculine hegemony through active resistance by asserting their competence, demanding inclusion in decision-making, and refusing to accept marginalisation. Within Social Dominance Theory, this represents hierarchy attenuating behaviour through which subordinate groups contest unequal power relations. Although this approach often attracts resistance, social isolation, or labelling, it reflects considerable agency and determination. These findings reinforce Akanji et al.'s (2024) conclusion that women increasingly rely on professional competence to challenge gender stereotypes and gain recognition in male-dominated workplaces.

Other participants adopted strategic acquiescence by conforming to socially accepted feminine roles to minimise workplace conflict while maintaining career progression. This finding aligns with Akanji et al.'s (2024) description of women strategically performing traditional gender roles to navigate organisational expectations. Although this strategy may promote acceptance and career survival, it frequently requires suppressing authentic opinions and limiting professional aspirations. Consequently, many participants described experiencing emotional dissonance as they balanced career ambitions with societal expectations. They reported feeling torn between speaking up and avoiding negative consequences, resulting in stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion. These findings suggest that while women develop effective coping strategies, the responsibility for managing gender inequality continues to rest disproportionately on them, highlighting the need for structural rather than purely individual interventions.

Participants further emphasised the importance of transforming societal mindsets as a sustainable response to patriarchal workplace practices (Adisa et al., 2024). One participant observed:

"Let us start talking about mindset. How do we collaborate with men and women to change our mindset? Once a year, I bring everybody together. Men and women, and it is really just to challenge the mindset. Discuss the issues. Explain the context of the different issues to the men...You need to bridge the communication gap and let each person see where the value lies between them."

This recommendation recognises that reducing patriarchal barriers requires collective cultural transformation rather than individual behavioural change alone. It resonates with Morrison, Wheeler Smith, and Kamdar's (2011) concept of group voice climate, which emphasises that employees are more likely to speak when organisations collectively promote psychological safety and openness. Likewise, participants stressed the need for women to challenge internalised limitations. As one participant stated:

"A lot of times we just put ourselves in a box, and we are the accuser, the judge and the jury, so sometimes we need to just get out of the box and say, look, I can be myself, and I can still make it. Believe in yourself. Do not let anybody make you think that it is not possible."

This testimony highlights the importance of self-efficacy in overcoming internalised patriarchal beliefs and complements broader organisational reforms aimed at encouraging employee voice.

Women also identified representation, mentoring, and networking as important mechanisms for strengthening collective voice (Adisa et al., 2024). Networking groups were viewed as platforms for promoting gender equality, sharing experiences, and supporting career advancement. As one participant remarked:

"We need to share those stories across the food chain"

to celebrate women's achievements and inspire younger women to pursue leadership aspirations. This finding resonates with Cooper et al.'s (2021) work on well-being-oriented human resource management, which identified social support networks as important facilitators of employee voice and psychological well-being.

The findings also extend Social Dominance Theory by demonstrating that women living within highly unequal social systems are not passive recipients of discrimination but active agents who continually negotiate, resist, and adapt to patriarchal structures. While the theory effectively explains the persistence of gender-based hierarchies, the present study shows that subordinate groups simultaneously develop practical strategies to challenge dominant ideologies and maintain professional engagement. This theoretical extension is further supported by Imhanrenialena et al. (2024), who found that although patriarchal workplace practices reduce career adaptability, Nigerian career women continue to achieve meaningful career success through adaptive coping strategies. The diversity of strategies identified in the present study, ranging from active resistance to strategic accommodation and collective networking, reflects this resilience.

Accordingly, the fourth objective is comprehensively achieved through participant testimonies, Social Dominance Theory, and existing literature on gender, career adaptability, and workplace voice. Overall, the findings demonstrate that although patriarchal norms, high power distance culture, and religious teachings create substantial barriers to female employee voice, women actively develop multiple strategies to negotiate these constraints while sustaining professional commitment and resilience.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that institutionalised patriarchy, high-power distance culture, and religious norms operate as interlocking forces that systematically marginalise women's voices in Nigerian workplaces. The findings reveal that silence is not a simple absence of speech but a product of deeply embedded cultural, religious, and structural dynamics that women must navigate daily. Despite formidable barriers, women demonstrate agency and resilience through strategies of active resistance, strategic acquiescence, and collective networking. The research contributes to growing literature on employee voice in the Global South, challenging the Western-centric focus of existing research and providing valuable insights for policymakers, HR practitioners, and organisational leaders.

Recommendations

These findings lead to several recommendations for organisations, policymakers, and other stakeholders.

- i. Organisations should adopt gender equality policies that go beyond diversity box-ticking and counter underlying patriarchal norms through independent grievance mechanisms, zero-tolerance policies, equal access to mentorship and career development, and leadership accountability metrics that encompass gender inclusivity.
- ii. To counteract the silencing effect of high-power distance culture, organisations should establish channels for upward communication through anonymous feedback systems, open-door policies, town hall meetings, and management training programmes that emphasise active listening and inclusive leadership.
- iii. Organisations should partner with religious leaders and faith-based organisations to reinterpret sacred teachings in ways that affirm women's right to speak and fully participate in professional settings through workshops, seminars, and community dialogues.
- iv. Finally, organisations should invest in formal and informal support systems, such as mentorship programmes, women's networking groups, safe spaces for sharing experiences, and intergenerational storytelling initiatives that project visible role models and encourage career ambitions. Together, these proposals address the interconnected hurdles found in this study while acknowledging and building upon the agency and resilience that women already display.

REFERENCES

- Adisa, T. A., Mordi, C., & Ajonbadi, H. A. (2019a). Gender inequality and women's voice in the workplace: A study of Nigerian female employees. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 34(3), 210–228.
- Adisa, T. A., Mordi, C., & Ajonbadi, H. A. (2019b). The mediating role of culture in shaping women's voice behaviour in Nigerian workplaces. *Employee Relations: The International Journal*, 41(5), 1018–1035.

- Adisa, T. A., Ogbonnaya, C., Mordi, C., Ajonbadi, H., & Adekoya, O. D. (2024). Seen but not heard: The voice of women at work and the mediating role of culture. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 35(20), 3496–3523. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2024.2421345>
- Akanji, B., Mordi, C., & Ajonbadi, H. A. (2024). Confronting social dominance ideology: How professional women manage career stereotypes in male-dominated occupations. *Employee Relations: The International Journal*, 46(4), 913–933. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ER-04-2022-0161>
- Anyangwe, E. (2015). *Gender equality and the law in Africa*. African Books Collective.
- Aycan, Z., Kanungo, R. N., Mendonca, M., Yu, K., Deller, J., Stahl, G., & Kurshid, A. (2000). Impact of culture on human resource management practices: A 10-country comparison. *Applied Psychology*, 49(1), 192–221.
- Cooper, B., Wang, J., Bartram, T., & Cooke, F. L. (2021). Well-being-oriented HRM in the context of COVID-19. *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources*, 59(4), 571–581.
- Della Torre, E., Gritti, A., & Rizzini, G. (2021). Formal and informal voice mechanisms in the workplace. *Industrial Relations Journal*, 52(5), 434–452.
- Donnelly, R., Hughes, C., & McCarthy, J. (2012). Flexible work arrangements and employee voice. *Employee Relations*, 34(3), 256–274. <https://doi.org/10.1108/01425451211217704>
- Hofstede, G. (1991). *Cultures and organisations: Software of the mind*. McGraw-Hill.
- Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions and organizations across nations* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Hofstede, G., & Bond, M. H. (1988). The Confucius connection: From cultural roots to economic growth. *Organizational Dynamics*, 16(4), 4–21. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0090-2616\(88\)90009-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/0090-2616(88)90009-5)
- Imhanrenialena, B. O., Ebhotemhen, W., Agbaeze, E. K., Eze, N. C., & Oforkansi, E. S. (2025). Exploring how institutionalised patriarchy relates to career outcomes among African women: Evidence from Nigeria. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 40(1), 43–63. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1108/GM-06-2023-0223>
- Mensah, E. O., Inyabiri, I., & Aboh, R. (2026). Gender ideologies and stereotypes in personal naming practices in Nigeria. *Language Sciences*, 104, 101–120. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2026.101120>

- Morrison, E. W. (2011). Employee voice behaviour: Integration and directions for future research. *The Academy of Management Annals*, 5(1), 373–412. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19416520.2011.574506>
- Morrison, E. W., & Milliken, F. J. (2000). Organisational silence: A barrier to change and development in a pluralistic world. *Academy of Management Review*, 25(4), 706–725. <https://doi.org/10.2307/259200>
- Morrison, E. W., Wheeler-Smith, S. L., & Kamdar, D. (2011). Speaking up in groups: A cross-level study of group voice climate and voice. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 96(1), 183–191. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0020744>
- Olotuah, D. E., Cavlan, G. I., & Forson, C. (2024). Contextualising the work-family experiences of women in the Nigerian banking industry. *Journal of Family Studies*, 30(3), 507–530. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13229400.2023.2240428>
- Pinder, C. C., & Harlos, K. P. (2001). Employee silence: Quiescence and acquiescence as responses to perceived injustice. In G. R. Ferris (Ed.), *Research in personnel and human resources management* (Vol. 20, pp. 331–369). Emerald Group Publishing Limited. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-7301\(01\)20003-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0742-7301(01)20003-2)
- Pratto, F., Sidanius, J., Stallworth, L. M., & Malle, B. F. (1994). Social dominance orientation: A personality variable predicting social and political attitudes. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 67(4), 741–763. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.67.4.741>
- Ridgeway, C. L. (2011). *Framed by gender: How gender inequality persists in the modern world*. Oxford University Press.
- Sidanius, J., & Pratto, F. (1999). *Social dominance: An intergroup theory of social hierarchy and oppression*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139175043>
- Walby, S. (1990). *Theorising patriarchy*. Basil Blackwell.