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Seen but not heard: the voice of women at work and the mediating role of culture

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Citation:

ADISA, Toyin Ajibade, OGBONNAYA, Chidiebere, MORDI, Chima, AJONBADI, Hakeem and ADEKOYA, Olatunji (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. [Article]

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The International Journal of Human Resource Management

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rijh20

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To cite this article: Toyin Ajibade Adisa, Chidiebere Ogbonnaya, Chima Mordi, Hakeem Ajonbadi & Olatunji David Adekoya (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, DOI: 10.1080/09585192.2024.2421345

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2024.2421345

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THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT
2024, VOL. 35, NO. 20, 3496–3523
https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2024.2421345

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Seen but not heard: the voice of women at work and the mediating role of culture

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ABSTRACT

While there is now an extensive body of literature on employee voice behaviour in the global North, research evidence from the global South is limited. This has constrained our understanding of the barriers that female workers face in expressing their views and concerns in developing countries such as Nigeria. This article examines the cultural factors that shape female employee voice behaviour in Nigerian workplaces. Using a meta-synthesis of 52 semi-structured interviews and approximately 200 h of non-participant observation, we identify a high-power distance orientation and patriarchal norms as two cultural factors that contribute to gender imbalance in the workplace, making it difficult for female employees to express their opinions, suggestions, ideas, or complaints about important workplace issues. Our findings highlight a system of patriarchal hegemony and gender inequality that makes voice behaviour difficult for female workers. The findings also show that contextualised religious norms and teachings encourage silence among female employees. We provide valuable insights into the cultural norms that inhibit female employee voice behaviour in the Global South context.

KEYWORDS

Employee voice; women; culture; workplace; high-power distance; patriarchy

Introduction

The issue of female employee voice has received more attention in the global North than in other regions, which might be explained by the significant progress in implementing gender-equality measures, fostering

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inclusive workplace cultures, and increasing women's representation in the workforce (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998; Whiting et al., 2012). However, the same is not true of developing countries and many parts of the global South. In Nigeria, for example, traditional gender norms and societal stereotypes persist, resulting in increased male dominance in professional, organisational, and domestic settings (Adisa et al., 2019a). In such societies, men are typically regarded as natural leaders, who demonstrate assertiveness, decisiveness, strength, and decision-making authority (Adisa et al., 2021). Women, however, continue to face patriarchal barriers that limit their effectiveness at home and work (Adisa et al., 2019b; Makama, 2013). They are often relegated to roles perceived as less authoritative and more nurturing, such as caregiving and domestic responsibilities (Fapohunda, 2016). These stereotypes restrict women's opportunities for professional advancement and inhibit their ability to voice concerns or ideas in organisational settings (Adisa et al., 2019b). However, our understanding of these cultural dimensions remains limited, particularly in regions where societal stereotypes significantly impact gender dynamics in the workplace.

Having a voice in the workplace entails being able to express concerns, share opinions, and make constructive contributions to work-related discussions (Detert & Burris, 2007; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998; Whiting et al., 2012). This capacity for open expression not only promotes healthy and well-functioning organisations (Morrison & Milliken, 2000) but also plays a crucial role in organisational decision-making processes (Detert et al., 2007). It also empowers employees to share their views without fear of retribution and to provide feedback on issues affecting their job performance (Ng & Feldman, 2012; Morrison, 2011). However, culture has a strong influence on employee voice behaviour, primarily because it shapes the social principles that govern interpersonal interactions within and outside the workplace (Mohammad et al., 2023). Indeed, the prevailing cultural norms and values at a national level can significantly influence organisational culture in ways that reflect broader societal expectations and attitudes (Hofstede & Bond, 1988; Aycan et al., 2000). For instance, a country with a strong emphasis on top-down hierarchies might encourage organisational cultures that prioritise respect for authority and centralised decision-making. In such environments, communication styles may be more formal, and employees may hesitate to openly challenge or question their superiors (Brockner et al., 2001; Ravenswood & Markey, 2018).

Prior research has consistently addressed these cultural differences, particularly in studies exploring the interplay between national culture and organisational dynamics (see Hofstede, 1991; Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede & Bond, 1988; Hofstede et al., 2010; Minkov, 2007). However, much of

this research is predominantly Western, where individual rights, freedoms, and personal autonomy are prevalent. This Western-centric perspective has significantly influenced organisational practices and policies regarding gender equality, encouraging the adoption of more inclusive and collaborative approaches to workplace decision-making (Whiting et al., 2012). Such insights are arguably less directly applicable or less effective in non-Western contexts, where cultural norms and expectations may diverge (Adisa et al., 2019a). In many non-Western cultures (such as Nigeria), collectivism and hierarchical structures prevail, creating distinct challenges regarding the voice behaviour of female employees (Adisa et al., 2019b). In this light, our research seeks to investigate the cultural biases and norms that influence female employee voice behaviour in a national context with distinct traditional beliefs and institutions that differ from those observed in the global North.

To further advance the existing research landscape, we argue that the ability to express one's voice and participate in decision-making processes within an organisation is often influenced by prevailing cultural norms at the national level. We thus identify a high-power distance orientation and patriarchal norms as the cultural factors constraining female employee voice behaviour in Nigeria. Power distance is a key cultural dimension that reflects the extent to which power disparities are accepted and endorsed within a society (Hofstede, 1991). It ranges from low to high, with higher power distance indicating a society characterized by rigid hierarchical structures and unequal distribution of power among its members. In contrast, patriarchal norms emphasise male dominance in societal roles, positioning men as superior to women in various aspects of decision-making (Adisa et al., 2019a; Makama, 2013; Walby, 1990). This cultural characteristic perpetuates gender inequality and creates an environment in which women's contributions and capabilities are undervalued and underutilised (Anyangwe, 2015).

Our study uses in-depth interviews with female employees to capture a diverse range of experiences and inequalities relating to voice behaviour in the workplace. This approach allows us to uncover the nuanced ways in which gender imbalance affects women's ability to speak up, share ideas, and participate in decision-making processes at work (Felix et al., 2018). In Nigeria, several cultural and societal norms typically influence the roles and behaviours deemed appropriate for women and ultimately affect their experiences in professional settings (Adisa et al., 2019b). These challenges might be exacerbated by traditional gender roles, such as the expectation for women to prioritise their domestic responsibilities over their professional advancement (Cooke, 2010). Using a qualitative methodology, our research highlights how these cultural factors influence female workers' ability to express their ideas and concerns within their

organisations. We therefore enrich our understanding of the broader discussions on gender inequality, providing new empirical insights into the complex interplay between national culture and gender dynamics in the workplace.

Our primary contribution lies in providing valuable insights into the cultural norms that inhibit female employee voice behaviour at work, with a focus on high-power distance orientation and patriarchal values. We aim to broaden the understanding of how these cultural norms increase the risk of female workers' silence at work, which undermines their participation in organisational decision-making processes. Additionally, while employee voice remains an important concern in human resource management (HRM) and employment relations (Brewster et al., 2015; Dobbins & Dundon, 2014), there is still much to learn about the cultural determinants of gender imbalance. One major concern is that employee voice research often treats the concept as affecting all workers uniformly, thereby overlooking the unique experiences and barriers faced by female employees (Hickland et al., 2020), especially in Africa. We therefore expand the scope of research on employee voice behaviour beyond the predominantly Western context that has characterised much of the existing literature. Our approach seeks to explain the interplay between culture and employee voice in depth, thereby responding to calls in the literature for more diverse cultural insights on this topic (Donaghey et al., 2019; Hickland et al., 2020). Ultimately, our research lays the groundwork for the development of culturally sensitive interventions that address the specific barriers to women's voice behaviour and their participation in organisational settings.

Conceptual background

Female employee voice behaviour

Research on employee voice has gained traction in HRM, organisational behaviour, and employee relations since the 1980s (Wilkinson et al., 2018; Cooper et al., 2021). This growing body of literature has typically addressed issues concerning employee involvement in organisational decision-making, knowledge exchange, and information sharing (Yucel & Gurler, 2019; Rubbab & Naqvi, 2020). While the voice discourse in the workplace is relevant to all employees, women face significant challenges in expressing their views and opinions at work (Ravenswood & Markey, 2018; Wilkinson et al., 2018; Cooper et al., 2021). These challenges may be rooted in cultural systems, where traditional gender norms and biases influence whose opinions are accepted or overlooked in professional settings (Fapohunda, 2016). There is also the issue of male dominance in the workplace, which discourages diverse perspectives and exacerbates

the difficulties women face when participating in decision-making processes (Primecz & Karjalainen, 2019). These barriers can create an environment in which female workers' contributions are undervalued or ignored, which affects their career advancement and their motivation and engagement levels at work (Cooper et al., 2021).

To fully comprehend the issue of female employee voice behaviour, it is crucial to highlight the various voice mechanisms used in the workplace and the potential consequences thereof in relation to gender equality and performance (Morrison, 2023). Women, like men, may express their views through formal voice mechanisms, such as direct communication with managers, staff surveys, suggestion schemes, staff forums, collective bargaining, and participation in grievance committees (Cooper et al., 2021; Della Torre et al., 2021). Other formal mechanisms, such as worker representation and participation in equality monitoring committees, may be less direct and may address matters such as flexible work arrangements (Donnelly et al., 2012). In contrast, informal voice mechanisms, such as informal discussions and supervisor empowerment, can aid women in expressing their opinions and concerns at any time—not necessarily in response to a management-led query (Klaas et al., 2012). However, the frequency, approach, and efficacy of women's use of formal or informal voice mechanisms are often influenced by institutional structures (such as workplace policies, leadership styles, and organisational culture) and broader socioeconomic and cultural barriers (such as gender stereotypes, voice legitimacy systems, and educational background) (Ravenswood & Markey, 2018; Kwon & Farndale, 2020).

When formal and informal voice mechanisms are absent in the workplace, employees are typically at risk of being silenced (Morrison, 2023; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). 'Silence' in this context is defined as a deliberate withholding of information, ideas, and opinions pertinent to organisational improvements (Van Dyne et al., 2003). When faced with a lack of support or fear of retribution, individuals may intentionally opt for silence rather than voicing their opinions through formal or informal channels (Pinder & Harlos, 2001; Townsend et al., 2022). This phenomenon is particularly evident among women, especially in patriarchal work environments where gender stereotypes and power imbalances may further discourage women from speaking up (Adisa et al., 2019a, 2019b).

However, with the increasing global awareness of gender-based equality, victims are discovering new avenues by which they can voice their concerns and seek support (Townsend et al., 2022). Women, in particular, are leveraging social networking platforms to share their experiences and connect with others who have faced similar challenges (Huang et al., 2023). The rise of social media platforms provides individuals with alternative channels by which they express their voice and solicit social

support and advice from others, particularly in matters affecting their work (Mohammad et al., 2021). In fact, trade unions are increasingly using social media platforms to reach marginalised workforce groups like women who have traditionally had less voice (Thornthwaite, 2018). The challenge, however, lies in understanding the cultural nuances involved in the adoption of these voice mechanisms and the challenges that workers (particularly women) encounter when expressing themselves in professional settings (Cooper et al., 2021; Syed, 2007).

Our study broadens the current understanding of this issue by focusing on female workers' voice behaviour in Nigerian workplaces, with a particular emphasis on how cultural norms create barriers for them when they are expressing their views in professional settings. Therefore, we investigate a high-power distance orientation and patriarchal norms as the two cultural factors applicable in the Nigerian context. These factors are especially important in Nigeria, as traditional societal norms and values often play a significant role in shaping workplace behaviours.

High-power distance orientation and female employee voice behaviour

The concept of power distance refers to the extent to which individuals accept an unequal distribution of power, even when they are part of the same social system or environment (Hofstede, 2001). This cultural dimension is typically categorized as either low or high, and it influences a society's decision-making and communication patterns. In cultures with a low power distance orientation, decision-making tends to be more democratic, with ideas and opinions openly exchanged across all organizational levels (Shao et al., 2013). In such cultures, individuals often seek equality in power dynamics and expect justifications for any inequalities. This typically fosters a more inclusive environment where employees feel valued and empowered (Shao et al., 2013). In contrast, in a high-power distance culture, authority and decision-making are typically held at the top of the hierarchy, with little input sought from lower-level employees (Witte, 2012; Oruh & Dibia, 2020). People generally accept that those higher in the social hierarchy dominate and have more power than those who are lower in the social hierarchy. These hierarchies are valued and respected, which leads to highly submissive behaviours among inferiors in relation to their superiors (Kwon & Farndale, 2020).

Employee voice can be suppressed in cultural systems with a high-power distance orientation (Loewenbrück et al., 2016). This suppression is especially prevalent among women, who may be silenced because of traditional gender roles that undervalue their contributions or discourage their voice expression. Such issues are exacerbated in cultures with less gender-egalitarian values, where social hierarchy and deference to

authority are highly valued (Kwon & Farndale, 2020). For example, in certain high-power distance cultures, such as those in Africa, there are clear differences in how seniority, age, and gender are perceived in the workplace. These differences can significantly impact the power dynamics within the workplace, such as older and male colleagues being accorded a higher status and greater authority than their female counterparts. This can result in the marginalisation of female voices in the workplace, as female employees may be perceived as less knowledgeable or competent than their male colleagues, thus limiting the ability of women to advance in their careers or contribute to a hostile work environment (Kwon & Farndale, 2020).

Furthermore, in cultures with a high-power distance orientation, women are more likely than men to engage in self-silencing (Hurst & Beesley, 2013). According to Jack (2011), self-silencing is the tendency to prioritise others' needs in relationships, which stems from cognitive schemas about maintaining safety and intimacy. This leads self-silencers to silence their own feelings, thoughts, and actions. Adisa et al. (2021) argue that given that men have historically received more preferential treatment than women in most social institutional settings (e.g. family, religion, education, and work), some women use self-silencing as a coping mechanism for preventing rejection by suppressing aspects of the self and inhibiting behaviour that might jeopardise their acceptance. However, there is limited research on which mechanisms are typically used. We therefore argue that in high-power distance cultures, where social order shapes women's voices behaviour, women's voices are often silenced because of their concerns about facing negative consequences for speaking up.

Patriarchal norms and female employee voice behaviour

Patriarchy is an important cultural factor characterised by a social system wherein men primarily occupy positions of authority and power, with their perspectives and interests being considered the most influential in shaping society. Walby (1990) defines it simply as 'a system of interrelated social structures which allows men to exploit women' (p. 20). In patriarchal societies, gender roles are often rigidly defined, with women typically being assigned the roles of caregivers and homemakers, while men are expected to be the primary decision-makers at work and at home (Makama, 2013). This often leads to gender disparities in various sectors, such as politics, business, and education (Cooray & Potrafke, 2011). It also limits women's opportunities in the workforce and the public sphere (Landes, 1998). This perpetuates a cycle of dependency and inequality (Makama, 2013). Women in such societies face barriers to

advancement and unequal treatment, as norms and values favour male dominance in leadership and decision-making roles (Adisa et al., 2019a, 2019b, 2021). For instance, patriarchal norms create institutional structures that enable female discrimination in paid jobs and promotions, thus limiting their career progression and earning potential (Nwagbara, 2020). Similarly, Adisa et al. (2021) argue that patriarchy confines women to the domestic sphere; promotes their seclusion from political, economic, and religious activities; and creates gender-segregated workplaces.

Moreover, in environments dominated by patriarchal values, female input in decision-making is often undervalued because of biases that favour male perspectives and contributions (Nwagbara, 2020; Mathew & Taylor, 2019). These biases may result in situations in which women's suggestions and insights are ignored or dismissed in meetings, workplace discussions, and decision-making activities. For instance, when a woman's achievements are ignored or wrongly attributed to male colleagues with comparable performance, societal biases may deter her from voicing concerns because of fear of retaliation. Similarly, women raising concerns about inequalities in workplace promotion practices may be labelled as too assertive rather than recognised for their legitimate advocacy of fairness and equality. These experiences can undermine female employees' voice behaviour, impacting their prospects for career growth and development (Adisa et al., 2019a; Duan et al., 2018). In Nigeria, where patriarchal beliefs pervade various aspects of life (including work, family, religion, and social interactions [Adisa et al., 2019a, 2021], women encounter various forms of gender disparities in employment outcomes. They have a lower chance than men of progressing to high-value roles and face significant obstacles in accessing positions of authority (Adisa et al., 2021).

Research setting

Nigeria is the largest and most populous economy in Africa, with over 200 million people, of which 49% are female and 51% male (World Bank, 2022). Nigeria is characterised as a culturally diverse and multi-ethnic society, with over 250 ethnic groups and more than 500 indigenous languages (CIA World Factbook, 2022). These facts make Nigeria an interesting context for exploring how its cultural beliefs and societal settings affect employee voice. Like most African countries, Nigeria has a deep-rooted collectivist culture portrayed by high levels of interdependence and long-term commitment to group members (e.g. family, friends, relatives, and other social groups) (Adisa et al., 2019b). Additionally, the Nigerian collectivist culture breeds a high degree of trust, loyalty, and regard for the elderly and

people in power because of its high-power distance culture (Adisa et al., 2021). Many Nigerians crave the social bonding engendered by communal and relational communications built through interpersonal exchanges and group interactions in the pursuit of common interests (Ojeme & Robson, 2020).

Despite the benefits of collectivism, Nigeria's social structure is delineated by patriarchal norms and cultural beliefs that prioritise masculinity, male-centredness, and male domination over females that are strengthened in all its social institutions (e.g. family, education, and religion) (Adisa et al., 2021). Patriarchy dominates the power relations in Nigerian society such that certain obligations are imposed on males and females depending on cultural and traditional beliefs. For instance, most cultures in Nigeria frown upon men performing certain domestic tasks because they are believed to be reserved for women (Mordi et al., 2010). Additionally, patriarchy reinforces occupational gender segregation in Nigeria, whereby females are underrepresented in so-called 'male-typed professions' (Adisa et al., 2021). Nevertheless, Nigeria's patriarchal norms and high-power distance culture go beyond males dominating females and create hierarchical structures based on seniority and reverence for people in power (Nwagbara, 2020), which may render certain people voiceless. Thus, while 'superior' individuals take responsibility for guiding and nurturing subordinates, there is an expectation of loyalty, commitment, and high regard superiors, some of whom enjoy separable acceptable conduct (Mensah, 2021). For example, Salami and Ajitoni (2016) reveal that Nigerian employees depend on their superiors to provide job resources and look after them, and in return, they demonstrate high levels of conformity, respect, and loyalty.

Furthermore, Ntoimo and Isiugo-Abanihe (2014) contend that patriarchy enforces constraints that shape and affect perceptions and decisions in terms of social acceptance in Nigeria. As a result of this patriarchal orientation, many Nigerians customarily accept unequal power dynamics that infringe upon individuals' rights, such as their ability to express themselves in the workplace (Nwagbara, 2020). Unequal power relationships in Nigeria are based on several cultural beliefs and norms practised even from childhood. For instance, age is a key determinant of power relationships in Nigeria—a young child is considered 'culturally disciplined' when they obey and are loyal to their older siblings. Consequently, while it is generally known that employment relations accord great power to superiors (e.g. employers) than subordinates (e.g. employees), the high-power distance culture in Nigeria exacerbates unequal power relations, which often inhibit employees' prospects of contributing to decision-making processes

(Oruh & Dibia, 2020) or of losing their voice. Thus, the employment relationship is predicated purely on a master-servant relationship according to which respect for hierarchy, seniority, and authority is deemed a cultural norm. We examine how this cultural ethos affects female employee voice in non-Western organisational settings.

Methodology

This empirical study uses an in-depth qualitative case study approach (Yin, 2003). It is based on a total of 52 semi-structured interviews (with 37 females and 15 males) and approximately 200 h of non-participant observation. Our data analysis focuses on the experiences of participants in three different organisations in the Nigerian cities of Lagos, Ibadan, and Ilorin; and their ages ranged between 29 and 50 years old. To understand the nature of female employee voice and silence in this collectivist context, it is important to study and analyse the conditions relating to and within that context, and a case study approach provides the necessary tools for achieving this goal. We followed data triangulation protocols (Creswell & Miller, 2000), with two main sources of data: semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation. Table 1 presents the details of our themes and indicative quotations, along with our observations. We undertook semi-structured interviews in order to explore the meanings and experiences of the participants in their own words, while maintaining consistency in the questions across the interviews (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Non-participant observation helped us observe the body language of the participants with our own eyes, thus revealing hidden truths and norms of behaviour (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Morse & Richards, 2004).

We selected the participants by means of purposive sampling, which ensured that the participants would have the necessary knowledge to respond to the questions (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The interviewees were senior managers, managers, and employees with no leadership responsibilities. Even though we set out to investigate women's voice in the workplace, we also interviewed and observed men in order to gain a holistic view of the subject. During the fieldwork and with the permission of the organisations' management teams, we were permitted to interact freely with the participants while they were at work, and we followed an 'engaged' approach to the research (Milan, 2014) by building a relationship of trust with the participants. We were also permitted to attend staff meetings as observers, which enabled us to observe the differences between men's and women's voice behaviours and participation levels as well as determine whether and how the cultural values of patriarchy and high-power distance affected women's voice behaviour. However,

Table 1. Emerging themes with indicative quotations, researchers' observations, and theoretical aggregate.

Organising themes	Basic themes	Indicative quotations	Researchers' observation	Theoretical aggregate
Female employee voice and power distance	Having a different opinion to a man's opinion is impertinent and frowned upon	I once voiced my differing opinions in a meeting, and I blamed myself. I felt it was a workplace, and I could say what I thought. The manager felt insulted and suspended me for a week. He was angry at me and queried whether I had a husband at home…It is better to maintain silence **(Victoria, 39 years old).**	Female participants often refrain from putting forward their views, concerns, and opinions. They prefer to share them among themselves but not with their managers.	High power distance
	Men lead and make decisions; women follow and accept the decisions	This is Nigeria. Men lead everywhere and in everything. Men make decisions and culturally, women must abide. When a woman abides by a man's decision, she is submissive, but she is subversive when she has a contrary opinion **(Olly, 34 years old).**	Female participants live in awe of their male managers and keep a respectable distance from them. Female participants both respect and fear their male managers and treat them as 'demigods'.	High power distance/ high patriarchal hegemony
High patriarchal proclivity and its intimidation and muting of women's voices	Endemic patriarchal behaviour	Nigerian men are extremely patriarchal in nature. They hate it when a woman opposes their views or has a contrary opinion to theirs. They consider it rude and totally disapprove it…Of course, it makes a lot of women silent at work **(Betty, 39 years old).**	There was a scenario in which a female participant was queried and was eventually suspended for one week for having contradicted her manager's opinions. She became cold and withdrawn when she came back from her suspension.	High patriarchal hegemony
	Culturally, men are superior to women	The culture enables men to dominate women, and this includes dominating their voices too. You always need a man to help you promote your views, because he has the voice…That is what happens here in my workplace. The truth is that men have the louder voice, and women have the quieter voice **(Olamide, 40 years old).**	Men's voice overshadows women's voice, and women appear to be passive members of their organisations.	High power distance/ high patriarchal hegemony

(*Continued*)

Table 1. Continued.

Organising themes	Basic themes	Indicative quotations	Researchers' observation	Theoretical aggregate
Religious beliefs	Women should keep quiet in gatherings of men	In Islam, a woman should not mingle with men and must keep her voice down when talking to a man other than her husband and relations. Yes, I am guided by this teaching at work **(Aliyah, 32 years old).**	The teachings of Islam and Christianity are employed by many participants (and many of their managers) as boundaries to promote religious norms that endorse women's silence.	High power distance/ high patriarchal hegemony
	Religion and women's voice	I just follow the instructions of my managers and senior male colleagues. That is what my religion teaches. I should not be as vocal as men **(Clara, 38 years old).**	Religion plays an important role in silencing women's voice.	High power distance/ high patriarchal hegemony

boundaries were clearly defined in order to maintain a critical distance and enhance the trustworthiness of our findings.

To address the research objectives of this study, we asked participants the following overarching research question: How does culture affect your voice behaviour at work? We assigned the participants pseudonyms in order to preserve their anonymity. All interviews were conducted in English and audio-recorded with each session lasting approximately one to two hours. Seventeen participants declined consent to have their voices recorded during the interviews. In these cases, we took extensive field notes, ensuring their words were documented verbatim. After completing 42 individual semi-structured interviews and analyzing the emerging data, we found recurring themes and concluded that further data collection was unlikely to reveal new insights. However, to enhance the study's reliability and confirm that no significant themes had been overlooked, we conducted an additional 10 'confirmatory' interviews with 7 women and 3 men, bringing the total to 52 interviews. The findings from these confirmatory interviews corroborated the themes identified in the initial 42 interviews, with no new issues emerging, indicating that we had reached 'theoretical saturation' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 61).

The non-participant observations, our second source of primary data, took place between June and August 2022, when two of the researchers kept a low profile, especially during the departmental meetings that we attended. The reason for doing so was to gain a first-hand experience of the interplay between voice and culture in the organisations along with the 'implicit meanings' (Lichterman, 1998, p. 402) in terms of how the organisations members make sense of it. Observing the participants helped us understand and interpret the data accurately, because we are acquainted with the local language and culture (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002).

However, when conducting participant observations, it is important for a researcher to remain reflexive about their own position in the field (McCurdy & Uldam, 2014). We assumed the role of an 'overt outsider' in order to be open minded and unbiased (McCurdy & Uldam, 2014, p. 48).

Our analytical process was consistent throughout both semi-structured interviews and observations, providing significant insights into participants' experiences with the impact of culture on female employee voice. We initially used open coding to identify concepts, moving from *in vivo*—a simple descriptive phase—to second-order codes based on thematic analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Observation notes, field notes, and audio recordings were important for our understanding of the phenomenon under study. We adopted an open-ended abductive approach to our data analysis, following an iterative process of thematic coding (Awuzie & McDermott, 2017). First, we developed an initial, deductive, theoretically broad codebook (Davidson et al., 2019) to facilitate the systematic coding of the interview transcripts (Brandt & Timmermans, 2021). Next, we engaged in abductive data reduction, which allowed us to group similar texts together and conduct an in-depth analysis (Davidson et al., 2019). Thematic analysis was employed to systematically identify, synthesize, and organize the data, offering insights into patterns of themes or meanings across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method also helped us uncover and interpret meanings and experiences, thereby enhancing our understanding of commonalities within the dataset (Clarke & Braun, 2017). The significance of a theme in this research is that it captures something important about the overall research objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We used an abductive approach to develop our themes, which enabled us to engage in a back-and-forth movement between theory and data in order to develop or modify existing theory (Awuzie & McDermott, 2017). Abduction allows for a tight but evolving framework (Dubois & Gadde, 2002) whereby researchers can move between theory and participants' accounts, each informing the other in order to answer the project's research questions (Cunliffe, 2011).

Research findings

Drawing on Hofstede's cultural dimensions of power distance and patriarchy, our analysis reveals commonalities in the accounts of the lived realities of the participants across the three organisations. The accounts indicate that female employee voice is impacted by high-power distance, a high patriarchal proclivity, and religious beliefs. The data analysis also reveals insightful findings regarding the idealism and reality of voice in

organisational practice in Nigeria. Our data suggests that the high-power distance and male-dominated culture in Africa (especially Nigeria) is imported into organisational settings and impedes women's voice behaviours.

Female employee voice and power distance

Power distance focuses on the perceived relationship between those in authority and their subordinates (Hofstede, 2001), or 'the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally' (Hofstede, 2001, p. 98). In Nigeria, women are culturally viewed as subordinate to men (Makama, 2013), a phenomenon that has created a significant power distance between genders. This dynamic has impacted women's ability to express their voices in the workplace, even on important issues. One participant commented:

> My manager is a man and is extremely patriarchal in nature. I am often afraid to talk to him. He always demonstrates a high patriarchal proclivity [like he doesn't like a woman to challenge or complain about his decisions]. So, I try to avoid him – and so do other female workers. When he talks, we listen and obey quietly. That is the attitude and culture (Kemi, female, 43 years old).

The attitude and culture here are 'silence', which is when employees consciously refrain from expressing ideas, information, and opinions related to their jobs. Similarly, Janet likened women's voice participation to a lamb speaking up in the gathering of lions:

> This is an African society and an African organisation, where women are always behind men at home, at work, and in everything. Women are supposed to look up to men in terms of decision-making, and a woman is not expected to have contrary opinions or views to men. The power distance is substantially high, such that voice expression for women among men is like a lamb talking in a gathering of lions. The lamb must maintain absolute silence if it must live peacefully among the lions (Janet, female, 39 years old).

A high-power distance culture promotes a fearful atmosphere wherein subordinates (female employees) are afraid to express their views and opinions or express their disagreement with their managers' decision-making styles. One participant commented:

> My manager is frightening and highly respected. He is like a demigod. His voice supersedes other voices. When he talks, we just obey…He particularly detests a woman talking back at him or expressing her views and opinions. He considers it rude, and he has punished people for doing that. I have even seen people sacked because they persistently expressed differing views on certain issues. So, everybody, especially women, maintains silence and complains or comments about

> nothing. Even though there are many things to complain and comment about, I dare not, because it will get me in trouble (Jemila, female, 43 years old).

Societies with a high-power distance, such as Nigeria, are characterised by a widespread acceptance of authority and power differences. In such environments, women are often regarded as second-class citizens, creating barriers that prevent them from expressing their opinions and views within organizations—as a participant shared:

> It was during our departmental meeting…I had different opinions to our manager's views on some issues. My suggestions were immediately nullified, and I was suspended for two weeks for contempt. Since then, I have stopped voicing my views to avoid problems (Teressa, female, 41 years old).

The quote above reflects the consequences of a high-power distance culture, where many participants (32 in total), including the speaker, reported choosing silence over speaking up to avoid conflict. Our non-participant observation sessions support this claim. We observed that women's voices were consistently subdued, while men dominated the conversations. Female participants were overshadowed by male managers and colleagues during meetings. Most women remained silent throughout, and those who did speak only reinforced the points made by male managers or colleagues. The disparity in voice between men and women was clearly evident…Women simply maintained silence among the men.

The significantly high-power distance culture in Nigeria reflects a general cultural value that legitimises hierarchy and power differences between men and women, such that women's voices are stilled and are always in the shadow of men's voices. Nigeria's employment terrain is deeply rooted in the cultural and environmental dynamics of high-power distance in which the less powerful (like women) find no voice by which they can complain or comment about organisational issues.

High patriarchal proclivity and its intimidation and muting of women's voices

A patriarchal society sets the parameters for women's structurally unequal position, at home and at work, by subtly endorsing gender-differential in terms voice and silence. Nigeria is a heavily patriarchal society in which the hypermasculine culture, social stratification, and gender differentiation enable men to dominate women in all spheres of life. In this context, women's desires to participate and express their views, opinions, complaints, and comments on various organisational issues are often

frustrated by patriarchal norms that are deeply ingrained in the culture. For example:

> Nigeria is a patriarchal society where a woman is supposed to be subservient to a man…subservient in terms of everything, including voice expression and decision-making. When he speaks, you don't speak, and when he decides, you just follow his instructions…That is subservient. The implications of this are that in such a society, women's voices are muted, and they can't contribute meaningfully to the development of the organisation. Like here [at my workplace], women are usually not invited to senior management meetings (Leticia, female, 45 years old).

Even though women are confronted with many challenges and issues at work—the prevalent patriarchal culture dictates that women must be subservient and obedient to men:

> I don't think I have a voice as a woman. First, men make the key decisions – they always have their way, because they have the numbers, and they always occupy superior positions. Second, the culture dictates that men should always make decisions, and women should accept them…So, there is no point contending the situation (Beatrice, female, 34 years old).

Women's reasons for not speaking up in this context are predicated on patriarchal proclivity, supported by cultural norms and ideologies. Another participant commented:

> Culturally, a man's role is to give instructions and make decisions, while women just obey, whether at home or at work. Consequently, women live in the shadow of men, with subsided or muted voices. A few women who force their voices to be heard are tagged as uncultured and impertinent. I had to leave my previous job because I was sexually harassed by my manager, and I was 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, female, 35 years old).

Our data analysis also provides insights into the male participants' views of women's voice behaviour in an organisation. One male participant commented.

> Honestly, I often find it uncomfortable to have decision-making meetings and conversations with women. It makes me feel weak and unmanly. The culture and tradition say women should be obedient to men, not that they should be making decisions together…I often prevent it [giving women a chance to voice their opinions] whenever I have the opportunity. It really is not me. It is the culture, and we are used to it (Sean, male, 45 years old).

Another male participant said:

> Women should always maintain silence in public places, including the workplace. Doing so means that such a woman is cultured and reserved…That's our culture.

> The culture and traditions frown upon a woman who acts contrarily in the name of 'making her voice heard'. A man should always do the talking and make decisions (Stuart, male, 38 years old).

In meetings, we observed that women often exhibited a passive attitude towards men, seemingly operating in their shadow. One female worker, for instance, was abruptly silenced after raising an objection to a male colleague's point. There were three female assistant managers present, but they rarely contributed or gave instructions. Instead, they sat alongside the male managers, agreeing with everything they said. The meetings were male-dominated spaces with an oppressive structure, where women remained silent. These findings highlight a deeply entrenched regime of male dominance—traditionally rooted, ideologically accepted, and psychologically internalized—that suppresses women's voices, leaving them subject to the approval of male colleagues and managers. This system of gender hierarchy, embedded in a longstanding patriarchy, significantly undermines women's voice behaviour and participation in organizations.

Religious beliefs

Our data analysis also shows the impact of religious beliefs on women's voice behaviour. For example, Islam and Christianity ascribe women and men to different statuses as manifested in their duties and roles in society. Some Muslims believe that women should not mingle with, interact with, or speak in the presence of men other than their husbands and close relatives, which has huge implications in terms of their voice behaviour and voice participation at work. For example:

> I am a Muslim, and I therefore 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…Of course, she can do so among her fellow women – but not men. Personally, this, along with other factors, is responsible for my attitude of keeping quiet on many issues at work (Amina, female, 32 years old).

Amina's attitude of silence is shaped by her religion, which gives women less of a voice than men. This shows how formal religion shapes cultural norms, social rules, and behaviours and has a significant impact on gender roles and attitudes, as the following participants' comments show:

> 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, female, 32 years old).

> 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. I am often guided by the Bible, so I hardly comment or complain about anything that is contrary to my beliefs at work (Sarah, female, 40 years old).

We observed that many people in the studied organizations were religious, and men tended to avoid close contact or interactions with women, which explains the silence among female employees. These findings highlight the role of religion in reinforcing norms that suppress women's voice behaviour and participation. Consequently, it is reasonable to conclude that women face challenges in being heard within Nigerian organizations, many of which are predominantly characterized by Muslim and Christian beliefs.

Discussion

We have examined the importance of a high-power distance orientation and patriarchal norms as the cultural factors influencing female employee voice behaviour in Nigerian workplaces. Using a comprehensive qualitative analysis, our study revealed that national cultures with a high-power distance orientation can foster work environments where female employees feel unable to speak up and share their perspectives. High-power distance cultures typically encourage hierarchical structures in which authority and decision-making are concentrated at the top of the hierarchy, often resulting in a lack of open communication channels throughout an organisation (Loewenbrück et al., 2016). Such a culture can disproportionately affect female employees, who may have few opportunities to challenge the status quo or participate in decision-making processes. According to Brockner et al. (2001), the more cultural norms legitimise voice, the more likely employees are to exercise positive voice behaviour. Conversely, if cultural norms within an organisation or society discourage speaking up or sharing one's thoughts, employees may choose to remain silent because of fear of reprisal, ostracism, or the belief that their contributions will be ignored. As a result, it is not a lack of voice in and of itself that limits women's participation and influence in the workplace; rather, a cultural system that encourages hierarchical decision-making can undermine women's voice behaviour at work.

In addition, our findings revealed that women in male-dominated organizations, characterized by patriarchal norms, face significant suppression of their voice. This is because societal norms dictate that men are the primary decision-makers, while women are expected to be

compliant followers who do not challenge authority (Tongo, 2015; Akanji et al., 2021). Such a culture stifles female employee voice and may explain why many women choose silence over speaking up in the workplace (Sandberg & Grant, 2015). This highlights the critical role that male supremacy and female subordination play in shaping women's voice behaviour and participation in organizational settings. An intriguing aspect of our findings is the influence of religious beliefs on female workers' silence. Many participants reported that the religious teachings of two of Nigeria's most popular faiths, Islam and Christianity, encourage women to be submissive to men and to remain silent in male-dominated gatherings. For many, these teachings have become embedded in the national culture, further shaping how female employees express themselves at work. This contrasts with European societies, where religion is largely considered a private matter and does not typically influence workplace dynamics. In Africa, however, religion is deeply intertwined with organizational life, reinforcing a cultural system that perpetuates gender inequality in decision-making (Essers & Benschop, 2009). The interplay between high-power distance, high patriarchal culture, the prevailing cultural beliefs, which culminate in gendered voice suppression, is illustrated in Figure 1.

Theoretical implications

Our study makes important empirical and theoretical contributions to the extant literature on employee voice behaviour. First, we advance theoretical understanding of how societal stereotypes and biases permeate organisational cultures to undermine female employee voice behaviour. We advance research in the fields of HRM and employment relations by revealing important connections between prevailing cultural beliefs in a non-Western society and how gender influences whether employees feel empowered to express their perspectives, opinions, and concerns at work. In particular, our findings illustrate how high-power distance orientation and patriarchal attitudes become embedded in the workplace and significantly shape how female voices are perceived and received in organisational settings. These insights expand previous research on employee voice by incorporating the dimension of cultural context, which is often overlooked in mainstream studies (Ravenswood & Markey, 2018; Syed, 2007). Rather than relying on universalist assumptions about gender and voice, our analysis provides a more nuanced examination of how specific cultural factors shape organisational dynamics surrounding female employee voice behaviour. This paves the way for future HRM studies that take societal cultural influences into account rather than assuming a one-size-fits-all approach to addressing gender inequality in the workplace.

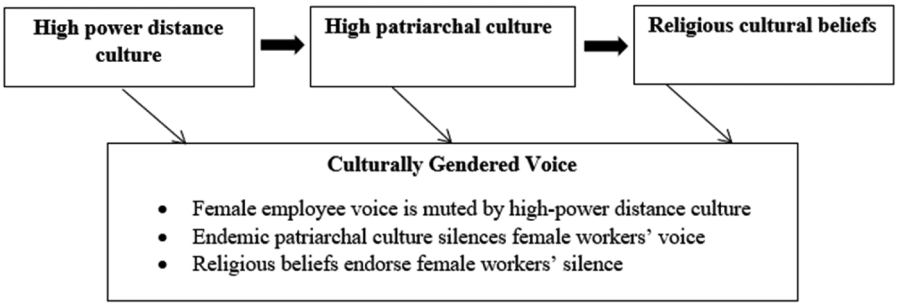

Figure 1. A conceptual framework of female employee voice.
Source: Authors' Findings

Moreover, despite growing interest in employee voice, most relevant studies have focused primarily on general employee voice in Western and developed nations (Donaghey et al., 2019; Wilkinson et al., 2018). This has left the role and impact of culture on female employee voice largely unexplored, especially in developing countries such as Nigeria. Our study thus advances the understanding of female employee voice behaviour in non-Western settings, significantly enriching the current literature on HRM and employment relations. This is an important point because of the widespread traditional stereotypes and biases in many developing countries, which can significantly impact women's capacity to express their views and perspectives in professional environments. We specifically highlighted the importance of high-power distance and patriarchal regimes, which are systemically embedded in these contexts and create barriers that prevent women's personal development and employment opportunities in non-Western settings. While high-power distance cultures support societal structures that relegate women to subordinate roles, patriarchal norms promote the idea of men as the primary authority figures at home and at work (Adisa et al., 2019). A key theoretical contribution of our research is our promotion of a more global understanding of employee voice behaviour, highlighting the importance of context-specific strategies to empower female employees and ensure their voices are heard and valued.

Our research thus broadens the theoretical scope of HRM studies by challenging existing models to embrace a truly global perspective that incorporates insights from underrepresented contexts such as the global South. The field has evolved significantly in recent years, with globalisation playing a crucial role in shaping the modern workforce (Schuler et al., 2002). As organisations expand their operations across borders and attract diverse talent pools, it is becoming increasingly important for HRM researchers to take a global approach to their research. Recognising the repeated calls from scholars for a deeper integration of a global

context (Nishii & Özbilgin, 2007; Schuler et al., 2002), the current study emphasises the importance of incorporating diverse cultural understandings into HRM models to reflect the complexities and varied realities of workplaces worldwide. Such integration not only enriches the theoretical foundations of HRM but also encourages more extensive empirical investigations across various regions and industries, particularly those previously underrepresented in research. Ultimately, this approach equips practitioners with the necessary insights to implement culturally aware and inclusive HRM strategies that support organisational effectiveness in diverse cultural contexts.

Practical implications

Our findings also have practical implications, especially in relation to the development of culturally sensitive policies and practices that enhance female employee voice behaviour in the workplace. First, our findings provide valuable evidence for the development of organisational interventions with the aim of creating safe, inclusive channels for promoting female employee voice in the workplace. Specific areas of policy reforms and initiatives should be designed and implemented in order to mitigate unconscious biases and gender stereotypes that may silence or devalue female contributions. For example, it is important to develop training and awareness programmes that build understanding of how to mitigate cultural biases against women in the workplace (Cooke, 2010). Additionally, HRM practices and initiatives may be tailored to incorporate diversity and inclusion principles that actively promote equal opportunities for all genders, such as by revising recruitment, promotion, and retention strategies as well as by ensuring the fair assessment of skills and competencies in the workplace. Other initiatives include establishing anonymous reporting procedures that encourage employees to raise concerns about discrimination or harassment without fear of reprisal (Felix et al., 2018). By establishing a safe and transparent mechanism for addressing gender-related issues in the workplace, organisations can foster an environment of mutual respect and support the broader objectives of social responsibility.

Second, our research highlights the need for cultural change initiatives that directly target high-power distance beliefs and patriarchal norms that stifle gender equality in developing countries. This point is critical, especially considering our finding that specific cultural areas in the global South require readjustment in order to address gender stereotypes and biases. For example, implementing mandatory gender sensitivity programmes and establishing clear anti-discrimination policies at the national level can create a more inclusive workplace culture (Cooke, 2010). This

approach can gradually dismantle gender-based stereotypes and biases, laying the foundation for more inclusive societal norms. In Nigeria and other African countries where patriarchal systems are deeply entrenched, such policies can serve to challenge the status quo, ensuring that the message of gender equality resonates throughout all levels of society (Ravenswood & Markey, 2018). Additionally, implementing government policies that support women's economic empowerment, such as equal access to entrepreneurial resources, can address economic disparities and challenge the patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender imbalance in voice behaviour. Ultimately, our research emphasises the critical need for cultivating inclusive cultures from the grassroot to strategic echelons at organisational and societal levels in order to enhance women's voice behaviour and equality.

Strengths, limitations, and recommendations for future research

In this article, we have revealed the dynamics of gendered organisations that are strongly supported by the cultural problems of high-power distance and patriarchy, which reinforce the subordination of female gender and practically mute their voice. We have thus broadened the understanding of the reality of female workers' voice in patriarchal Sub-Saharan Africa, Nigeria in particular. The study is a country/continent-specific study that evidences a culture of a lack of voice participation among female workers in the global South. Despite the important academic and practical contributions of the present study, it has some limitations, many of which lend themselves to directions for future research. We only collected data from women in Nigeria. Future research would benefit from in-depth interviews with women in other African countries in order to compare their experiences of voice behaviours. Our results are idiosyncratic to Nigeria. Because results may vary across different parts of Africa, similar studies to ours should be carried out in other African countries to compare their experiences of voice behaviours. Furthermore, the adoption of qualitative research methods for this study provides a promising avenue for future studies to examine a greater number of female employees using quantitative research methods and in a different context in order to discover novel findings.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as women continue pushing against the cultural boundaries that mute their voices in male-dominated organisations, high-power distance and patriarchal norms in Nigeria and in other

developing countries remain major barriers to women's voice participation. While the relatively limited sample size may constrain the generalisability of our findings, this article provides useful empirical insights on gender and employee voice behaviour in the global South. We hope that this study will lead to more equitable and dynamic organisational cultures and environments where women's voices are not only heard but valued.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Data availability statement

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

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