

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

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Seen but Not Heard: The Voice of Women at Work and the Mediating Role of Culture

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 hours 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 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, 2011; Morrison, 2011). However, culture has a strong influence on employee voice behaviour, primarily because it shapes the

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3 social principles that govern interpersonal interactions within and outside the workplace
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5 (Hendrith, 2018). Indeed, the prevailing cultural norms and values at a national level can
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7 significantly influence organisational culture in ways that reflect broader societal expectations
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9 and attitudes (Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede & Bond, 1988; Aycan et al., 2000). For instance, a
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11 country with a strong emphasis on top-down hierarchies might encourage organisational
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13 cultures that prioritise respect for authority and centralised decision-making. In such
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15 environments, communication styles may be more formal, and employees may hesitate to
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17 openly challenge or question their superiors (Brockner et al., 2001; Ravenswood & Markey,
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19 2018).
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24 Prior research has consistently addressed these cultural differences, particularly in
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26 studies exploring the interplay between national culture and organisational dynamics (see
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28 Hofstede, 1991; Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede & Bond, 1988; Hofstede et al., 2010; Minkov,
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30 2007). However, much of this research is predominantly Western, where individual rights,
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32 freedoms, and personal autonomy are prevalent. This Western-centric perspective has
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34 significantly influenced organisational practices and policies regarding gender equality,
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36 encouraging the adoption of more inclusive and collaborative approaches to workplace
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38 decision-making (Whiting et al., 2012). Such insights are arguably less directly applicable or
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40 less effective in non-Western contexts, where cultural norms and expectations may diverge
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42 (Adisa et al., 2019a). In many non-Western cultures (such as Nigeria), collectivism and
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44 hierarchical structures prevail, creating distinct challenges regarding the voice behaviour of
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46 female employees (Adisa et al., 2019b). In this light, our research seeks to investigate the
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48 cultural biases and norms that influence female employee voice behaviour in a national context
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50 with distinct traditional beliefs and institutions that differ from those observed in the global
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52 North.
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3 To further advance the existing research landscape, we argue that the ability to express
4 one's voice and participate in decision-making processes within an organisation is often
5 influenced by prevailing cultural norms at the national level. We thus identify a high-power
6 distance orientation and patriarchal norms as the cultural factors constraining female employee
7 voice behaviour in Nigeria. Power distance is a key cultural dimension that reflects the extent
8 to which power disparities are accepted and endorsed within a society (Hofstede, 1991). It
9 ranges from low to high, with higher power distance indicating a society characterized by rigid
10 hierarchical structures and unequal distribution of power among its members. In contrast,
11 patriarchal norms emphasise male dominance in societal roles, positioning men as superior to
12 women in various aspects of decision-making (Adisa et al., 2019a; Makama, 2013; Walby,
13 1990). This cultural characteristic perpetuates gender inequality and creates an environment in
14 which women's contributions and capabilities are undervalued and underutilised (Anyangwe,
15 2015).

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33 Our study uses in-depth interviews with female employees to capture a diverse range
34 of experiences and inequalities relating to voice behaviour in the workplace. This approach
35 allows us to uncover the nuanced ways in which gender imbalance affects women's ability to
36 speak up, share ideas, and participate in decision-making processes at work (Felix et al., 2018).
37 In Nigeria, several cultural and societal norms typically influence the roles and behaviours
38 deemed appropriate for women and ultimately affect their experiences in professional settings
39 (Adisa et al., 2019b). These challenges might be exacerbated by traditional gender roles, such
40 as the expectation for women to prioritise their domestic responsibilities over their professional
41 advancement (Cooke, 2010). Using a qualitative methodology, our research highlights how
42 these cultural factors influence female workers' ability to express their ideas and concerns
43 within their organisations. We therefore enrich our understanding of the broader discussions
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3 on gender inequality, providing new empirical insights into the complex interplay between
4 national culture and gender dynamics in the workplace.
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8 Our primary contribution lies in providing valuable insights into the cultural norms that
9 inhibit female employee voice behaviour at work, with a focus on high-power distance
10 orientation and patriarchal values. We aim to broaden the understanding of how these cultural
11 norms increase the risk of female workers' silence at work, which undermines their
12 participation in organisational decision-making processes. Additionally, while employee voice
13 remains an important concern in human resource management (HRM) and employment
14 relations (Brewster et al., 2014; Dobbins & Dundon, 2014), there is still much to learn about
15 the cultural determinants of gender imbalance. One major concern is that employee voice
16 research often treats the concept as affecting all workers uniformly, thereby overlooking the
17 unique experiences and barriers faced by female employees (Hickland et al., 2020), especially
18 in Africa. We therefore expand the scope of research on employee voice behaviour beyond the
19 predominantly Western context that has characterised much of the existing literature. Our
20 approach seeks to explain the interplay between culture and employee voice in depth, thereby
21 responding to calls in the literature for more diverse cultural insights on this topic (Donaghey
22 et al., 2019; Hickland et al., 2020). Ultimately, our research lays the groundwork for the
23 development of culturally sensitive interventions that address the specific barriers to women's
24 voice behaviour and their participation in organisational settings.
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48 **Conceptual Background**

49 ***Female Employee Voice Behaviour***

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52 Research on employee voice has gained traction in HRM, organisational behaviour, and
53 employee relations since the 1980s (Wilkinson et al., 2018; Cooper et al., 2021). This growing
54 body of literature has typically addressed issues concerning employee involvement in
55 organisational decision-making, knowledge exchange, and information sharing (Yucel &
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3 Gurler, 2019; Rubbab & Naqvi, 2020). While the voice discourse in the workplace is relevant
4 to all employees, women face significant challenges in expressing their views and opinions at
5 work (Ravenswood & Markey, 2018; Wilkinson et al., 2018; Cooper et al., 2021). **These**
6 **challenges** may be rooted in cultural systems, where traditional gender norms and biases
7 influence whose opinions are accepted or overlooked in professional settings (Fapohunda,
8 2016). There is also the issue of male dominance in the workplace, which discourages diverse
9 perspectives and exacerbates the difficulties women face when participating in decision-
10 making processes (Primecz & Karjalainen, 2019). These barriers can create an environment in
11 which female workers' contributions are undervalued or ignored, which affects their career
12 advancement and their motivation and engagement levels at work (Cooper et al., 2021).

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26 To fully comprehend the issue of female employee voice behaviour, it is crucial to
27 highlight the various voice mechanisms used in the workplace and the potential consequences
28 thereof in relation to gender equality and performance (Morrison, 2023). Women, like men,
29 may express their views through formal voice mechanisms, such as direct communication with
30 managers, staff surveys, suggestion schemes, staff forums, collective bargaining, and
31 participation in grievance committees (Cooper et al., 2021; Della Torre et al., 2021). Other
32 formal mechanisms, such as worker representation and participation in equality monitoring
33 committees, may be less direct and may address matters such as flexible work arrangements
34 (Donnelly et al., 2012). In contrast, informal voice mechanisms, such as informal discussions
35 and supervisor empowerment, can aid women in expressing their opinions and concerns at any
36 time – not necessarily in response to a management-led query (Klaas et al., 2012). However,
37 the frequency, approach, and efficacy of women's use of formal or informal voice mechanisms
38 are often influenced by institutional structures (such as workplace policies, leadership styles,
39 and organisational culture) and broader socioeconomic and cultural barriers (such as gender
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3 stereotypes, voice legitimacy systems, and educational background) (Ravenswood & Markey,
4 2018; Kwon & Farndale, 2020).

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8 When formal and informal voice mechanisms are absent in the workplace, employees
9 are typically at risk of being silenced (Morrison, 2023; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). ‘Silence’
10 in this context is defined as a deliberate withholding of information, ideas, and opinions
11 pertinent to organisational improvements (Dyne et al., 2003). When faced with a lack of
12 support or fear of retribution, individuals may intentionally opt for silence rather than voicing
13 their opinions through formal or informal channels (Pinder & Harlos, 2001; Townsend et al.,
14 2022; Zheng et al., 2023). This phenomenon is particularly evident among women, especially
15 in patriarchal work environments where gender stereotypes and power imbalances may further
16 discourage women from speaking up (Adisa et al. 2019a, 2019b).

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28 However, with the increasing global awareness of gender-based equality, victims are
29 discovering new avenues by which they can voice their concerns and seek support (Townsend
30 et al., 2022; Zheng et al., 2023). Women, in particular, are leveraging social networking
31 platforms to share their experiences and connect with others who have faced similar challenges
32 (Huang et al., 2023). The rise of social media platforms provides individuals with alternative
33 channels by which they express their voice and solicit social support and advice from others,
34 particularly in matters affecting their work (Mohammad et al., 2021). In fact, trade unions are
35 increasingly using social media platforms to reach marginalised workforce groups like women
36 who have traditionally had less voice (Thorntwaite et al., 2018). The challenge, however, lies
37 in understanding the cultural nuances involved in the adoption of these voice mechanisms and
38 the challenges that workers (particularly women) encounter when expressing themselves in
39 professional settings (Cooper et al., 2021; Syed, 2007; Harley, 2020).

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56 Our study broadens the current understanding of this issue by focusing on female
57 workers’ voice behaviour in Nigerian workplaces, with a particular emphasis on how cultural
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3 norms create barriers for them when they are expressing their views in professional settings.
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5 Therefore, we investigate a high-power distance orientation and patriarchal norms as the two
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7 cultural factors applicable in the Nigerian context. These factors are especially important in
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9 Nigeria, as traditional societal norms and values often play a significant role in shaping
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11 workplace behaviours.
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14 ***High-power Distance Orientation and Female Employee Voice Behaviour***

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17 The concept of power distance refers to the extent to which individuals accept an
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19 unequal distribution of power, even when they are part of the same social system or
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21 environment (Hofstede, 2001). This cultural dimension is typically categorized as either low
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23 or high, and it influences a society's decision-making and communication patterns. In cultures
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25 with a low power distance orientation, decision-making tends to be more democratic, with ideas
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27 and opinions openly exchanged across all organizational levels (Shao et al., 2013). In such
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29 cultures, individuals often seek equality in power dynamics and expect justifications for any
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31 inequalities. This typically fosters a more inclusive environment where employees feel valued
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33 and empowered (Shao et al., 2013). In contrast, in a high-power distance culture, authority and
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35 decision-making are typically held at the top of the hierarchy, with little input sought from
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37 lower-level employees (Witte, 2012; Oruh & Dibia, 2020). People generally accept that those
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39 higher in the social hierarchy dominate and have more power than those who are lower in the
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41 social hierarchy. These hierarchies are valued and respected, which leads to highly submissive
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43 behaviours among inferiors in relation to their superiors (Kwon & Farndale, 2020).
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49 Employee voice can be suppressed in cultural systems with a high-power distance
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51 orientation (Loewenbrück et al., 2016). This suppression is especially prevalent among women,
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53 who may be silenced because of traditional gender roles that undervalue their contributions or
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55 discourage their voice expression. Such issues are exacerbated in cultures with less gender-
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57 egalitarian values, where social hierarchy and deference to authority are highly valued (Knoll
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3 et al., 2021). For example, in certain high-power distance cultures, such as those in Africa,
4 there are clear differences in how seniority, age, and gender are perceived in the workplace.
5 These differences can significantly impact the power dynamics within the workplace, such as
6 older and male colleagues being accorded a higher status and greater authority than their female
7 counterparts. This can result in the marginalisation of female voices in the workplace, as female
8 employees may be perceived as less knowledgeable or competent than their male colleagues,
9 thus limiting the ability of women to advance in their careers or contribute to a hostile work
10 environment (Chiweshe, 2019; Knoll et al., 2021).
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21 Furthermore, in cultures with a high-power distance orientation, women are more likely
22 than men to engage in self-silencing (Hurst & Beesley, 2013; Maji & Dixit, 2023). According
23 to Jack (2011), self-silencing is the tendency to prioritise others' needs in relationships, which
24 stems from cognitive schemas about maintaining safety and intimacy. This leads self-silencers
25 to silence their own feelings, thoughts, and actions. London et al. (2012) argue that given that
26 men have historically received more preferential treatment than women in most social
27 institutional settings (e.g. family, religion, education, and work), some women use self-
28 silencing as a coping mechanism for preventing rejection by suppressing aspects of the self and
29 inhibiting behaviour that might jeopardise their acceptance. However, there is limited research
30 on which mechanisms are typically used. We therefore argue that in high-power distance
31 cultures, where social order shapes women's voices behaviour, women's voices are often
32 silenced because of their concerns about facing negative consequences for speaking up.
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49 ***Patriarchal Norms and Female Employee Voice Behaviour***

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51 Patriarchy is an important cultural factor characterised by a social system wherein men
52 primarily occupy positions of authority and power, with their perspectives and interests being
53 considered the most influential in shaping society (Hofstede, 1980). Walby (1990) defines it
54 simply as 'a system of interrelated social structures which allows men to exploit women' (p.
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3 20). In patriarchal societies, gender roles are often rigidly defined, with women typically being
4 assigned the roles of caregivers and homemakers, while men are expected to be the primary
5 decision-makers at work and at home (Makama, 2013). This often leads to gender disparities
6 in various sectors, such as politics, business, and education (Cooray and Potrafke, 2011). It also
7 limits women's opportunities in the workforce and the public sphere (Landes, 1998). This
8 perpetuates a cycle of dependency and inequality (Makama, 2013). Women in such societies
9 face barriers to advancement and unequal treatment, as norms and values favour male
10 dominance in leadership and decision-making roles (Adisa et al., 2019a, 2019b, 2021). For
11 instance, patriarchal norms create institutional structures that enable female discrimination in
12 paid jobs and promotions, thus limiting their career progression and earning potential (Aluko,
13 2015; Nwagbara, 2021). Similarly, Salem and Yount (2019) as well as Adisa et al. (2021) argue
14 that patriarchy confines women to the domestic sphere; promotes their seclusion from political,
15 economic, and religious activities; and creates gender-segregated workplaces.

16
17 Moreover, in environments dominated by patriarchal values, female input in decision-
18 making is often undervalued because of biases that favour male perspectives and contributions
19 (Nwagbara, 2021; Rawat & Lyndon, 2016; Mathew & Taylor, 2019). These biases may result
20 in situations in which women's suggestions and insights are ignored or dismissed in meetings,
21 workplace discussions, and decision-making activities. For instance, when a woman's
22 achievements are ignored or wrongly attributed to male colleagues with comparable
23 performance, societal biases may deter her from voicing concerns because of fear of retaliation.
24 Similarly, women raising concerns about inequalities in workplace promotion practices may
25 be labelled as too assertive rather than recognised for their legitimate advocacy of fairness and
26 equality. These experiences can undermine female employees' voice behaviour, impacting
27 their prospects for career growth and development (Budhwar et al., 2016; Duan et al., 2018).
28 In Nigeria, where patriarchal beliefs pervade various aspects of life (including work, family,
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3 religion, and social interactions [Adisa et al., 2019, 2020], women encounter various forms of
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5 gender disparities in employment outcomes. They have a lower chance than men of progressing
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7 to high-value roles and face significant obstacles in accessing positions of authority (Aluko
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9 2015; Adisa et al., 2020).

12 **Research Setting**

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15 Nigeria is the largest and most populous economy in Africa, with over 200 million
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17 people, of which 49% are female and 51% male (World Bank, 2022). Nigeria is characterised
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19 as a culturally diverse and multi-ethnic society, with over 250 ethnic groups and more than 500
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21 indigenous languages (CIA World Factbook, 2022). These facts make Nigeria an interesting
22
23 context for exploring how its cultural beliefs and societal settings affect employee voice. Like
24
25 most African countries, Nigeria has a deep-rooted collectivist culture portrayed by high levels
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27 of interdependence and long-term commitment to group members (e.g. family, friends,
28
29 relatives, and other social groups) (Akanji et al., 2021). Additionally, the Nigerian collectivist
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31 culture breeds a high degree of trust, loyalty, and regard for the elderly and people in power
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33 because of its high-power distance culture (Adisa et al., 2020). Many Nigerians crave the social
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35 bonding engendered by communal and relational communications built through interpersonal
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37 exchanges and group interactions in the pursuit of common interests (Ojeme & Robson, 2020).

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43 Despite the benefits of collectivism, Nigeria's social structure is delineated by
44
45 patriarchal norms and cultural beliefs that prioritise masculinity, male-centredness, and male
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47 domination over females that are strengthened in all its social institutions (e.g. family,
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49 education, and religion) (Adisa et al., 2021). Patriarchy dominates the power relations in
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51 Nigerian society such that certain obligations are imposed on males and females depending on
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53 cultural and traditional beliefs. For instance, most cultures in Nigeria frown upon men
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55 performing certain domestic tasks because they are believed to be reserved for women (Mordi
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57 et al., 2010). Additionally, patriarchy reinforces occupational gender segregation in Nigeria,
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3 whereby females are underrepresented in so-called ‘male-typed professions’ (Adisa et al.,
4 2021). Nevertheless, Nigeria’s patriarchal norms and high-power distance culture go beyond
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6 males dominating females and create hierarchical structures based on seniority and reverence
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8 for people in power (Nwagbara, 2021), which may render certain people voiceless. Thus, while
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10 ‘superior’ individuals take responsibility for guiding and nurturing subordinates, there is an
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12 expectation of loyalty, commitment, and high regard superiors, some of whom enjoy separable
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14 acceptable conduct (Mensah, 2021). For example, Salami and Ajitoni (2016) reveal that
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16 Nigerian employees depend on their superiors to provide job resources and look after them,
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18 and in return, they demonstrate high levels of conformity, respect, and loyalty.
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24 Furthermore, Ntoimo and Isiugo-Abanihe (2014) contend that patriarchy enforces
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26 constraints that shape and affect perceptions and decisions in terms of social acceptance in
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28 Nigeria. As a result of this patriarchal orientation, many Nigerians customarily accept unequal
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30 power dynamics that infringe upon individuals’ rights, such as their ability to express
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32 themselves in the workplace (Nwagbara, 2021). Unequal power relationships in Nigeria are
33
34 based on several cultural beliefs and norms practised even from childhood. For instance, age
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36 is a key determinant of power relationships in Nigeria – a young child is considered ‘culturally
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38 disciplined’ when they obey and are loyal to their older siblings. Consequently, while it is
39
40 generally known that employment relations accord great power to superiors (e.g. employers)
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42 than subordinates (e.g. employees), the high-power distance culture in Nigeria exacerbates
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44 unequal power relations, which often inhibit employees’ prospects of contributing to decision-
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46 making processes (Oruh & Dibia, 2020) or of losing their voice. Thus, the employment
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48 relationship is predicated purely on a master-servant relationship according to which respect
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50 for hierarchy, seniority, and authority is deemed a cultural norm. We examine how this cultural
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52 ethos affects female employee voice in non-Western organisational settings.
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59 **Methodology**

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

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19 We selected the participants by means of purposive sampling, which ensured that the
20 participants would have the necessary knowledge to respond to the questions (Bryman & Bell,
21 2015). The interviewees were senior managers, managers, and employees with no leadership
22 responsibilities. Even though we set out to investigate women's voice in the workplace, we
23 also interviewed and observed men in order to gain a holistic view of the subject. During the
24 fieldwork and with the permission of the organisations' management teams, we were permitted
25 to interact freely with the participants while they were at work, and we followed an 'engaged'
26 approach to the research (Milan, 2014) by building a relationship of trust with the participants.
27 We were also permitted to attend staff meetings as observers, which enabled us to observe the
28 differences between men's and women's voice behaviours and participation levels as well as
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3 determine whether and how the cultural values of patriarchy and high-power distance affected
4 women's voice behaviour. However, boundaries were clearly defined in order to maintain a
5 critical distance and enhance the trustworthiness of our findings (Harrison et al., 2001).
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10 To address the research objectives of this study, we asked participants the following
11 overarching research question: How does culture affect your voice behaviour at work? We
12 assigned the participants pseudonyms in order to preserve their anonymity. All interviews were
13 conducted in English and audio-recorded with each session lasting approximately one to two
14 hours. Seventeen participants declined consent to have their voices recorded during the
15 interviews. In these cases, we took extensive field notes, ensuring their words were documented
16 verbatim. After completing 42 individual semi-structured interviews and analyzing the
17 emerging data, we found recurring themes and concluded that further data collection was
18 unlikely to reveal new insights. However, to enhance the study's reliability and confirm that no
19 significant themes had been overlooked, we conducted an additional 10 'confirmatory'
20 interviews with 7 women and 3 men, bringing the total to 52 interviews. The findings from
21 these confirmatory interviews corroborated the themes identified in the initial 42 interviews,
22 with no new issues emerging, indicating that we had reached 'theoretical saturation' (Glaser &
23 Strauss, 1967, p. 61).
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42 The non-participant observations, our second source of primary data, took place between
43 June and August 2022, when two of the researchers kept a low profile, especially during the
44 departmental meetings that we attended. The reason for doing so was to gain a first-hand
45 experience of the interplay between voice and culture in the organisations along with the
46 'implicit meanings' (Lichterhan, 1998, p. 402) in terms of how the organisations members
47 make sense of it. Observing the participants helped us understand and interpret the data
48 accurately, because we are acquainted with the local language and culture (DeWalt & DeWalt,
49 2002). However, when conducting participant observations, it is important for a researcher to
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3 remain reflexive about their own position in the field (McCurdy & Uldam, 2013). We assumed
4 the role of an ‘overt outsider’ in order to be open minded and unbiased (McCurdy & Uldam,
5 2013, p. 48).
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10 **Insert Table 1 about here**

11
12 Our analytical process was consistent throughout both semi-structured interviews and
13 observations, providing significant insights into participants' experiences with the impact of
14 culture on female employee voice. We initially used open coding to identify concepts, moving
15 from in vivo – a simple descriptive phase – to second-order codes based on thematic analysis
16 (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Observation notes, field notes, and audio recordings were important
17 for our understanding of the phenomenon under study. We adopted an open-ended abductive
18 approach to our data analysis, following an iterative process of thematic coding (Awuzie &
19 McDermott, 2017). First, we developed an initial, deductive, theoretically broad codebook
20 (Davidson et al., 2019) to facilitate the systematic coding of the interview transcripts (Brandt
21 & Timmermans, 2021). Next, we engaged in abductive data reduction, which allowed us to
22 group similar texts together and conduct an in-depth analysis (Davidson et al., 2019). Thematic
23 analysis was employed to systematically identify, synthesize, and organize the data, offering
24 insights into patterns of themes or meanings across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This
25 method also helped us uncover and interpret meanings and experiences, thereby enhancing our
26 understanding of commonalities within the dataset (Clarke & Braun, 2017). The significance
27 of a theme in this research is that it captures something important about the overall research
28 objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We used an abductive approach to develop our themes,
29 which enabled us to engage in a back-and-forth movement between theory and data in order to
30 develop or modify existing theory (Awuzie & McDermott, 2017). Abduction allows for a tight
31 but evolving framework (Dubois & Gadde, 2002) whereby researchers can move between
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3 theory and participants' accounts, each informing the other in order to answer the project's
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5 research questions (Cunliffe, 2011).
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8 **Research Findings**

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10 Drawing on Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions of power distance and patriarchy,
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12 our analysis reveals commonalities in the accounts of the lived realities of the participants
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14 across the three organisations. The accounts indicate that female employee voice is impacted
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16 by high-power distance, a high patriarchal proclivity, and religious beliefs. The data analysis
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18 also reveals insightful findings regarding the idealism and reality of voice in organisational
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20 practice in Nigeria. Our data suggests that the high-power distance and male-dominated culture
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22 in Africa (especially Nigeria) is imported into organisational settings and impedes women's
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24 voice behaviours.
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29 **Insert Figure 1 about here**

30 **Female Employee Voice and Power Distance**

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32 Power distance focuses on the perceived relationship between those in authority and their
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34 subordinates (Hofstede, 1980, 2001), or 'the extent to which the less powerful members of
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36 institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed
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38 unequally' (Hofstede, 2001, p. 98). In Nigeria, women are culturally viewed as subordinate to
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40 men (Makama, 2013), a phenomenon that has created a significant power distance between
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42 genders. This dynamic has impacted women's ability to express their voices in the workplace,
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44 even on important issues. One participant commented:
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50 My manager is a man and is extremely patriarchal in nature. I am often afraid to
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52 talk to him. He always demonstrates a high patriarchal proclivity [like he doesn't
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54 like a woman to challenge or complain about his decisions]. So, I try to avoid him
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56 – and so do other female workers. When he talks, we listen and obey quietly. That
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58 is the attitude and culture (Kemi, female, 43 years old).
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3 The attitude and culture here are ‘silence’, which is when employees consciously refrain
4 from expressing ideas, information, and opinions related to their jobs. Similarly, Janet likened
5 women’s voice participation to a lamb speaking up in the gathering of lions:
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10 This is an African society and an African organisation, where women are always
11 behind men at home, at work, and in everything. Women are supposed to look up
12 to men in terms of decision-making, and a woman is not expected to have contrary
13 opinions or views to men. The power distance is substantially high, such that voice
14 expression for women among men is like a lamb talking in a gathering of lions.
15 The lamb must maintain absolute silence if it must live peacefully among the lions
16 (Janet, female, 39 years old).
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23 A high-power distance culture promotes a fearful atmosphere wherein subordinates (female
24 employees) are afraid to express their views and opinions or express their disagreement with
25 their managers’ decision-making styles. One participant commented:
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30 My manager is frightening and highly respected. He is like a demigod. His voice
31 supersedes other voices. When he talks, we just obey...He particularly detests a
32 woman talking back at him or expressing her views and opinions. He considers it
33 rude, and he has punished people for doing that. I have even seen people sacked
34 because they persistently expressed differing views on certain issues. So,
35 everybody, especially women, maintains silence and complains or comments about
36 nothing. Even though there are many things to complain and comment about, I dare
37 not, because it will get me in trouble (Jemila, female, 43 years old).
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45 Societies with a high-power distance, such as Nigeria, are characterised by a widespread
46 acceptance of authority and power differences. In such environments, women are often
47 regarded as second-class citizens, creating barriers that prevent them from expressing their
48 opinions and views within organizations – as a participant shared:
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54 It was during our departmental meeting...I had different opinions to our manager’s
55 views on some issues. My suggestions were immediately nullified, and I was
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3 suspended for two weeks for contempt. Since then, I have stopped voicing my
4 views to avoid problems (Teresa, female, 41 years old).
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8 The quote above reflects the consequences of a high-power distance culture, where many
9 participants (32 in total), including the speaker, reported choosing silence over speaking up to
10 avoid conflict. Our non-participant observation sessions support this claim. We observed that
11 women's voices were consistently subdued, while men dominated the conversations. Female
12 participants were overshadowed by male managers and colleagues during meetings. Most
13 women remained silent throughout, and those who did speak only reinforced the points made
14 by male managers or colleagues. The disparity in voice between men and women was clearly
15 evident... Women simply maintained silence among the men.
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27 The significantly high-power distance culture in Nigeria reflects a general cultural value
28 that legitimises hierarchy and power differences between men and women, such that women's
29 voices are stilled and are always in the shadow of men's voices. Nigeria's employment terrain
30 is deeply rooted in the cultural and environmental dynamics of high-power distance in which
31 the less powerful (like women) find no voice by which they can complain or comment about
32 organisational issues.
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41 **High Patriarchal Proclivity and Its Intimidation and Muting of Women's Voices**

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43 A patriarchal society sets the parameters for women's structurally unequal position, at
44 home and at work, by subtly endorsing gender-differential in terms voice and silence. Nigeria
45 is a heavily patriarchal society in which the hypermasculine culture, social stratification, and
46 gender differentiation enable men to dominate women in all spheres of life. In this context,
47 women's desires to participate and express their views, opinions, complaints, and comments
48 on various organisational issues are often frustrated by patriarchal norms that are deeply
49 ingrained in the culture. For example:
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3 Nigeria is a patriarchal society where a woman is supposed to be subservient to a
4 man...subservient in terms of everything, including voice expression and decision-
5 making. When he speaks, you don't speak, and when he decides, you just follow
6 his instructions...That is subservient. The implications of this are that in such a
7 society, women's voices are muted, and they can't contribute meaningfully to the
8 development of the organisation. Like here [at my workplace], women are usually
9 not invited to senior management meetings (Leticia, female, 45 years old).

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

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

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

35 Culturally, a man's role is to give instructions and make decisions, while women
36 just obey, whether at home or at work. Consequently, women live in the shadow of
37 men, with subsided or muted voices. A few women who force their voices to be
38 heard are tagged as uncultured and impertinent. I had to leave my previous job
39 because I was sexually harassed by my manager, and I was discriminated against
40 during a promotion exercise. I had no voice by which to report it. I didn't even have
41 the guts to do so, because I was afraid of losing my job and the shame it would
42 bring on me in the organisation and in society...I just left (Claire, female, 35 years
43 old).

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

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

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11 Women should always maintain silence in public places, including the workplace.
12 Doing so means that such a woman is cultured and reserved...That's our culture.
13 The culture and traditions frown upon a woman who acts contrarily in the name of
14 'making her voice heard'. A man should always do the talking and make decisions
15 (Stuart, male, 38 years old).
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21 In meetings, we observed that women often exhibited a passive attitude towards men,
22 seemingly operating in their shadow. One female worker, for instance, was abruptly silenced
23 after raising an objection to a male colleague's point. There were three female assistant
24 managers present, but they rarely contributed or gave instructions. Instead, they sat alongside
25 the male managers, agreeing with everything they said. The meetings were male-dominated
26 spaces with an oppressive structure, where women remained silent. These findings highlight a
27 deeply entrenched regime of male dominance—traditionally rooted, ideologically accepted,
28 and psychologically internalized—that suppresses women's voices, leaving them subject to the
29 approval of male colleagues and managers. This system of gender hierarchy, embedded in a
30 longstanding patriarchy, significantly undermines women's voice behaviour and participation
31 in organizations.
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46 47 **Religious Beliefs**

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49 Our data analysis also shows the impact of religious beliefs on women's voice behaviour.
50 For example, Islam and Christianity ascribe women and men to different statuses as manifested
51 in their duties and roles in society. Some Muslims believe that women should not mingle with,
52 interact with, or speak in the presence of men other than their husbands and close relatives,
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3 which has huge implications in terms of their voice behaviour and voice participation at work.
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5 For example:
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8 I am a Muslim, and I therefore believe that men should lead, make decisions, and
9 do the talking. Women really should not talk much especially in the gathering of
10 other non-related men...Of course, she can do so among her fellow women – but
11 not men. Personally, this, along with other factors, is responsible for my attitude of
12 keeping quiet on many issues at work (Amina, female, 32 years old).
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19 Amina's attitude of silence is shaped by her religion, which gives women less of a voice
20 than men. This shows how formal religion shapes cultural norms, social rules, and behaviours
21 and has a significant impact on gender roles and attitudes, as the following participants'
22 comments show:
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28 This organisation is privately owned, but the CEO, the managing director,
29 and many senior managers are Muslims who will not consent to women
30 interacting closely with them or having contrasting opinions and views to
31 theirs. They expect the women who work here to be submissive and not
32 subversive. So, I understand that, and I often maintain a decent silence (Kate,
33 female, 32 years old).
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40 I really don't like speaking out too vocally at work, especially during
41 departmental meetings, where we have senior male colleagues and managers.
42 I think it's against Christian teachings because the Bible says women should
43 be submissive. Women are meant to be quiet and supportive of the males in
44 church, family, and social settings. I am often guided by the Bible, so I hardly
45 comment or complain about anything that is contrary to my beliefs at work
46 (Sarah, female, 40 years old).
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53 We observed that many people in the studied organizations were religious, and men tended to
54 avoid close contact or interactions with women, which explains the silence among female
55 employees. These findings highlight the role of religion in reinforcing norms that suppress
56 women's voice behaviour and participation. Consequently, it is reasonable to conclude that
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3 women face challenges in being heard within Nigerian organizations, many of which are
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5 predominantly characterized by Muslim and Christian beliefs.
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13 **Discussion**

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16 We have examined the importance of a high-power distance orientation and patriarchal
17 norms as the cultural factors influencing female employee voice behaviour in Nigerian
18 workplaces. Using a comprehensive qualitative analysis, our study revealed that national
19 cultures with a high-power distance orientation can foster work environments where female
20 employees feel unable to speak up and share their perspectives. High-power distance cultures
21 typically encourage hierarchical structures in which authority and decision-making are
22 concentrated at the top of the hierarchy, often resulting in a lack of open communication
23 channels throughout an organisation (Loewenbrück et al., 2016). Such a culture can
24 disproportionately affect female employees, who may have few opportunities to challenge the
25 status quo or participate in decision-making processes. According to Brockner et al. (2001),
26 the more cultural norms legitimise voice, the more likely employees are to exercise positive
27 voice behaviour. Conversely, if cultural norms within an organisation or society discourage
28 speaking up or sharing one's thoughts, employees may choose to remain silent because of fear
29 of reprisal, ostracism, or the belief that their contributions will be ignored. As a result, it is not
30 a lack of voice in and of itself that limits women's participation and influence in the workplace;
31 rather, a cultural system that encourages hierarchical decision-making can undermine women's
32 voice behaviour at work.
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55 In addition, our findings revealed that women in male-dominated organizations,
56 characterized by patriarchal norms, face significant suppression of their voice. This is because
57 societal norms dictate that men are the primary decision-makers, while women are expected to
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3 be compliant followers who do not challenge authority (Tongo, 2015; Akanji et al., 2021). Such
4 a culture stifles female employee voice and may explain why many women choose silence over
5 speaking up in the workplace (Sandberg & Grant, 2015). This highlights the critical role that
6 male supremacy and female subordination play in shaping women's voice behaviour and
7 participation in organizational settings. An intriguing aspect of our findings is the influence of
8 religious beliefs on female workers' silence. Many participants reported that the religious
9 teachings of two of Nigeria's most popular faiths, Islam and Christianity, encourage women to
10 be submissive to men and to remain silent in male-dominated gatherings. For many, these
11 teachings have become embedded in the national culture, further shaping how female
12 employees express themselves at work. This contrasts with European societies, where religion
13 is largely considered a private matter and does not typically influence workplace dynamics. In
14 Africa, however, religion is deeply intertwined with organizational life, reinforcing a cultural
15 system that perpetuates gender inequality in decision-making (Essers & Benschop, 2009). **The**
16 **interplay between high-power distance, high patriarchal culture, the prevailing cultural beliefs,**
17 **which culminate in gendered voice suppression, is illustrated in Figure 1.**

Theoretical Implications

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

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19 Moreover, despite growing interest in employee voice, most relevant studies have
20 focused primarily on general employee voice in Western and developed nations (Cheng et al.,
21 2020; Donaghey et al., 2019; Wilkinson et al., 2018). This has left the role and impact of culture
22 on female employee voice largely unexplored, especially in developing countries such as
23 Nigeria. Our study thus advances the understanding of female employee voice behaviour in
24 non-Western settings, significantly enriching the current literature on HRM and employment
25 relations. This is an important point because of the widespread traditional stereotypes and
26 biases in many developing countries, which can significantly impact women's capacity to
27 express their views and perspectives in professional environments. We specifically highlighted
28 the importance of high-power distance and patriarchal regimes, which are systemically
29 embedded in these contexts and create barriers that prevent women's personal development
30 and employment opportunities in non-Western settings. While high-power distance cultures
31 support societal structures that relegate women to subordinate roles (Hofstede, 1980),
32 patriarchal norms promote the idea of men as the primary authority figures at home and at work
33 (Adisa et al., 2019). A key theoretical contribution of our research is our promotion of a more
34 global understanding of employee voice behaviour, highlighting the importance of context-
35 specific strategies to empower female employees and ensure their voices are heard and valued.
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3 Our research thus broadens the theoretical scope of HRM studies by challenging
4 existing models to embrace a truly global perspective that incorporates insights from
5 underrepresented contexts such as the global South. The field has evolved significantly in
6 recent years, with globalisation playing a crucial role in shaping the modern workforce (Schuler
7 et al., 2002). As organisations expand their operations across borders and attract diverse talent
8 pools, it is becoming increasingly important for HRM researchers to take a global approach to
9 their research. Recognising the repeated calls from scholars for a deeper integration of a global
10 context (Nishii & Özbilgin, 2007; Schuler et al., 2002), the current study emphasises the
11 importance of incorporating diverse cultural understandings into HRM models to reflect the
12 complexities and varied realities of workplaces worldwide. Such integration not only enriches
13 the theoretical foundations of HRM but also encourages more extensive empirical
14 investigations across various regions and industries, particularly those previously
15 underrepresented in research. Ultimately, this approach equips practitioners with the necessary
16 insights to implement culturally aware and inclusive HRM strategies that support
17 organisational effectiveness in diverse cultural contexts.

37 **Practical Implications**

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39 Our findings also have practical implications, especially in relation to the development
40 of culturally sensitive policies and practices that enhance female employee voice behaviour in
41 the workplace. First, our findings provide valuable evidence for the development of
42 organisational interventions with the aim of creating safe, inclusive channels for promoting
43 female employee voice in the workplace. Specific areas of policy reforms and initiatives should
44 be designed and implemented in order to mitigate unconscious biases and gender stereotypes
45 that may silence or devalue female contributions. For example, it is important to develop
46 training and awareness programmes that build understanding of how to mitigate cultural biases
47 against women in the workplace (Cooke, 2010). Additionally, HRM practices and initiatives
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3 may be tailored to incorporate diversity and inclusion principles that actively promote equal
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5 opportunities for all genders, such as by revising recruitment, promotion, and retention
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7 strategies as well as by ensuring the fair assessment of skills and competencies in the
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9 workplace. Other initiatives include establishing anonymous reporting procedures that
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11 encourage employees to raise concerns about discrimination or harassment without fear of
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13 reprisal (Felix et al., 2018). By establishing a safe and transparent mechanism for addressing
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15 gender-related issues in the workplace, organisations can foster an environment of mutual
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17 respect and support the broader objectives of social responsibility.
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22 Second, our research highlights the need for cultural change initiatives that directly
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24 target high-power distance beliefs and patriarchal norms that stifle gender equality in
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26 developing countries. This point is critical, especially considering our finding that specific
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28 cultural areas in the global South require readjustment in order to address gender stereotypes
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30 and biases. For example, implementing mandatory gender sensitivity programmes and
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32 establishing clear anti-discrimination policies at the national level can create a more inclusive
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34 workplace culture (Cooke, 2010). This approach can gradually dismantle gender-based
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36 stereotypes and biases, laying the foundation for more inclusive societal norms. In Nigeria and
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38 other African countries where patriarchal systems are deeply entrenched, such policies can
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40 serve to challenge the status quo, ensuring that the message of gender equality resonates
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42 throughout all levels of society (Ravenswood & Markey, 2018). Additionally, implementing
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44 government policies that support women's economic empowerment, such as equal access to
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46 entrepreneurial resources, can address economic disparities and challenge the patriarchal
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48 structures that perpetuate gender imbalance in voice behaviour. Ultimately, our research
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50 emphasises the critical need for cultivating inclusive cultures from the grassroots to strategic
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52 echelons at organisational and societal levels in order to enhance women's voice behaviour and
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54 equality.
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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.

Data Availability Statement

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article [and/or] its supplementary materials.

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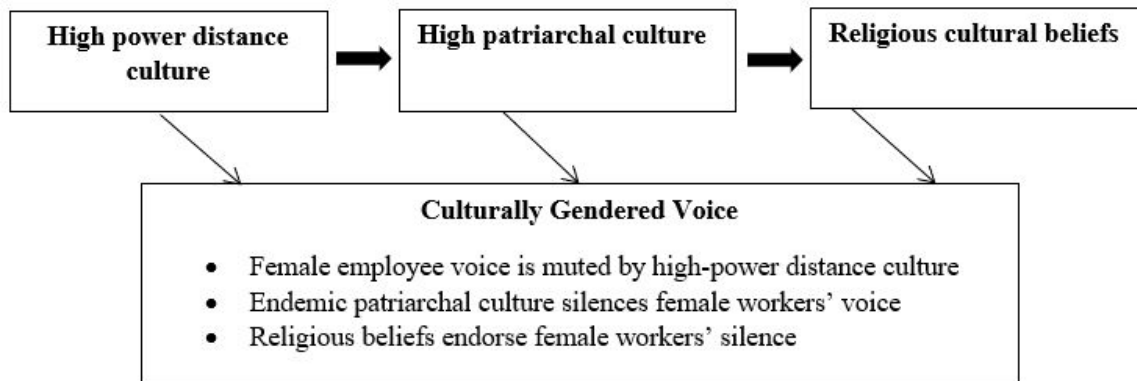
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For Peer Review Only

Figure 1. A Conceptual Framework of Female Employee Voice



Source: Authors' Findings

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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

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