

FILM AS ADVOCACY TOOL FOR WOMEN'S INCLUSION IN POLITICAL LEADERSHIP: A STUDY OF 4TH REPUBLIC BY ISHAYA BAKO

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Abstract

This study examines the capacity of film as an advocacy instrument for upscaling women's inclusion in governance in Nigeria, using IshayaBako and BemPever's 4th Republic film as case study. Anchored on feminist media theory (Mulvey, 1975; Zoonen, 1994), cultivation theory (Gerbner, 1973), auteur theory (Sarris 1963), and intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989), the study analyses how media representations influence/shape audience perceptions of political reality that either reinforce or challenge gendered roles. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study employs textual and thematic analyses to examine how the film's construct presentation deconstructs gender, power, and political participation. The study explores how the film contributes to public discourse on gender equity, leadership, and democratic engagement within Nigeria. Through systematic analysis, the study identifies recurring themes and dominant frames that define women's roles in governance and reveal the socio-cultural and institutional factors that enable or constrain female political participation. Findings indicate that 4th Republic portrays women as politically aware, morally grounded, resolute and capable actors, thereby challenging traditional gender stereotypes. However, the film also reflects persistent patriarchal resistance, gendered power relations, and structural exclusion that limit women's full participation in political leadership. The study concludes that while film hold significant potential as advocacy platform for gender-inclusive governance, this potential depends on deliberate, gender-sensitive narratives that confront entrenched stereotypes. Consequently, the study recommends prioritising equitable, and intentional gender-sensitive narratives that focus on logical, purpose-driven, and competent representation of women in films to promote inclusive democratic participation in Nigeria.

Keywords: Advocacy, Tool, Inclusion, Leadership, Film

Introduction

Women remain severely underrepresented in Nigeria's political landscape. Consequently, women are significantly underrepresented in global political leadership, occupying fewer than 25% of national parliamentary seats despite constituting approximately half of the world's population (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2021). Banjo (2023) posits that the underrepresentation of women in Nigeria's political leadership remains a persistent democratic challenge, shaped by entrenched patriarchal norms, institutional exclusion, religious, cultural norms, socioeconomic, political violence and gendered power that impede the realization of the Beijing 35% affirmative action benchmark.

Within the context of this study, film emerged as an influential performance platform capable of shaping public discourse and reframing societal perceptions of governance and leadership.

Equally, this study examines how Nigerian political all-inclusive film *4th Republic* functions as an advocacy medium for promoting women's inclusion in governance (Worlu et al. 2025).

Central to the study is the argument that the media function as powerful social institutions that both reflect and shape societal values. Feminist media scholars contend that stereotypical portrayals such as framing women as emotional, docile, or appearance-focused limit women's visibility and legitimacy in public spheres, including politics. In the Nigerian context, such representations contribute to the systematic underrepresentation and biased portrayal of female politicians, often emphasising personal attributes over competence and leadership capacity (Osakpolor 2021; Okafor & Akokuwebe, 2015).

The study also interrogates structural inequalities within media organisations. Nigerian media institutions, like many globally, remain male-dominated in ownership and editorial leadership, which influences news selection, framing, and agenda-setting processes (Shaibu & Gambo, 2021; Oyesomi & Oyero, 2014). This institutional imbalance often results in political coverage that marginalises women or positions them as anomalies within a male-centred political arena thereby reinforcing Tuchman's concept of the symbolic annihilation of women (Tuchman 1978).

By systematically analysing recurring themes, dominant frames, and symbolic patterns within the film, the study situates *4th Republic* within broader debates on gender equity and democratic engagement in equitable representation. Through this lens, the study places film not merely as entertainment but as a strategic and potential advocacy tool for gender-inclusive governance (Worlu et al. 2025).

Literature Review

Representation of Women in Nigerian Film and Media

Researchers establish that Nigerian cinema (Nollywood) has historically reproduced gendered stereotypes that shape public perceptions of women's roles and capacities. Depicting that women in Nollywood films are often portrayed in domesticated or subordinate roles, reinforcing traditional expectations about gender (Ejem et al., 2022; Worlu et al., 2025; Worlu & Harcourt-Whyte, 2025). For example, analyses of recent films like *Adire* (2023) and *Wura* (2023) by Worlu et al (2025). reveal that female characters are frequently confined to caregiving, romantic, or dependent roles, which reflects broader societal norms and limits perceptions of women's leadership capability. Worlu et al. (2025) opine that "In Nigerian cinema, especially Nollywood, women are frequently cast in roles that reinforce traditional stereotypes such as the obedient wife, the seductive temptress, or the victim in need of rescue. These consistent portrayals can have profound implications on the social reality of women" (P.3012).

Earlier research also highlights persistent stereotypes where women are portrayed as sex objects, weak, or secondary to men, while men occupy professional and leadership roles (Azogu 2026). This pattern is evident even in contemporary analyses of Nollywood content and is linked to the reinforcement of gender norms that affect how women are viewed in public and political spheres. This aligns with Emelobe (2015) study. Emelobe (2015) opines that "... it is, however, disappointing to note that a lot of home videos ... portray women as evil witches, husband

snatchers/killers, greedy people, prostitutes, objects of ridicule, and so on” (p.529). Emelobe's assertion above echoes the stereotyping of women in films.

Evolving Narratives in Nigerian Film's Construct

While stereotypical portrayals remain prevalent, recent studies portray a gradual shift on how women are depicted. Some contemporary films and works by Nigerian female filmmakers are beginning to challenge patriarchal norms by portraying women as multifaceted, resilient, and autonomous (Ibbi, 2017; Ebekue 2017).

Additionally, research on the role of women in Nigerian cinema highlights the transformative capability of storytelling (film) in challenging deep-rooted gender biases and advocating for equitable society. Equally, women filmmakers and their works have the potential to foster cross-cultural understanding, highlight gender inequality, and promote advocacy for women's adequate inclusion in leadership through cinema (Ofori, 2024).

Recent studies have revealed shift in representational practices, despite the progressive shifts, challenges abound regarding the industry's continued reinforcement of traditionally restrictive gender roles and norms (Alola & Alola, 2022). Nevertheless, contemporary films particularly those helmed by female auteurs are increasingly challenging patriarchal conventions by presenting women as resolute, competent, and independent personalities. In recent times, female Nigerian filmmakers have integrated a range of counter-interventionist strategies into their storytelling in a bid to dismantle patriarchal narrative diminishing women's capacities (Ilori 2025; Ofori, 2024).

Research on prominent female directors in Nigeria, such as KemiA detiba and Omoni Oboli reveal the emergence of a distinctly feminist cinematic awareness within Nollywood. Female filmmakers including Genevieve Nnaji, Kemi Adetiba, and Mildred Okwo have also made remarkable strides in an industry historically dominated by men, using their constructs to challenge societal norms and advocate for gender equality. These female auteurs/filmmakers (such as Funke Akindele, Kemi Adetiba and Omoni Obolietc) use their films to reconstruct female identities in ways that resist traditional norms and reflect societal evolution. (Okibe, 2024). Through counter-narratives that portray women as ambitious and competent rather than domesticated figures, these directors reconstruct female identity in ways that intellectualize the experiences of marginalized groups and resist the limiting frames of conventional Nollywood storytelling (Alola&Alola, 2022).

Film as a Political Advocacy Tool

The influence of film as a medium for advocacy and social change has been recognised in broader media studies. Films that project issues of governance, empowerment, and social justice have the potential to raise awareness and influence public debate. (Amonyeze & Agbo 2022). In Nigerian context, politically themed films like *4th Republic* can serve as crucial platforms for advocating women's inclusion in governance by normalizing female leadership roles and exposing audiences to alternative gender constructs. The film makers use the medium as a platform to lend their voices towards women's political involvement and reveals that women have not cried enough, why should women play supporting roles, they can rule, give them equal opportunity/chance, and level playfield. It is also used as a medium of mass media to tell the story of women's political travails, triumph, and advancement at the end of the tunnel (*4th Republic*, 2019).

Studies suggest that media can function not only as a mirror reflecting existing societal values but also as a mechanism for challenging and reshaping those values. Hall (2021) posits that media institutions play vital roles in shaping public understanding of politics and governance. This is particularly relevant for films with political narratives, as they can influence awareness, encourage discussion on governance, and highlight the importance of inclusive representation of women in politics, and leadership.

Consequently, while Nigerian cinema has historically contributed to reinforcing traditional gender norms through stereotypical portrayals, recent studies highlight signs of change and the growing representation of women in both film production and representation. Cultivation theory emphasises the role of repeated representations in shaping audience perceptions Gerbner (1973) and contemporary research (Worlu et al. (2025; Ofori, 2024) suggests that film has the potential to function as a powerful advocacy platform. However, there remains a need for more focused studies on how film can actively promote women's political inclusion.

Gaps in the Literature

Despite extensive work on gender representation in Nollywood, few studies directly examine the potential of film as a strategic tool for advocating women's inclusion in governance. Specifically, most existing research works focus on portrayal patterns and their social impact rather than explicitly linking cinematic narratives to political empowerment and advocacy. This gap underlines the need for studies like the present one, which explores how narratives in politically themed films like *4th Republic* can be leveraged to promote gender equity in governance. The film seeks to disseminate information, interrogate entrenched gender stereotypes, and encourage women's active participation in political processes. Through *4th Republic* strategic storytelling advocacy efforts, public awareness to promote a more inclusive, equitable, and gender-responsive political environment are evolving.

Theoretical Framework

The study is hinged on four complementary theories, they are -

1. Feminist media theory- Prominent scholars (Laura Mulvey and Van Zoonen,) of feminist media theory claim that media representations reflect and shape societal norms about gender roles (Mulvey, 1975; & Zoonen, 1994). In the context of *4th Republic*, feminist media theory helps analyse patterns of representation in the media. The construct of this study portrays women's political promotion, competence, and leadership through entertainment medium - film, highlighting that its portrayals challenge patriarchal assumptions/gendered roles, and advocates women's advancement in political participation

2. Cultivation Theory- Cultivation theory as propounded by George Gerbner, opines that prolonged exposure to media content shapes audiences' perceptions of social reality (Gerbner 1973). In the context of *4th Republic film*, positive framing and representational strategies that position female politicians as competent and effective leaders lead viewers to normalise women's political leadership capability and support gender equity in governance.

3. Auteur theory -Auteur theory is an essential assessment theory in film studies, offering a framework for understanding how individual directorial vision shapes cinematic meaning. The theory, propounded by Andrew Sarris in 1963 implies that directors shape films with their personal bearing, that their views become visible across their works. Imprinting their distinct artistic,

thematic, and stylistic view onto the work (Sarris 1963). When applied to IshayaBako's *4th Republic*, the theory illuminates the ways in which the director's sustained views reveal the themes that showcase democratic dysfunction, gender and political power, social injustice and his distinctive narrative and visual approach constitute a coherent authorial portrayal. *4th Republic* stands as evidence that the auteurism ideology is portrayed in contemporary Nigerian cinema.

4. Intersectionality Theory- Building on Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality considers how overlapping identities such as gender, ethnicity, class affect women's representation and inclusion (Crenshaw, 1989). This is crucial because Nigerian women's experiences in politics are shaped by multiple socio-cultural factors, given that Nigerian women's political experiences are shaped by overlapping socio-cultural structures, wherein gender intersects with ethnicity and religious identity to produce compounding forms of marginalisation.

All in all, Feminist Media Theory provides a critical framework for analysing how media constructs reproduce, and contest gender identities and power relations. It argues that media representations are not neutral but are shaped by patriarchal ideologies that privilege male perspectives while marginalising or distorting women's experiences (Zoonen, 1994; Gallagher, 2003). The theory examines how symbolic practices within media institutions reinforce dominant gender norms and sustain structural inequalities (Steiner, 2014).

Importantly, feminist media theory adopts an intersectional perspective, recognising that gender intersects with ethnicity, class, and religion to shape representation and political participation. Beyond the above analysis, the theory advocates transformative media practices that prioritise inclusive, equitable, and empowering portrayals of women. By encouraging narratives that focus on women's visibility, competence, leadership, and competence, feminist media theory emphasises the potential of media to reshape public perceptions and promote gender equality in governance through cultivated ideologies.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design anchored in textual and thematic analysis. As the focus is on interpretation of media content, it enables in-depth exploration of thematic structures in *4th Republic*. As emphasized by Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative approaches enable in-depth exploration of media narratives, allowing for understanding of symbolic, thematic, and representational dimensions of film content. Thematic coding was conducted using the framework developed by Braun & Clarke (2006), which involves systematic engagement with the data through familiarization, initial code generation, theme identification, theme refinement, and the final articulation of themes in the research report (Braun & Clarke 2006). From the methodology lens above, the study utilizes thematic analysis involving: Repeated viewing of the film, Coding of key themes, and Interpretation using theoretical frameworks.

Discussions, Findings, and Conclusion

4th Republic (2019), written by Emil Garuba and Zainab Omaki and directed by Ishaya Bako, is a politically charged Nollywood drama (film) that interrogates gender, power, and democratic struggle within Nigeria's political environment. Set against the backdrop of a male-dominated political landscape, the film centres on Mabel King, a reform-oriented gubernatorial candidate who contests against the incumbent, Idris Sani. Although she emerges as the rightful winner of the

election, her mandate is subverted through electoral manipulation, intimidation, and institutional bias. What follows is a narrative marked by political violence, harassment, betrayal, and systemic injustice conditions that mirror broader realities of Nigeria's electoral politics with this aligning with Tuchman's concept of symbolic annihilation of women.

The film focuses the structural barriers confronting women in Nigerian politics, including patriarchal gate keeping, gender stereotyping, and political violence. Mabel King's experience reflects scholarly observations that women's political ambitions in Nigeria are frequently undermined by male-dominated party structures and coercive political cultures. Her resilience culminating in a legal battle that restores her stolen mandate symbolises both resistance and institutional recourse within democratic frameworks. The tribunal's eventual declaration of her victory represents not only personal triumph but also a symbolic breakthrough in the quest for gender-inclusive governance.

From a feministic media theory perspective, *4th Republic* exemplifies Nollywood's evolving role as a site of political commentary and social advocacy. Nigerian cinema has increasingly functioned as a platform for negotiating national anxieties and contesting hegemonic ideologies. Through its narrative, the film challenges the normative relegation of women to supporting political roles and instead constructs a counter representation of female leadership, and depicting them as competent, strategic, and intellectually grounded. This challenges power structures that resist women's political advancement and inclusion, and dismantle dominant political culture. This aligns with Zoonem, 1994 feminist media theory postulation, which posits that media texts can either reproduce patriarchal narratives or disrupt them through transformative representation.

Importantly, the film highlights the gendered nature of political violence and symbolic annihilation where women's voices are marginalized or diminished in public discourse. By portraying Mabel King not as a victim but as a determined political actor who reclaims her mandate through lawful means, the filmmakers advance an argument for equal political opportunity, electoral reform and structural reform. The narrative insists that women's political exclusion is neither natural nor inevitable, but socially constructed and therefore contestable. Accordingly, *4th Republic* operates as both cinematic storytelling and political intervention. It uses the media as a pedagogical tool to illuminate women's political travails while projecting a vision of transformative leadership. In doing so, it contributes to broader discourses on gender equity, democratic accountability, and the necessity of levelling the political playing field for women in Nigeria.

As viewed in the film, while the legal battle progresses, political operatives including Governor Sani's associates attempt to obstruct justice by intimidating or eliminating key witnesses. Despite these pressures, King remains resolute, supported by her aide Ike and other loyal allies. The film stresses electoral violence, judicial contestation of mandates, and the structural resistance faced by women who seek executive political office. Overall, *4th Republic* functions as both a political thriller and a commentary on electoral malpractice, judicial redress, and women's struggle for political legitimacy in Nigeria's democratic landscape. The study indicates that *4th Republic* serves as advocacy function in the representation of women in governance. Key observations include: *4th Republic* women's competence portrayal in leadership roles challenges the historical invisibility of women in Nigerian political narratives and offers alternative discourses on gender

roles. Despite progressive narratives, male-centric validation remains a motif, highlighting the enduring influence of patriarchal norms in shaping both media narratives and audiences' expectations.

Theoretically, by depicting women engaging in civic activities and policy advocacy, the film demonstrates how media can actively promote awareness of women's rights and political participation, this resonates with Mulvey 1975, and Zoonem, 1994 studies on feminist media studies.

Bako's *4th Republic* critically examines systemic challenges in Nigeria's democracy, including women's political participation, patronage networks, electoral intimidation, and judicial inconsistencies. These narrative choices reflect the director's deliberate engagement with issues of justice, accountability, and gender. Stylistically, Bako demonstrates a careful balance between visual composition and dialogue, showcasing both directorial and writing skills. His control over narrative and cinematic elements exemplifies the qualities Sarris (1963) identifies as characteristic of a true auteur.

Additionally, positive representation has the potential to cultivate supportive attitudes toward female leadership, in line with cultivation theory (Gerbner, 1973). At the same time, stereotypical portrayals indicate that media alone cannot fully overcome socio-cultural biases without intentional narrative design.

The film subtly reflects how socio-cultural, ethnic, and economic factors intersect with gender, shaping both opportunities and challenges for women in Nigerian politics, this aligning with Crenshaw, 1989 studies. These insights emphasise the importance of context-sensitive advocacy in media.

Themes Identified in *4th Republic* Film

1. The Representation and Visibility of Women in Political Spaces.

The study reveals that *4th Republic* projects women in strategic political roles, including candidates, advisers, and civil society advocates. Key female characters are shown actively participating in decision-making, campaigning, and a woman was shown as the right candidates for Confluence state governorship election. This visibility challenges the historically limited representation of women in Nollywood films. This resonates with feminist media theory. According to feminist media theory, the portrayal of women in positions of influence reinforces the notion of female competence (Zoonen, 1994). By presenting, interpreting, and framing women as capable leaders, the film has the potential to reshape societal expectations and positively shape women's participation in governance as seen below:

Ike:	We just need the right people
Danladi:	And you think Mabel King is one of them.
Bukky and Ike:	Yes

By presenting Mabel King as the right candidate for Confluence State Governorship Election, the film purposefully places her in male-dominated political setting to highlight both inclusion and equality.

Discursive Emphasize on Female Political Participation

The film strongly emphasizes civic participation, including voter education, raises public awareness, anti-corruption initiatives, and grassroots mobilization (Market Women Association). Female characters are shown advocating for community involvement and policy reforms, portraying them as agents of political change, and strong contenders. Therefore, making them endearing. This narrative choice aligns with the idea that media can serve as a platform for advocacy and social change. From an intersectional perspective, these portrayals emphasize how gender interacts with civic responsibility and social influence. Women are not only participants but also educators and leaders, illustrating the potential of media to challenge stereotypes and inspire real-life political engagement:

Governor Idris Sani:	Mrs king
Mabel King:	After what happened at Ikonu, you still have the nerve to show up here?
Governor Idris Sani:	What happened at Ikonu Mrs king?
Mabel King:	You know exactly what happened
Governor Idris:	Look, you have tried, I really didn't expect that you would last this long. Well-done.
Mabel King:	Are you serious here?
Governor Idris Sani:	Why not? Look, there is fire in you that I really like.

Through the construct of the film's discursive dialogue above, it reveals that women's participation in politics should go beyond symbolic roles. This aligns with the message that democratic structures should include women as active participants/flag bearers, and not observers or mere participants.

Symbolic Empowerment and the Construction of Female Political Role Models

The film portrays women as resilient, strategic, and morally principled, positioning them as role models for the audience. Scenes depicting women negotiating political challenges, confronting corruption, and asserting policy initiatives offer aspirational narratives that inspire viewers and symbolically empower women as seen in Mabel King. This affirms cultivation theory that postulates that repeated exposure to positive role models can shape audience perceptions of social reality. The film's depiction of competent female leaders may encourage public support for women's political inclusion and increase young women's interest in political participation:

Moore:	You know Mabel is going to win, right?.....
Ike:	You're sure she is going to win?
Moore:	From the look of things she will, and rightly so.....

Ike: The people are not stupid, look between King's industries and her foundation; she's done more for unemployment, education, IDPs than the past four administrations

4th Republic film clearly portrays Mabel King as an aspirational political figure, highlighting empowerment.

Gendered Stereotypes, Challenges and Representation

While the film promotes female political participation, some scenes reinforce gendered stereotypes. Women are occasionally portrayed in roles that highlight emotional, relational dependence on male support, or aesthetic appeal over professional competence. Such depictions resonate with broader Nollywood patterns that continue to privilege male narratives while marginalising female expertise:

Male Party Chieftain: So the next time, we'll get Confluence state; that I am sure of.

Mabel King: Is it with me or with a male candidate?
I don't believe we have lost yet.
I still think we have a chance with this election.
I am contesting the result and I will win.
I just need your support

The film discloses double standards in political expectations, and patriarchal attitudes. Mabel King is shown as a strong contender yet discouraged considering apathy shown to her by her political party chieftains owing to her gender. She solicits (their) male support in reclaiming her mandate.

Findings

Within the construct of the film, the following findings emerged in line with identified themes: *4th Republic* reflects female character's political participation vying for strategic political spaces. Thus, signaling an evolving media recognition of women's political competence. This study divulges that despite visibility, women are often depicted as needing male endorsement or mentorship to succeed, reflecting real-world socio-political barriers. This suggests the film endorses inclusion but retains subtle patriarchal narratives.

The film positions civic engagement as central to democratic governance, with female characters advocating voters' education, and grassroots mobilization indicating film medium potentiality for advocacy. Female protagonist is framed as a role model, whose resilience, strategic thinking, and ethical leadership offer counter-narratives to stereotypical portrayals of women in Nigerian film.

Conclusion

The study concludes that *4th Republic* exemplifies the capacity of film to advocate for women's inclusion in governance by presenting narratives that normalise women's political participation and civic engagement. By representing women in leadership roles, the film challenges traditional gender hierarchies and contributes to advocacy for political inclusion. While the film makes important strides in increasing the visibility of women in political contexts, it also reflects enduring

socio-cultural barriers that hinder full gender parity. The interplay between media representation and public perception highlights the importance of gender-sensitive storytelling in influencing audiences' attitudes and contributing to substantive advocacy for political inclusion. However, residual stereotypes indicate the complexity of media influence, affirming the need for deliberate, progressive storytelling to advance gender equity in governance. The findings affirm that media contents particularly popular films can serve as a strategic platform for promoting gender parity in politics, leadership, and governance.

Accordingly, the study recommends that intentional gender-sensitive narratives that focus on competence over personality aesthetics are necessary to maximise film advocacy impact. Secondly, films like *4th Republic* can complement formal advocacy campaigns, increasing public awareness of women's political inclusion, and set agenda for public discourse.

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