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Female producers and the structural transformation of anglophone Cameroonian cinema

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ABSTRACT

This paper examined how female producers sustain and reshape Anglophone Cameroonian cinema. It argues that these women do not simply add to an existing industry but build feminist infrastructures that keep filmmaking going under conditions of institutional neglect, linguistic asymmetry, and gendered exclusion. Using feminist film theory, intersectionality, and Bourdieu's notion of cultural production as lenses, the paper reads the work of producers such as Syndy Emade, Stephanie Tum, and Lilian Mbeng as infrastructural labour rather than isolated entrepreneurial success. The analysis drew on publicly available interviews, festival discussions, and sustained scholarly engagement with Collywood. It shows how women's strategies of economic diversification, digital circulation, and informal training create opportunities for crews and audiences while exposing them to moralised scrutiny of funding, ambivalent reactions to Nollywood collaborations, and structural invisibility within Francophone-dominated cultural institutions. The paper concludes that supporting these feminist infrastructures through gender-responsive, regionally balanced cultural policy is crucial to the sustainability of Cameroonian cinema and calls for research that centres producers' labour, tracks gendered access to capital, and examines how streaming platforms and digital circuits reshape opportunities in African minoritised cinemas.

KEYWORDS:

Anglophone Cameroonian cinema; feminist film infrastructures; women film producers

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INTRODUCTION

Anglophone Cameroonian cinema has emerged over the past two decades in a space marked by structural neglect and improvisation. While Francophone productions have historically benefited from closer ties to French co-production, national institutions, and festival circuits^{1,2,3}, Anglophone filmmakers have built what is now called Collywood⁴ mainly through self-financing, informal apprenticeship, and digital experimentation⁵. Rather than on a coherent national film infrastructure, their production companies operate without reliable public subsidies; professional film training schools are fragile or non-existent⁶; distribution depends on social media, YouTube channels, occasional festival screenings, and exhibition opportunities are sparse on streaming networks. Despite an institutional gap, filmmakers from Cameroon's Anglophone regions continue to produce a consistent body of films that focus on daily survival in their communities.

Within this fragile ecosystem, female producers have become some of the most visible and structurally consequential figures, yet their role remains conceptually under-theorised and institutionally under-recognised. Their impact on Anglophone cinema is significant; they raise funds, negotiate contracts and brand deals, and coordinate transnational collaborations, all while navigating a film culture that is both male-dominated and Francophone-centered. They face challenges on at least two levels. As Anglophones, they are peripheral to national policy frameworks, funding schemes, and state-backed festivals that still privilege Francophone networks⁷. As women, they confront gendered suspicion around their access to capital, moralised scrutiny of their success, and persistent erasure of their production labour in media and scholarly accounts that foreground directors, stars, or festival awards. Existing African cinema scholarship has increasingly acknowledged women directors and performers^{8,9,10}, but the specific labour of Anglophone Cameroonian female producers as infrastructural actors has received far less sustained attention.

This paper responds to that gap by treating Anglophone female producers not as ancillary participants but as

structural transformers who are building feminist infrastructures within a neglected film field. It advances the claim that their entrepreneurial strategies, digital practices, informal training initiatives, and affective labour collectively reconfigure how films are financed, made visible, and socially valued in Collywood. The argument is grounded in feminist film theory, intersectionality, and Bourdieu's theory of cultural production. It selectively draws on interviews, public conversations, and industry events that involve both prominent and less visible producers. The analysis is informed by sustained research on Anglophone Cameroonian cinema and engagement with filmmakers, festival organisers, and students within this ecosystem. It draws on this position to foreground both the possibilities and contradictions embedded in women's production work at the margins of Cameroonian film culture.

CONCEPTUAL VANTAGE POINT

This paper is anchored in three intersecting lenses that help to make sense of women's production work as infrastructural labour rather than as a series of isolated biographies. Feminist film theory provides the first point of entry¹¹. It shifts attention from women as on-screen representations to women as agents who organise finance, labour, and decision-making in ways that reconfigure the conditions under which images are produced. In the African context, scholars have shown how women filmmakers negotiate patriarchal control over resources, censorship, and festival visibility, while building alternative circuits of collaboration and support that sit uneasily within existing institutional frameworks. Reading Anglophone Cameroonian female producers through this lens emphasizes not only what their films say about gender, violence, or belonging, but also how their companies, partnerships, and mentoring practices function as feminist interventions in the material organisation of Collywood.

Intersectionality and Bourdieu's theory of fields and capital provide the second and third coordinates of the argument. Intersectional analysis¹² highlights that these producers operate at the intersection of gender, language, region, class, and, in some cases, migration status. They are Anglophone in a Francophone-dominated cultural policy space, women in a male-

dominated industry, and often middle-class professionals who must still rely on precarious, informal funding arrangements. Intersectionality is therefore not only a matter of representing multiple identities on screen, but of understanding how overlapping axes of power shape access to capital, exposure to moral scrutiny, and vulnerability to institutional erasure. Bourdieu's account of cultural fields and forms of capital¹³ helps to clarify how, in a context of limited economic capital, these women convert other resources, visibility, festival recognition, transnational networks, digital followings, and reputations for reliability into symbolic and social capital that can sustain projects and attract collaborators.

The analysis drew on publicly accessible materials, including interviews and conversations with prominent and less-visible producers conducted across television, radio, and online platforms between 2019 and 2024; question-and-answer sessions at industry events and festival panels; press kits and social media posts. This is not an exhaustive empirical study but a conceptually focused perspective that uses select examples to explore how Anglophone female producers are creating feminist infrastructures within a neglected film enterprise, and what is at stake in recognizing their work as structurally transformative. Drawing on sustained scholarly engagement with Anglophone Cameroonian cinema, including festival attendance, workshops, and practitioner exchanges, the paper adopts an embedded but analytical vantage point.

FEMALE AUTHORSHIP AND FEMINIST INFRASTRUCTURES

Female authorship in Anglophone Cameroonian cinema operates, first of all, through production companies that women have built and sustained under conditions of uncertainty. This sits uneasily with more familiar, director-centred notions of authorship that have dominated both African cinema scholarship and festival discourse. In those frameworks, the director appears as the primary creative agent, while producers recede into the background as facilitators or financiers. By contrast, the cases discussed here treat authorship as infrastructural: it lies in assembling resources, keeping teams together between projects, opening

platforms for circulation, and creating spaces where others can learn to work.

Sydney Emade's Blue Rain Entertainment is the clearest illustration of authorship as infrastructural labour rather than as a purely creative function. The company handles script development, casting, negotiations with Nollywood actors, distribution deal coordination, and brand partnership management¹⁴. When films such as *A Man for the Weekend*¹⁵ and *Broken*¹⁶ secure Netflix slots or high-profile premieres, the visibility tends to attach to Emade as star and producer. Yet what makes those projects possible is a dense, largely invisible architecture of contracts, informal loans, cross-subsidies from other businesses, endorsements, and careful curation of social media presence. In this sense, her authorship resides as much in the ability to assemble and stabilise an infrastructure around films as in specific aesthetic choices on set.

Stephanie Tum's work through EMBI Productions shows a related but distinct configuration of feminist infrastructure, as in productions such as *Saving Mbang*¹⁷. She draws on diverse business investments, including a skincare business line and a background in corporate management, to finance films, negotiate partnerships, and sustain a small team of collaborators between productions¹⁸. Within EMBI, actors and crew learn to move between roles, acquiring skills in casting, publicity, or basic production management in addition to their primary tasks. This rotation is not only a response to resource scarcity; it is also an implicit pedagogy that widens the pool of people capable of sustaining future production. Both Emade and Tum therefore occupy nodal positions in Collywood's ecology. They concentrate and redistribute various forms of capital, connect local crews with transnational partners, and leverage their reputations as collateral for projects that would otherwise struggle to move from script to screen.

A different but complementary mode of female authorship emerges in the digital and working-class spaces occupied by figures such as Lilian Mbeng, better known through her comic persona Caro. Mbeng's trajectory from short skits shared on social media to feature-length YouTube films illustrates how digital platforms function as parallel infrastructures in

the absence of stable theatrical distribution¹⁹. In interviews^{20,21}, Mbeng describes YouTube not only as a screening space but also as a laboratory for experimenting with storylines, gauging reception in real time, and refining future projects. Although Cameroon is excluded from YouTube's monetisation framework, she leverages visibility to attract sponsors, secure endorsements, and build a recognisable brand. Here, feminist infrastructure takes the form of a digital circuit in which storytelling, comedy, and entrepreneurial self-branding are tightly interwoven. Mbeng's authorship does not depend on access to festival circuits or state-backed funds; it is rooted in the capacity to mobilise inexpensive technologies and online publics to create a viable, if precarious, production platform.

Alongside these visible figures are producers whose names circulate far less widely but whose labour is indispensable to the continuity of Collywood. Carista Asonganyi's role as executive producer of *Half Heaven*²², the work of Irene Nangi and Quiny Ijang on *The Planter's Plantation*²³, and Emelinde Simo's contributions to *Therapy*²⁴ are cases in point. In publicity materials and media coverage, these women are often mentioned only briefly or omitted altogether, even when they have borne primary responsibility for budgets, schedules, co-production arrangements, and festival submissions. Their authorship is quiet in the sense that it resides in their eye for creativity, bold business moves, spreadsheets, and problem-solving rather than in red-carpet images or director-centred narratives. Yet without their work, many of the most visible Anglophone films of the past decade would not exist or would never have travelled beyond local premieres.

Taken together with the higher-profile cases of Emade, Tum, and Mbeng, these producers demonstrate that women are not merely adding their names to an existing industry. They are the ones building and maintaining the scaffolding that allows Collywood to function at all: companies that double as training hubs, networks that bridge local and diaspora resources, mentoring practices that transmit skills horizontally, and digital platforms that stand in for missing cinemas. This layered, collaborative labour constitutes feminist infrastructure and marks the site where female authorship in Anglophone Cameroonian cinema

becomes most clearly visible once analytical attention moves beyond the screen.

GENDERED BARRIERS AND DOUBLE LIMINALITY

If female producers in Collywood are building feminist infrastructures, they are doing so in an environment that subjects their work to a distinctive kind of moral and symbolic policing. One recurring pattern, visible in interviews, social media commentary, and informal industry conversations, is the moralised scrutiny of women's access to finance⁹. When a female-led project secures a recognisable Nollywood star, achieves a relatively high production value, or lands on an international platform, speculation about "where the money came from" is rarely far behind. Rather than interpreting financial success as the outcome of careful planning, diversified entrepreneurship, or hard-won partnerships, segments of the industry and audience frame it as suspicious, exceptional, or morally compromised. This suspicion is not evenly distributed.

In Bourdieu's terms, these dynamics operate as a form of symbolic violence. The legitimacy of women's economic capital is repeatedly questioned, and their attempts to convert economic and social capital into symbolic recognition are undercut by insinuations about morality and respectability that rarely target male peers in the same way. Male producers who attract patronage or move between formal and informal sources of funding are more easily folded into familiar narratives of business acumen. Women, by contrast, must constantly defend the legitimacy of their capital and the respectability of their networks, even when they are drawing on the same fragmented funding ecology as their male peers. The effect is to impose an additional layer of affective labour on female producers, who are compelled to explain and justify the very conditions that enable them to continue working.

These dynamics are intensified when women pursue transnational collaborations, particularly with Nollywood. For producers like Syndy Emade and Stephanie Tum, working with Nigerian actors, technicians, and distributors, or relocating parts of production to Nigeria, is less a stylistic choice than a

pragmatic response to structural constraints: limited technical infrastructure at home, a fragile theatrical exhibition network, and the exclusion of Cameroon from YouTube's monetisation framework. Such collaborations open access to established crews, monetised digital channels, and larger regional markets. Yet they are often received ambivalently within Cameroonian debates. On one side, collaborations are celebrated as evidence that Anglophone films can meet regional quality standards and compete within the wider West and Central African media space. On the other hand, they provoke accusations of selling out, diluting Cameroonian identity, or undermining the development of a strictly national industry^{25, 26}. For female producers, these tensions intersect with existing gendered suspicions. Their recourse to Nollywood or diaspora partnerships is interpreted not only through the lens of industrial strategy but also through anxieties about loyalty, morality, and ambition.

Beneath these everyday controversies lies a more profound structural asymmetry, shaped by Cameroon's linguistic and institutional history³. Cultural policy, public funding schemes, bilateral cooperation, and flagship festivals have long been organised through Francophone networks, anchored in Yaoundé and Douala, and often tied to French and other European partners²⁷. Anglophone filmmakers, in general, and female producers in particular, occupy a peripheral position within these circuits. Their projects struggle to fit the expectations of grant committees shaped by Francophone auteur traditions²⁸, and their names rarely appear on advisory boards, juries, or official delegations, even when their films bring international visibility to Cameroonian cinema. The result is a condition of double liminality.

As Anglophones, these women are structurally marginal to the dominant institutional field; as women, they remain marginal within their own subfield, where leadership positions, professional associations, and public recognition continue to skew male. Their work circulates in a grey zone between visibility and erasure: highly present in informal networks, digital platforms, and everyday production practices, yet underrepresented in the spaces where policy is made, resources allocated, and canonical narratives of

national cinema are written. Understanding this double liminality is crucial because it is precisely against this layered marginalisation that their feminist infrastructures are built, and it is this same marginalisation that threatens to undermine their long-term sustainability if it is not recognised and addressed.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE, AND RECONCLUSION

Reframing Anglophone female producers as builders of feminist infrastructures rather than merely successful individuals changes how we see Cameroonian cinema. It shifts focus from isolated stories of perseverance to the structural efforts needed to sustain a marginal film sector. From this perspective, Collywood is less a fragile extension of Francophone cinema and more a unique cultural production infrastructure operating under institutional neglect. This perspective renders gender, region, and infrastructure analytically inseparable in any discussion of Cameroonian cinema.

For cultural policy and industry practice, the implications are direct. If the most innovative and resilient infrastructures in Anglophone Cameroonian cinema are currently being built by women operating informally, a serious policy response would begin by recognising and stabilising those initiatives rather than designing new programmes from scratch. This entails gender-responsive and regionally balanced measures: grant schemes that explicitly target female-led companies in Anglophone regions; co-production funds that value mentorship, training, and digital distribution as legitimate budget lines; and festival and council structures that include Anglophone women as decision-makers rather than occasional invitees. Experiences from elsewhere on the continent show that this is not utopian.

In Nigeria, organisations such as Women in Film and Television²⁹ have created platforms that enable women to access training, networking, and advocacy in a coordinated manner, contributing to a visible cohort of female producers and directors with regional reach. In South Africa, the National Film and Video Foundation's Female Filmmaker Project³⁰ combines funding with structured mentorship and guaranteed exhibition,

supporting women's transition from short films into sustained careers. These examples suggest that if Cameroonian policy were to treat feminist infrastructures in Collywood as strategic assets rather than informal stop-gaps, it could leverage existing energies rather than perpetually compensating for their absence.

The paper also opens a set of research questions that have been marginal in African cinema studies. First, producers' labour needs to be documented with the same care as that devoted to directors and stars. This involves tracing contracts, funding arrangements, mentoring practices, and everyday negotiations with platforms and partners, as well as analysing how these practices redistribute risk and opportunity along gendered and regional lines. Second, feminist infrastructure can be taken up as an analytical concept in its own right, allowing scholars to examine how women's collective labour constructs circuits of training, care, and visibility that are not easily captured by auteur-centred frameworks. Third, audience and reception studies need to pay closer attention to how women-led films are watched, debated, and valued in different spaces, from YouTube comment threads and event halls to festivals and diaspora gatherings, and how these reception practices feed back into producers' decisions. Finally, the expanding role of streaming platforms and social media in African film circulation calls for careful investigation of how digital infrastructures reshape gendered opportunities¹⁹.

CONCLUSION

Treating Anglophone female producers as builders of feminist infrastructures rather than as exceptional success stories changes the scale at which their work is understood. Their companies, digital practices, mentoring, and daily negotiations with funders, crews, and platforms underpin Collywood's survival in an environment in which formal institutions are falling behind. They hold together a film culture that is doubly marginalised, both by a Francophone-centred national field and by persistent gender hierarchies within their own milieu. Centring their labour reveals a cinema whose viability rests on feminised work that policy, criticism, and many scholarly accounts rarely register,

even when women's films are celebrated on international stages.

The stakes go beyond recognition for individual women; they touch the very architecture of Cameroonian cinema. If the feminist infrastructures they have built remain unsupported, the industry risks continuing as a precarious patchwork, dependent on the personal stamina of a small cohort of women who are already overextended. If, instead, policymakers, funders, and researchers treat these infrastructures as strategic assets, Collywood becomes a laboratory for thinking about how minoritised cinemas can be sustained under conditions of structural neglect. The experience of Anglophone female producers speaks directly to other African film cultures operating at the margins of national visibility, offering a concrete example of how feminist remaking can turn marginality into a site of institutional imagination rather than mere survival.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None declared

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