

This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/14127.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/14127.001.0001)

Creative Hustling

Women Making and Distributing Films from Nairobi

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Citation:

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DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/14127.001.0001

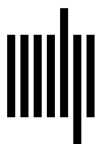
ISBN (electronic): 9780262372688

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2023

OA Funding Provided By:

OA Funding from MIT Press Direct to Open



The MIT Press

CONCLUSION

Nairobi is home to an extraordinary phenomenon. In this city the most critically acclaimed filmmakers—both directors and producers—are women. Through hustling, Nairobi-based female filmmakers have created a vibrant screen media industry without state support and worked to overcome many of what they see as the most pressing challenges facing their industry, the biggest of which is finding a profitable and sustainable way of distributing their films. As Hawa Essuman put it:

You make films to be seen. So you need to find a way to make sure that they are seen. But it's not just about being seen, it's also remuneration. Because that's the thing that will complete the circle. So finding a solution to that is the big one.¹

All the filmmakers we have met in this book share a similar desire to change the film distribution landscape in Nairobi and abroad so that it is more open to the kinds of content they want to create. They have contended with state and market censorship, and done so with remarkable innovation—for instance, through producing creative documentaries at Docubox or exploring the possibilities of digital and online distribution to make the kinds of television programs that broadcasters are not currently interested in purchasing.

They have approached the challenges facing them with an astonishing degree of flexibility and resourcefulness through their practice of creatively and entrepreneurially hustling. Nairobi-based female filmmakers may move between producing high-quality television for cross-continental broadcasters, producing lauded “festival” films, working in extremely low budget modes, and self-financing their creative projects and sustaining their careers through commissioned fiction and documentary work, alongside many other strategies. They have employed radical new models of working. For instance, Appie Matere's production company, Zamaradi, produced fifty-six hour-long films for the South African pay-TV company M-Net

in a five-month period from a single location. Not all of their projects are successful—for instance, Wanjiru Kinyanjui's experiments in Riverwood did not lead to a novel production model for locally made films—but the point is that Nairobi-based female filmmakers are willing to undertake these experiments and that their flexibility and entrepreneurship is a defining feature of their career biographies.

Individual female filmmakers have been at the center of this book, but it is not an auteur study. Many Nairobi-based female filmmakers could be seen simply as auteur directors because, for example, their work has been validated at key prestigious locations on the international film festival circuit. Their stylistically internationalized films—such as *Something Necessary*, *Pumzi*, *The Battle of the Sacred Tree*, and *Saikati*—could easily fit into an auteurist frame. However, as we have seen, Nairobi-based female filmmakers are not *merely* auteurs. Focusing on stylistically internationalized films alone ignores an enormous amount of their creative output and blinds us to how these female filmmakers sustain their individual careers and build a thriving industry. The privileging of auteur cinema in film studies scholarship has led to the false impression that these filmmakers are a minor group in the world of filmmaking, rather than the architects of an extraordinary industry where creative women are flourishing.

Politically, a lot is at stake in studying female filmmakers, and *how* we study them matters. Conventional approaches to cinema studies have obscured the work of Nairobi-based female filmmakers. This raises the important question: How many other female filmmakers have we overlooked? Are there other industries where they flourish where our scholarly methods render them invisible? Throughout this book, I have argued for a non-hierarchical approach to their films and careers. Rather than focusing on only directors—or only the directorial works of filmmakers who also work in other ways—it is necessary to consider filmmakers much more holistically as both filmmakers *and* entrepreneurs. I hope to have laid out a framework for studying female filmmakers that recognizes the true scope of their work and contribution to global cinema.

A critical implication of this book is that to understand contemporary processes of film production and distribution we have to examine the local and transnational spaces in which filmmakers live and work. The key to achieving this insight was the long-term study of Nairobi-based female filmmakers in their working context of Nairobi so that their decision-making,

strategizing, and traveling could be situated within the particularities of their own media economy. Nairobi-based female filmmakers recounted again and again how their experiences abroad and at home both shaped their creative processes. Ng'endo Mukii explained how leaving and returning to Kenya gave her a new perspective, which then led to the powerful critique of racialized beauty standards in her short film *Yellow Fever*:

The time I felt really shocked was when I returned from the US because I'd been gone for six years without coming back. My head was just exploding. There was so much color. When was the soil so red? I didn't remember that. I didn't remember there being so much dust. Why was it so noisy? Why were there so many languages? Why can't everyone just use the same language? . . . I think it made me start to question a lot of things. Things I grew up with but I didn't ask any questions about. . . . I realized that being European or Western in Kenya has a sort of added value that maybe I'd forgotten about when I left.²

Transnational experience is imbricated in the local. We can see the same process at work with collaborative filmmaking projects such as One Fine Day Films. Collaboration is central to the development of the film industry in Nairobi, and it can be seen positively because it is for the mutual benefit of both “local” and “foreign” participants who must work together. Collaboration, and the syncretism it creates, challenges “the notion that ‘African’ cinema can only be created by African passport holders,” and collapses the automatic opposition between “local” and “foreign” in favor of the “transnational.”³

Nairobi-based female filmmakers have to seize transnational opportunities in addition to being radically flexible in their ways of working in Nairobi. This is a complicated terrain where the politics of identity—around gender and race, for example—are fraught. As with musicians charged with selling out by working with commercial interests, African filmmakers are too often assumed to have sold out their authentic voices in working with foreign partners, in either production or distribution phases. Yet, as we have seen throughout this book, this politics is too simple. The fact that a film is successful in a film festival abroad does not mean that it will not be meaningful or popular locally; as we have seen, the politics of distribution shapes meaning formation. There are local audiences for the films by Nairobi-based female filmmakers, and Nairobi-based female filmmakers are hustling to bring their films to local screens and, crucially, to develop local

audiences into markets, just as taking their films abroad is also part of that strategy.

Cross-border filmmaking relationships are not inherently suspicious, Tarzanist, or Neo-Oriental. The Euro-American projects financing films by Nairobi-based female filmmakers—such as Focus Features Africa First and One Fine Day Films—do not have singular agendas, and those multiple agendas are further complicated when the agency of every filmmaker is taken into account. Filmmakers need to rely on a *combination* of funding sources to make their movies, and thus have to be savvy to balance multiple agendas as they pursue their creative processes. As we have seen, Nairobi-based female filmmakers have been remarkably successful on this front. Simplistic assumptions about foreign interference in African creativity thus lack explanatory power.

An intersectional approach accounting for gender but, more importantly, one that recognizes that other identities might supersede the importance of gender as an explanatory variable in some instances allows for a full understanding of the dynamic of creative hustling in Nairobi and how Nairobi-based female filmmakers have been able to hustle to success. African female filmmakers need to be studied together not on the grounds of “an essentialising retreat to a universal womanhood, but by an interrogation of what it means for people who self-identify as women to work with and in film” in contemporary African locations.⁴ In Nairobi, this means also accounting for class position. The filmmakers in this study are united by shared gender, but racial, class, and gendered identities are not separate from one another and instead exist “as part of a permeable interwoven relationality.”⁵ As such, throughout this book I have taken an intersectional approach and particularly emphasized the way class status impacts the life and work chances of Nairobi-based female filmmakers.

When Hawa Essuman says that “it’s almost like the middle class of Africa feels like a dirty secret. Because you hear so little about them,”⁶ she both points to a gap in knowledge about the lived experience of being middle-class in Africa and highlights the importance of filling this gap to understand filmmakers like herself. Nairobi-based female filmmakers’ hustling strategies are underpinned by their particular class position. Their middle-class position is essential to allowing them to profit from Nairobi’s environment of media convergence, a vital enabling condition of their hustle. Making creative and feature films is a painstaking process in Nairobi and one where

filmmakers frequently spend years saving and raising capital. Having client work is indispensable, and working for NGOs and the development industry more broadly is the “bread and butter” of many Nairobi-based female filmmakers. However, accessing these clients is dictated in large part by the class status of a given filmmaker. All filmmakers in Nairobi work in precarious conditions, but those of a middle-class rather than working-class status, such as Nairobi-based female filmmakers, are able to access these “bread and butter” networks and jobs and correspondingly continue to work as filmmakers even as they struggle to finance their creative projects. The filmmakers we have met in this book are in a privileged position against the majority of the Kenyan population. The very fact that I have termed them Nairobi-based filmmakers is reflective of this dynamic, for it indicates a temporality: based here now, with the potential to one day move elsewhere. Keeping class in focus is important to understanding work in the creative industries in Nairobi and far beyond.

Anne Mungai reported needing to visit financial institutions with her husband in order to get taken seriously when she was making films in the 1990s, and likewise her contemporary Wajuhi Kamau reported being held to a different standard than men, where “people would be faster to spot a fault in a production done by a woman. If a similar fault is in a production done by a man, they may choose to overlook it.”⁷ These examples reflect a heavily patriarchal milieu, and the first generation of Nairobi-based female filmmakers pioneered and laid a foundation for the future success of other female filmmakers. Women in Kenya still face many difficulties in a patriarchal society, but they do not face these difficulties equally and do not confront them with the same resources.

Understanding the position of women in Nairobi (and elsewhere) thus requires an intersectional understanding of privilege and position. Nairobi-based female filmmakers’ work practices challenge many common assumptions in creative labor studies about women and work. Whereas in most places “creative people, creative work and creativity itself are all positively valued,”⁸ being a filmmaker is widely considered to be not a “real” job in Nairobi. Filmmakers in Nairobi face the difficult circumstance that there is little social respect for their profession, and they have to fight against this stigma even when they have established careers. In other ways, too, they do not face the same challenges as female filmmakers working in places like the United Kingdom. Whereas patterns of informal work, such as the

dominance of freelancing, contribute to the marginalization of women in the film and television industries in the United Kingdom and Europe because these patterns are incompatible with motherhood,⁹ the situation is quite different in Nairobi. This is not because of a regulatory environment offering a higher degree of protection to female members of the workforce, but because they are relatively affluent within a context of radical inequality. In this context, vital assistance for working mothers, such as hired house help, is financially within reach. In an environment where childcare and house help is affordable, being a career woman—even in an unstable and flexible job like those in the film industry—and a mother are not irreconcilable goals in the same way as they often are in places like the United Kingdom. Of course, motherhood is not the only challenge women face in the creative industries in the global North, but it is an important one, and it is worth examining how local specificities shape this challenge, particularly as we aim to de-Westernize creative industry studies.

We need to explicitly foreground women's experiences as entrepreneurs, and how they hustle to succeed in their industries. Entrepreneurial activity in cultural and creative industries is highly gendered, so studying cases of women's entrepreneurship, and particularly successful entrepreneurship, is important.¹⁰ Defining entrepreneurial success financially—in terms of profits and growth—obscures and devalues women's entrepreneurial activities.¹¹ More inclusive metrics are needed. The case of Nairobi-based female filmmakers shows that creating a career where one can make the kinds of films they want to make is one way of defining success, but equally important is the *action* of hustling through precarious circumstances, because it is through this action that they build the kinds of lives they want in the present. I thus contribute new understanding not only of entrepreneurship in film industries but also of female entrepreneurship in Africa and elsewhere.

Creative industries theory has largely emerged from metropolitan centers in Euro-America. At its worst, and often by errors of omission, this scholarship becomes Eurocentric—seeing Europe and the rest of the global North “as ontological ‘reality’ to the rest of the world’s shadow.”¹² This latent Eurocentrism in the scholarship has led to normative understandings of creative work based on a very narrow and unrepresentative sociopolitical context. In this scholarship, creative workers are often theorized as trapped in a hopeless limbo of aspiration, chasing after cruel promises where a future of good work will never materialize. *Creative Hustling* has offered

a fundamentally different assessment of contemporary creative work. As we have seen throughout this book, Nairobi-based female filmmakers, like so many hustlers, are not hostages to the future. They build good lives and careers within precarity, and it is through focusing on the practice of hustling that this can become visible.

Theorizing based on the lived experiences of creative African women must necessarily transform how we understand conditions of modern creative work writ large. Nairobi-based female filmmakers have built a vibrant film industry through their willingness to hustle. We have much to learn from their example.

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The MIT Press would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers who provided comments on drafts of this book. The generous work of academic experts is essential for establishing the authority and quality of our publications. We acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of these otherwise uncredited readers.

This book was set in Bembo Book MT Pro by Westchester Publishing Services.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Steedman, Robin, author.

Title: Creative hustling : women making and distributing films from Nairobi / Robin Steedman.

Other titles: Distribution matters.

Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, 2023. | Series: Distribution matters | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022014241 (print) | LCCN 2022014242 (ebook) |

ISBN 9780262544832 (paperback) | ISBN 9780262372671 (epub) |

ISBN 9780262372688 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Women motion picture producers and directors—Kenya—Nairobi. | Motion picture producers and directors—Kenya—Nairobi. | Women in the motion picture industry—Kenya—Nairobi. | Motion pictures—Kenya—Nairobi—Distribution.

Classification: LCC PN1995.9.W6 S8 2023 (print) | LCC PN1995.9.W6 (ebook) |

DDC 791.430820967625—dc23/eng/20220329

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022014241>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022014242>