



Womanhood and the Riddle of Negativity in Some Nigerian Folksongs

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Abstract

In both traditional and modern Nigeria, womanhood is far lesser than the esteemed status of men. This position is palpable in the every-day life of the people. In their social-organizational structure, there are a corpus of songs which denigrate, assault and verbally attack womanhood. This study examines the employment of songs in fostering this dichotomy and portrayal of women in the negative among the Esan of Edo and Anioma of Delta States, Nigeria. Using the ethnographic method of data gathering, this study employed interview, group discussion and non-participant observation techniques to draw data which was analysed in this study. It was observed that female denigration is simply a mechanism put in place by men to assert their superiority and authority over them. Undaunted by the realities that women do reach the peak of their careers just like their male counterparts in public service, the penchant to devalue them still exists and although the songs denigrate womanhood, females still sing the songs. It is thus argued that there is need for cultural re-engineering and these harmful practices against womanhood should be urgently abrogated.

Keywords: *Womanhood, female denigration, women shaming, feminism; Nigerian women*

Introduction

In the Nigerian religious, social and cultural settings, there is a general agreement that God made the earth and its appurtenances. Within the earth are living and non-living things and primary among living things are humans. In the traditional Nigerian situation, humans have just two



classification-male and female. They also have their clear-cut roles which are decided by the men in the various communities. From every indication, there appears to be a deliberate attempt to constantly move the female folk to the back stage in most of these communities. This view is held based on available indices with strong indications of firm establishment of male chauvinism and superiority in traditional governance, administration and political structures in the communities. In almost every Nigerian ethnic group, strategies are orchestrated to tame the growth of the female folk thereby truncating their aspirations in many spheres. At the traditional levels, some communities are waking up to the realisation that the female should be given a place in the socio-political structure in every community's administrative organograms. This yearning has given rise to the cultural renaissance of *Umu Ada* - (daughters) and *Iphoho- Ogbe* (wives) of Anioma people of Delta State and *Ekhuian, Edan*, (married daughters) of the Esan Edo State of Nigeria. Beyond these are the emergence of socio/cultural associations for wives and daughters. Even in this supposed effort, not much has changed. As we speak, legislations are being made prohibiting women battering and elder abuse- the women are adversely hit from available records in Nigeria (Okakah, 2020).

The search for effective ways to move African women from the margin to the centre has not produced total success. Many variables hinder the full emancipation of women. Culture is often an excuse for institutionalizing women's marginalization (Sheba, 2013). Sheba made these observations in his study of women in Yoruba proverbs. He opined further that "many social values, beliefs, practices, ideologies and philosophies are embedded in proverbs and that most of them tend to address womanhood derogatorily. Looking beyond the Yoruba nation, this study examines the scenario in two adjacent communities of Anioma and the Esan in Delta and Edo States of Nigeria.

Every society has its identity which is portrayed through its culture in the forms of occupation, language, music, dance, food and even their tribal marks etc. The artistic nature of communities showcases a lot of what they practice and indulge in in their past time. Thus, these cultural peculiarities are transmitted primarily orally and in various other ways. Folksongs which is our major concern among other things speak of a people's worldview. This includes but not limited to their land, history, philosophy, culture, passion, feelings, locations, worship,



entertainment, to mention but a few. Through the lens of a people's folk songs, one is able to gain knowledge about their construct and positions on important beliefs. It is in realization of this that this work interrogates some selected songs from two states which are crafted to denigrate womanhood in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

Objective

The overall aim of this study is to examine the negative portrayal of the female folks in the two cultures. This study is therefore driven by the following objective and they are:

- a. Examine the nature negative portrayal of women.
- b. Interrogate the basis of such musical traditions.
- c. Investigate if such principles responsible for such traditions are still tenable in contemporary Nigeria.
- d. Investigate contemporary realities such as transgenderism. With the evolution such a phenomenon, thinking along maleness and femaleness tends to be outdated in relation to musical activities which are based on such routines.
- e. Attempt a musical notation of some of such songs for posterity.

The Locale of Research

This research is conducted among the Anioma people of Delta State and the Esan people of Edo State Nigeria. Anioma is located around the West basin of the river Niger, south-south of the present-day Delta State of Nigeria. They are part of Igbo ethnic group which spans across nine local government areas. They speak different variants of the general Igbo language and they are mutually comprehensible among each other. Anioma community is made of Oshimili, Aniocha, Ika and Ukwuani in Delta State, Nigeria. These are subgroups and their dialect are Igbo hence they are identified as the Igbo people in Delta State. These communities occupy about nine local government areas and they speak different strands of Igbo which are identified as Ukwuani, Ika-Igbo, Aniocha/Enuani and Oshimili. Anioma which literally means, 'good land' in Igbo dialect has an estimated population of 1.8million people and they occupy the northern senatorial district in Delta State, Nigeria. The term Esan is simultaneously used for a territory occupied by a people



of and for a language spoken in that same locale. Owing to its historical origin which is greatly tilted to Benin kingdom, the social – political organization of the people is akin to the Benin structure. (Okojie 1994; Okoduwa, 1997). Speaking from the geographical sense, the Esan occupies a landmass of about 2,814 square kilometers (Oseghale, 2019). Below is a map of the study areas.

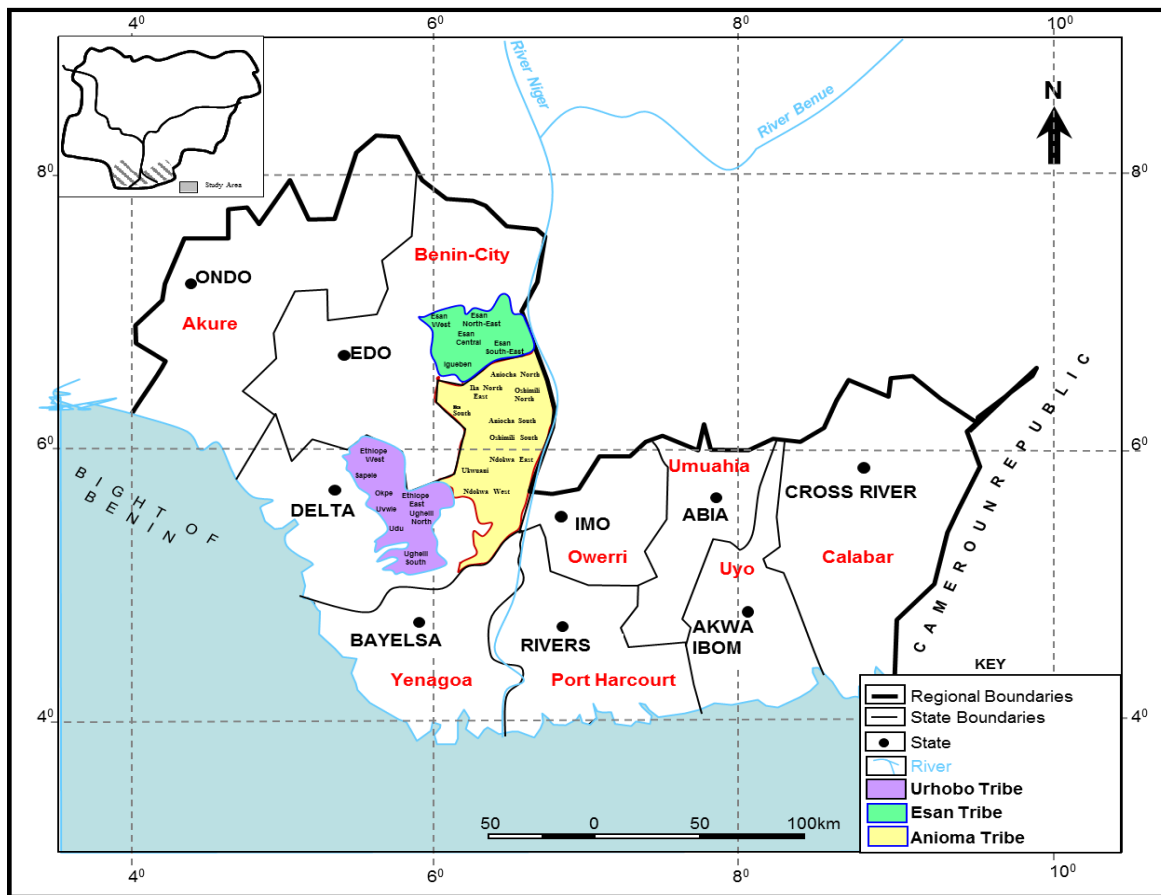


Figure 1: A Map of the study area. Source: Delta State Ministry of Land and Surveys

Method

This study was carried out among the Esan of Edo and Anioma people of Delta States of Nigeria. These two states are part of a region in Nigeria called South Southern Nigeria or Niger



Delta. In Edo State are Benin, Etsako, Owan, Akoko-Edo and Esan ethnic groups; Esan being the thrust of this investigation. In Delta State, there are prominent ethnic nationalities like the Urhobo, Isoko, Okpe, Ijaw, Itsekiri and Anioma; Anioma being our primary concern. In this study, we adopted basically the descriptive and interpretative approaches. To extract data, we used a three-way approach which comprised literature review, interviews, and non-participant observational technique. To properly investigate musical activities in both states, six towns each were selected in both Anioma and Esan provinces and they are Asaba, Oko, Ogwuashuku, Iseluku Agbor and Obiaruku in Delta State; and Ewatto, Ubiaja, Igueben, Uromi, Irrua and Ekpoma in Edo State. In both states, we investigated traditional musical activities among some selected ensembles. These ensembles were selected based on certain criteria:

- (a) Male ensembles, (b) Female ensembles (c) Mixed ensembles comprising male and female

From these ensembles, the relevant data gathered were scrutinized using Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA)- a technique which involves the process and procedure of analyzing data and providing some level of understanding, explanation, and interpretation of patterns and themes in textual data. This technique requires some familiarity with the data which are coded into themes and patterns. Through the QDA, we subjected our data to double checks to ascertain the valuableness of data to be reviewed and when to seek corroboration of facts from major stakeholders in the field. From our field investigation, which was basically participatory, the authors sieved four apt folksongs from Esan and three from Anioma which featured in most of the ensembles. They were recorded, notated and analysed in content and context within their cultural milieu.

Result /Finding

Folksong and Folksong Tradition in Edo and Delta States of Nigeria

Folk music is the music of communities which emerged from amongst them as part of their cultural activities to entertain their audiences, their gods/goddesses and their selves through social interactions, worship and recreations. Folk music rarely has an individual composer nor are they documented hence it is never static but faces a lot of changes as it is presented or performed from one community to another. Okafor (2019:17), states that folksong “is a composition that has grown



with a race or a nation or even a community and whose authorship is enshrined in the midst of antiquity”. Folk music is therefore as old as the community where they emerge or evolve. Since music was used by our ancestors to send messages in various ways and for many other purposes than entertainment, folk songs evolved from spoken words and were turned poetically into melodies to form songs. These songs were therefore used to accompany activities that go on in their communities such as marriages, naming, initiation and burial ceremonies, festivals of different types, to mention but a few.

Traditional and cultural practices are very common among Esan and Anioma communities; virtually every of these are done with musical accompaniment. Music and dance form part of the cultural traits and behaviors of these communities hence they are apparent not only for entertainment, but to portray the cultural practices as well as the aesthetic features of the communities’ musical traditions which include their folk songs, dances, festivals, indigenous instruments etc.

In both provinces, music plays very important roles in their celebrations. It functions in the activities that occur among individuals and groups in the community and it brings every cultural interests and organization to limelight. Music is used as a forum for show of love, maintenance of law and order, and it is a major vehicle in political rallies, festival celebrations, storytelling, and worship by these communities hence their indigenous songs form part of the history, portraying all aspects of their cultural heritage. Their music which is intertwined with their culture, entertains, educates and encourages their social obligations as members of their communities. Every cultural activity has accompanying music since that is the basic medium of expression, communication and information. There is music for moonlight plays, storytelling and other recreational activities for both the young and the old, the men and the women etc. To our amazement, a corpus of songs abounds in these cultures that treat femaleness and female-related matters in a derogatory manner.

Negative Portrayal of Womanhood in Nigeria

The negative portraiture of women is not tied to any territorial boundary. For example, Willis, (2014), remarked that the black female body has long been a distinct site of transgression



for outsiders -Europeans, especially. Beyond the images painted by outsiders of African women, Africans themselves have been significant contributors to the growth of such tendencies. A quick interrogation of African odes to womanhood in folktales and folklores reveals primarily among other features the erotic. This trend gives an impression of grave misfortune in femaleness. Today, body politics is too profound in Africa and it is fanned by the people's idea of nature of one's body, sexism, academic status, gender roles and many others. Beyond body politics, we are faced with the term 'sexual politics' which has been widely adopted as an essential term in the last century. Particularly in academia, it is used to characterize how life in a patriarchal world has created biased structures that use sex as a primary influencer in all political questions (Friar, 2022).

There are copious evidences in all the regions-North, South, East and West of Nigeria, which see women in the pejorative light. These narratives are aptly captured in proverbs, folktales and folksongs in the works of Dickson and Mbosowo (2014), Ezeifeke (2017), Yakubu (2018), Emeka-Nwobia and Ndimele (2019) and Onukawa (2021). In these cultures, it has been observed that issues pertaining to male selfhood are objectively and eminently captured and those of womanhood are beset with absence of finesse and an overdosed degree of subjectivity. Feminism is a movement that states or believes that women should be given equal opportunities in the scheme of things in the society as it applies to men, while patriarchy celebrates men over women. From time immemorial the world has always been patriarchal since very many societies are ruled by men and women are made to play the second fiddle (Jamgbadi, 2021). Ever since Nigerian independence up to date, the fight for equality amongst Nigerian men and women is not yet won and the hope for wining is yet not in sight. This observation is unequivocally made in that the major perpetrators of this male -female dichotomy are no longer men but women themselves. The songs listed below in the two communities under investigation are composed and performed by women themselves.

Some Esan and Anioma Songs

In this segment, we present even songs whose texts we will subject to textual analysis without losing sight of their contexts of performance. Four of the songs are from the Esan region of Edo State and the rest three are from the Anioma region of Delta State, Nigeria.



IKHUO NE KA BO 'DO

$\text{♩} = 90$

Voice

I khuo ne ka bo do bo do no ye 'lan e ne ki ke bo-o 'ri hue bie lo

5
mien 'do le se ro 'bo mui lan a ro bo mue gbe

Text in Esan

Ikhuo ne ka bo do
'bodo no ye 'lan
E ne kike bo o
E rihue bie 'lo mien
Edole re ro bo mui 'lan-o
A robo mue 'gbe

Translation

Ladies who married much earlier
married men of their choice
those who married lately
have with their eyes and nose seen torment
Husbands, treat them well
It is nice to handle spouses well

Borne out of the desire to denigrate the image of the women, this song says that the ladies who married much earlier, married men of their choice and those who married lately have with their eyes and nose seen torment. Husbands, please treat your wives well. It is nice to handle spouses well. This song appears to be trying in futility to re-write history. Until recently in Esan, the girl-child was simply called on a fateful day, unprepared, and be shown her husband whom her father has accepted bride price from. However, in today's Esan, it is the girl-child who introduces her approved suitor to her parents. In the song, we also see a general assumption that husbands are the chief providers and are being pacified to treat their wives well. This thinking is holding on to old models of working husbands and perpetual housewives. The song has failed to capture current tendencies where wives are husbands' co-equals or chief providers.



IGHO NA 'GBILE KHUAN

Voice

I gho na 'gbi le khuan I su ya ha na rie - o 'gho na 'gbi le khuan-

4
o I su ya ha na rie - o

Text in Esan

Igho na 'gbile khuan
Isuya ha la rie
'ghona 'gbile khuan
Isuya ha la rie

Translation

Money made by prostitutes
is wasted on kebab
Money made by prostitutes
is wasted on kebab

Any money made by prostitutes will be spent on frivolities. This opinion is not and has never been true. Even within the communities where this ideology is peddled, there are distinguished ladies who are property owners. In recent times, some women have had to travel out of the country to places like Dubai, Italy, France and Belgium to mention a few for prostitution and other related businesses. Most of them have come back to their homelands as entrepreneurs and in a similar manner are their male counterparts who are known gigolos yet are celebrated but not defamed. The money which a harlot makes is got from males. Men are not admonished to eschew wasting resources on women rather the subject of attack is the woman who has made money and how it is spent has become the subject matter of the community.

ANNA

An - na ta reo nu wea lubho An na An na-o a gbi le bha ye mu we - e

Text in Esan

Anna tare o nu we a lu bho

Translation

Anna, tell us what exactly you want to do



Anna-o agbele bha ye muwe –e Anna, prostitution no longer befits you

This song is targeted at Anna a pretty light complexioned girl who was yet to marry in one of the Esan towns. Among this people, long years of spinsterhood is in itself a sickness which is a form of social dysfunction. Anna, tell us exactly what you want to do is simply saying that Anna should either get married now to a bachelor, divorcee, be a second wife or marry a widower. Pungent as this song is, men who are far older than Anna are in the same community yet they have their peace and freedom without being molested or assaulted in songs. This is again a case of gender bias and a well-orchestrated attempt to reduce womanhood.

IJONI



Text in Esan

Ijoni ki rio le le

O ri no ri no

Translation

It is John who's now vandalizing it

vandalizing it. vandalizing it

This song is one of the *Ikoghe*¹ songs that is used in cleansing a woman who has violated matrimonial rules by sleeping with another man other than her husband. To retune her to her immediate environment, she is cleansed using a ritual musical dance drama and during this exercise, songs of lecherous flavour are performed (Aluede and Ekeweu, 2003). The woman is made to confess the names of the men she has slept with and their names are crafted into songs for the woman to dance. Sadly though, this music is performed by women for the woman infidel and the male folks who are the main transgressors are left undisturbed.

¹ Ikoghe is a musical cum ritual performance held for a woman who has violated matrimonial rules by sleeping with another man other than her husband.



DAINA EWO

Dai na dai na o dai na o ewo daina lisie go muo dai na

open d door

Text in Anioma

Translation

Dina, Dina-o, Dina-o, ewo!

Diana, Diana-o, Diana-o, Oo

Dina eli-si-ego muo

Diana has duped me of my money.

Dina kpo pu ‘zor

Diana open the door.

The song ‘Dina’ is meant to ridicule women who depend on men for livelihood. It is a social control song meant to condemn the act of prostitution, laziness and immorality among women who have no means of livelihood yet want to enjoy the good things of life through immoral means. The name Dina is neither in reference to a particular woman nor girl but a generic word representing a female. Any other name



MAKA EGO YIBO

E wo makego yi bo ne nanwa nazoyio makaegoyibo i ma nashamed
janwai Nodikanachiete a weleo

could be

used in context to reflect a female given name.

Text in Anioma	Translation
Ewo! Maka ego oyibo	Oh, because of white man's money
Nne na nwa na zor oyi-o	mother and child are fighting over men
Maka ego oyibo	because of white man's money
Ima n'ashawo ²	do you know that the prostitute
Je li anwai	that went to anwai
N'odi ka nachiete, awele-o	has not returned, lucky her!

The song exposes the attitude and actions of women in relation to money. It portrays the extent which women can go in search of money. It explains how a certain mother is contesting with her daughter or the younger girls for men because of money.

² Ashawo/ Ashewo is originally a Yoruba word for prostitute, sex worker or loose character. In modern parlance it means runs girls. This term has now been elevated and accepted as a common slang in most Nigerian indigenous languages.



This song again gives us an idea of the negative construct of the community in connecting prostitution with solely the quest for money. Out of family pressure, many women have had to marry men which they ordinarily would not have loved to be their life partners. The misfortune of marrying who they do not love may have drawn them into having carnal knowledge of other men. Besides, craze for money is not specifically women’s flaw alone. For example, in Nigerian one hears at one time or the other that money is life or time is money or that rather than telling the sick sorry, it is the poor that should have been told sorry. These mantras are indicative of how money- and money-making is valued. The quest for money or the white man’s money is not gender based. Ojoye (2017), Sahara Reporters (2021) and Odeyemi (2023) have in recent times captured in their headlines, the deaths of Nigerians on the Mediterranean Sea, Nigerians among seventy-five migrants feared dead in shipwreck on Mediterranean and that one thousand two hundred Nigerians die in Sahara Desert and Mediterranean Sea in 2023. In all these reports, at no point was it said that the casualties were all women; the victims were both males and female.

BIKO YOLU NUMU DIMO

bikoyo lunumu di mo yo lunumu di mo ka n jekwe ni lo

7
ne n je sic ba ta ma na e wu kao ge lio o ye nyco gi di gbo o gi

14
di gbo bu e gwu i tsie iba ta ma na e wu kao ge lio

Text in Anioma

Translation

Biko yolu num dim-o

Please beg my husband

yolu num dim-o

beg my husband



ka njekwe n'ilo	to permit go outside
Na njesie mbata	I will be back afterward
mana ewu ka ogeli-o	the fine is a goat
Oyenyegbo	Oyenyegbo
Ogidigbo bu egwu-o	Ogidigbo is the dance
ite si-e ibata	after dancing, you come back
mana ewu k'ogeli-o	the fine is a goat.

This song talks about women who go out of their marriages to have canal affairs with other men after which they then come back to confess and purchase goats for cleansing rites. On the other hand, it challenges the men who are fond of accusing their wives wrongly and who call them obscene names that can elicit the wrath of the women to desist from it. This is so because any woman alleged to be involved in the unwholesome act of infidelity risks her name being crafted into songs of derogatory content for public appreciation. The song therefore is used to condemn infidelity amongst women, and also enumerate the items to procure in appeasing the gods for such an egregious act. Thus, the act is outrightly discouraged among women because it has the propensity of threatening mutual coexistence. Just as it is with the Esan culture, men who are co-travelers and probably the initiators of act that ushers in opprobrium for the women are neither mentioned in any songs nor are they fined to serve as deterrents. The ignoble path threaded by two persons often suddenly becomes the woe of just one person.

Discussion

Primordial proclivities that have put men far above women have continued to reign supreme in these two ethnic groups. To our amazement is the fact that even most of the female folks still perform these songs without considering their repugnant nature. Within the remit of this study, we are unable to locate the essence of the denigration of the female folks in both cultures other than to subjugate them. As a matter of truism, quite an impressive number of researches have alluded to the fact that women are more spiritual and religious than men. The opinions of Trzebiatowska & Bruce (2012), Yili, Hexuan & Guang (2020), Smith & Schapiro (2021) and Zurlo (2022) to mention a few are noteworthy. With a particular reference to the Nigerian scenario,



Magaji & Jegede (2018), Adeosun & Owolabi (2021), Aluede & Aluede (2021) and Okechukwu (2022) have examined the Hausa, Yoruba, Esan and Igbo women respectively. To religiously hold on to genderism is also known as gender binarism can no longer be seen as a healthy practice in the wake contemporary realities. Binarism connotes the belief that there are only two genders in humankind and that a person's gender is fixed at birth. This thinking holds that maleness and females have their culturally approved roles which are defined by any given society. Nevertheless, transgenderism which means the condition of someone feeling that he or she is not the same gender (sex) as the one they had or were said to have at birth. There are also 'Queer bodies' who have desires for the same sex and feel that they are not what their sex prescribes. These groups of people are gradually being noticed in many Nigerian communities including the areas under investigation. In one of the Anioma ensembles which we investigated, we identified a male star performer who was costumed as a lady but avoided being captured in a photograph during our fieldtrip. Also, in Esan, we found a male dancer who was dressed in female costume standing by another male who is costumed as an elderly masquerade. Below is the photograph.



Figure 2: Two masquerades in male and female costumes. Source: The authors, 2022



That women and men are coming together in one performance is indicative of the desire to expound their sonic space. More interesting is the fact that in this epoch where a man can turn a woman and verse versa, drawing lines of dichotomy simply along maleness and femaleness is defective, unrealistic and unmindful of contemporary realities. Traditional musical arts will be further sustained for posterity if these man-made rules are deemphasized in favor of musical growth.

Suggestion

Treating the female folks as second fiddle in current times is capable of threatening mutual coexistence. Derogatory songs should not be composed around female even when in some situations, it is clear that the issues for which they are being called out for concern both males and females. Peace and harmony can only exist among individuals dwelling in the same locale only if there is equity and fairness.

Conclusion

In this article, we discussed how two ethnic groups deploy songs to negotiate status in Edo and Delta States. Given some thoughtful look, one finds that in our communities, there are gender-based barriers in the service of male superiority. This idea of genderism has significantly affected different communities. For example, an irresponsible act between two persons of opposite sexes is paid for by the female and the male is exonerated. Consequently, the female's name features in festival songs of allusion and other lecherously crafted works while the male is exonerated. We reason that much efforts should be made to achieve the integration of genders to the level of parity so that gender stereotypes in our societies can be effaced. We make this suggestion because gender-based restrictions that are not conducive to social cohesion in this modern epoch should be challenged if gender equity will ever be achieved

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