

The Positioning Women and Viable Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

Women constitute the majority of humanity, being about 56% of the total of the 6 billion on earth. The problem of unequal access to social benefits by women received global attention when the United Nations declared the period 1975-1985 as the decade for women. There was also a special conference on women held in Beijing, China in 1995 to access improvement on the life of women. A consciousness has been developing nationally that unless something is done to politically empower women, as an interest group, and to combat poverty amongst them by creating incomes and wealth, the entire development of the country stands mortgaged. Women have gone through notable development phases in human history. Poverty has a woman face since 70% of people in poverty are women.

In the light of the above, this paper seeks to examine the need not only of empowering women, but the essence of giving women the task and opportunity of being part and parcel of managing Nigeria's resources, trace the roles of women in the society, discuss barriers to women emancipation and efforts towards enhancing the position of the Nigerian woman as well as discuss strategies for enhancing the status of women as a means of achieving sustainable development in the country.

**Key words: Empowerment, Gender inequality, Role expectation of women;
Women Labour Movement, Employment**

Introduction

Development is a process by which a continuous increase in a system's efficiency produces the conditions which result in general upliftment. Such upliftment could be national and quantitative, while it could also be psychological and hence qualitative. These physical and psychological elements of development mutually enforce each other to bring about the desired general upliftment which is measured by the general improvement on man's living condition. Yesufu (1962) said "*development means the process and result of improving the well being of people – not a category or some categories of people, but also persons within national economy, the totality of the citizens*". That women play a central role in development is becoming increasingly recognized for they are the principal producers of food, the managers of household resources, and the custodians of family welfare. Women in traditional Africa were a product of the social, political and economic realities of their society. 67% of women constitute the agricultural workforce while they energetically engage in the promotion of the informal sector in the urban areas (2000 census).

In terms of adult functional literacy, illiterate women represent 61% of the female population as compared to 38% of the adult men. The Nigerian woman has not pressed hard to derive the full benefits of her economic activism and activities.

According to the 2000 census almost 50% of the total population of the country of 150million are women. The Federal office of Statistics (FOS, 1992) reports that 70% of this population resides and work in the rural areas. 56% of these rural dwellers (about 31 million women) are below the nationally defined poverty line. In addition, there are some households headed by women due to a variety of life accidents. The 2006 Demographic and Health Survey puts female headed households at 34% in the South-East, 30% in the South-West, 13% in the North-East and 11% in the North-West. Summarily put therefore, this implies that too many women largely live in poverty, lacking access to basic education, decent nutrition, adequate health and social services which the development process is supposed to provide.

The UNDP Human Development Index (HDI) defined the following three abilities as the three basic measures of empowerment:

- (i) Ability to live a long and healthy life

- (ii) Ability to be knowledgeable
- (iii) Ability to have access to the resources needed for a decent standard of living.

Empowerment entails investing legally or formally with power, Authorizing, licensing, enabling, permitting, giving people more control over their own life. Women empowerment therefore is the process whereby women develop the capacity, ability to control and direct those things that affect them. The status of women changes when they are economically empowered.

If going by the report that women are more than men in the world, going by the ideology of democracy, the majority should be able to exercise their power over the minority. Therefore, women should be made to be in control of Nigeria's resources for its growth. In managing the resources of this country, we cannot afford that as much as 50% of the population should not be involved in all the commanding heights of the economy. Apart from the latent human resource, which will thus be wasted, in certain area of development, women are the greatest beneficiaries. For instance, in the field of maternal and child health, and family planning, because of their reproductive role, women are not only the beneficiaries, but the key to resolving issues on those aspects of health that impinge on the survival of our population.

However, throughout the ages, the sharing of power, wealth, influence, employment etc between men and women has never been close to equality. Even in the most advanced countries, gender inequality has remained a live issue. Nigeria as a nation remains under-developed because of the unprecedented rate of corruption that has eaten deep into the fabrics of the Nigerian society. If Nigeria remains as it is this millennium, then one can easily conclude that the men who have been in the forefront of managing Nigeria's resources have failed.

Theoretical Conceptualization

Several theoretical explanations have been given as the underlying reasons and causes of marginalisation of women. This becomes very imperative when it borders on gender issues. One is however tempted to examine the cultural determinants, social explanation, biological explanation as justification for the predicament of women. One of such theories is the biological determinant theory. The school of thought

argued that the roles of men and women are biologically or genetically determined and that there are fundamental and psychological differences between males and females in the society and this makes male supremacy and patriarchy inevitable. Women can only be perceived in terms of their sex roles and societal inhibitions, belief system and their coping ability at various times. There is no gainsaying the obvious that women are seriously oppressed globally. The picture in Africa, Asia and other developing world always call for concern, hence the need for a pragmatic approach towards putting in place various sustainable programme in their favour. Womanhood on the other hand, can be described as the state of maturity both physically and mentally of the female sex. It has to do with the ability to produce and rear children.

Opong (1980) has grouped the roles of women into seven categories, namely, mother, worker or producer outside the home, worker or producer inside the home (goods and services), wife, kinswoman, community member, and individual woman. These roles or the degree of their performance vary among cultures and from time to time even within the same culture. Women in many societies were regarded as their husbands' property and hence it was unethical for them to aspire too much (Nwankwo, 1996). They as "property" could not own property. The concept was very prevalent in Nigeria and is still fairly strong in some part of the country. Women own only 1% of the world land, but grow half of the world's food. They are predominant in the poorest paid occupations but make up one-third of the world's labour force (Pogson, 2004). Women contribute significantly to the reduction of hunger and poverty, promotion of family welfare and generally to the overall growth of a nation's economy.

Very few women have had the opportunity of being part of the decision making processes of their societies while politics was regarded as an exclusive preserve of men. Women face discrimination, deprivation and violence. These inequalities are shared by women both in developing and developed world and caused them to come together with the purpose of eliminating discrimination against women in all societies worldwide.

The argument of the cultural norms and standards of behaviour are responsible for the subjugation of women. There is no gainsaying that women suffer from a number of inhibitions that often transcend beyond cultural, biological and economic boundaries. Others include belief systems, taboos, magic, cultural variations ideological differences, norms, language, religion etc. In Nigeria, for instance, some areas in the country see religion as cultural hence, the impediments it has on the freedom of women. In the words of Professor Adiele Afigbo *“the standard approach to the study of women in development continued to concern itself with the celebration and immortalisation of women who are said to have contributed to development in different aspects of national life, whose roles are no longer of being relegated to the garbage heap of history. Thus we continue to witness a lot of chest-beating and hallelujah choruses in favour of real and imaginary “Amazons who are said to have come, see, and conquered”.*

Oyekanmi (1990) opines that biological characteristics do not bar women from particular occupations rather, the mother role is the cultural constraint and a validating myth for the “domestic oppression of women”. For instance, in African society, the popular belief is that men are superior to women. Women are brought up in a conventional way and they in turn bring up children in the same way. Until recently, the male child was believed to be more beneficial to the family consequently there is preference for male education. One can argue that, since women are the major agents of socialization, they should partly be blamed for their predicament since it seems they have either explicitly or implicitly supported the cultural arrangement of roles and the value attached to them.

Finally, there is the religious explanation for the position of women in the society. Kapur (1974) described religion as an institution of social control to oppress women. Again, Karl Marx declared that *“religion is the opium of the people”*. Maleness and femaleness are culturally established and religion is a vehicle for this socialization process. Religion is a vehicle for teaching caste differences that are ascribed to gender. Caste exists wherever “socio-economic benefits are fixed, typically from birth, according to certain ascribed characteristics of the individual”. While women played significant roles in the Christian religion for instance, the saints of women in the Christian religion are low. In addition, since women are regarded as Eve’s

daughters, the punishment pronounced on her by the Almighty God justifies and legitimizes a gendered hierarchy. In Islam, there is a separation of men's and women's lives into different spheres. While men have their place in the public sphere and can worship in the mosque, women's place is in the private sphere-the home where they pray. In addition, the place of worship and sitting arrangement at social events are separated. Again, in the traditional religion, women are prevented from actively participating in certain festivals such as the Egungun, Eluku, Agemo and so on.

The Role of Women in Development

The Senacca Falls Convention held in 1848, brought about the spread of the awareness of women's inferior role in society. At the convention, resolutions were passed, which led to a conscious orientation or equality in the society. It enabled the American woman assert her rights and utilize her potentials. Breakthroughs on women issues at the international level can be traced to the establishment of the Women's International Organisation in 1919 made up of about 15 women Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO's) under the auspices of the League of Nations. The establishment of the United Nations in 1945 and the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 further advanced the interests on women at the international level. Their roles, involvement and contributions to national development were gradually being re-defined. There emerged stimulation of international and national action to solve the problems of under development and the socio-economic structure, which place women in an inferior position. The series of world conferences on women began in Mexico in 1975, Copenhagen in 1980, Nairobi in 1985 and culminated in Beijing in 1995. Other conferences were the Rio de Janeiro Conference on Environment and Development in 1992, the Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, the Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in September, 1994 and the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen in March 1995. The declaration of 1975-85 and 1985-95 as decades for women and the decision to proclaim 1975 International Women's Year were consequent upon the realisation of the poor conditions of the women and the need to link national action on women to action at the international levels.

Until the last decade and a half, the gains of women from development were minimal and temporal while the entire process intensified existing gender inequalities even in period of national prosperity. The United Nations Decade for Women increased awareness about strategic and practical needs of women, there was little commitment to incorporate these into national and sectoral policies until the mid-1980s, when there developed the yearning for National Women in Development Policy to facilitate the full integration of women into social, economic and political life of the nation.

The National Policy on Women fulfils the yearning as well as efforts of Federal, State and Local Governments, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), International Development Partners, the private sector, concerned corporate bodies and individuals to integrate women fully into national development in order to remove those gender inequalities that have evolved in our society over time through structures and processes created by patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism.

In managing the resources of this country, we can not afford that as much as 50% of the population should not be involved in all the commanding heights of the economy. Apart from the latent human resource, which will thus be wasted, in certain area of development, women are the beneficiaries, for example, in the field of maternal and child health, and family planning, because of their reproductive role, women are not only the beneficiaries, but the key to resolving issues on those aspects of health that impinges on the survival of our population.

The Nairobi forward looking strategies for the advancement of women has described them as health providers and health brokers for the family and community as well as informed of adequate and appropriate health. Health planners all over the world are now placing increasing emphasis on women's leadership and participation in these areas. It is important that women should be able to identify the social, psychological, economic, technical and managerial issues affecting the health of women.

What is true of women's role in health is also true of their role in agriculture where it has been established that at least 70% of our female population is involved and constitutes the backbone of our food production in this country.

In providing basic needs such as water for instance, women's involvement at all levels and stage of planning and implementation is also crucial. Women are the greatest

consumers of water and where water is not available they spend many hours everyday searching for it. Experience in countries such as Tanzania where there had been concerted efforts to provide water has shown that the experiment has recorded failure where women had not been involved in planning and implementation. The point that needs to be made is that women have a vested interest and must be involved in these far reaching plans that are informal sector of the economy of this country.

Today, in Nigeria, we living witness to the achievements of women who are saddled with great responsibilities. Such women include Dr. (Mrs) Dora Akunyili, Dr.(Mrs) Ndi Okereke Onyiuke, Dr. (Mrs) Cecilia Ibru to mention but a few. If more women are placed in similar sensitive and important positions, the nation will develop and be better for it. Examples are the emergence of Germany's First Female Chancellor and Mrs. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, Africa's First Female Liberia's President, Mrs Condolisa Rice and Mrs Hilary Clinton, both immediate past and present United State secretaries of State.

Folayan Ojo (1997) grouped the role of women into seven categories: mother, workers and producers inside the home, workers and producers outside the home, wife, kinswoman and community woman. The degree of performance of these roles, vary from culture to culture. Women are however entering the labour force in an ever increasing number. Davies (1978) noted, *"When women participated in the traditional labour force, their productive roles were an extension of their domestic roles, all such activities were carried out within the home"*.

Women have always been the unsung and solid backbone of Nigeria's livelihood especially in the rural areas and in the poor urban communities. It must be noted however, that simply posing the problem of women in equity terms can not really be described as a solution to take the Nigerian woman out of poverty and into wealth and social power. Traditionally, in African culture women have initiated and executed numerous and virtually daily livelihood projects at individual level. They therefore constitute an indispensable force contributing in no small measure to the development of their various communities. In Nigeria, due to the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural nature, the roles and contributions of women have varied among regions.

Oyekanmi (1990) says that the Nigerian woman has realized that she shoulders the greater part of the family up keep responsibilities than the man. This compels her to

strive to have a trade or profession in order to earn income which will enable her to fulfil her responsibilities to the family. Hoffman (1984) agrees that the need for accomplishment and the drive for results are some of the psychological factors which tend to stimulate the employment of married women. Adedokun (1998) asserts that urbanization and increasing commercialization also brought changes to the roles of women. Women in the urban areas began to have access to modern technology. The release from domestic work due to modern household technology as well as the complex of urban values arising from education and increasing level of need among women has altogether influenced their increasing involvement in paid employment. Economically, the depression which has set into the Nigerian economy since the early 1980s, has forced many women to go into paid employment in order to augment family income as their husbands are no longer able to shoulder the family responsibilities alone.

Adedokun (1998) and Ogunlade (1990) indicate that the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) introduced in Nigeria in 1988, created such a serious inflation that most Nigerian families could no longer make ends meet. The result has been an increased anxiety as many women have joined their husbands in wage earning economic activities.

Hindering Factors to Women Emancipation

The most prominent of these hindering factors is education. In both developed and developing countries, males have been shown to be better educated than females. Female participation in education is usually hindered by socio-economic restraints such as limited parental resources, early marriages, pregnancy, sexual harassment, high illiteracy among mothers, childrearing and so on. To Adedokun (1998), more men than women have access to formal education. Furthermore, the influence of education tends to diminish as one moved away from the coast.

The role of socialization in the subordination of women can not be denied. Societal prejudice tends to limit the scope of educational and professional training open to women. Also religious practices of keeping women in purdah and those of Sharia system hinder the participation of women in educational and other activities. Some employers believe they have legal justification to discriminate against women because

of the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention which stipulates some protective measures aimed at protecting women and enhancing their effective participation in the labour market. The ILO is however making serious efforts to remedy some of these contradictions in its set standards.

Another factor is identified to be the women or personal factor. Some argue that women are their own worst enemies. Some women have lackadaisical attitude to work and many lack proper education and are not making positive efforts to improve themselves. Again women often fail to accord fellow women leaders as much respect as they would male leaders. Lack of networking among women has also been observed to be a barrier hindering women's upward mobility and emancipation.

Conflict in multiple roles militates against women emancipation. In addition, women are less geographically mobile than men. Women are often saddled with mother-wife roles which tie them to their husbands. Summarily put, Ighadalo (1990) notes that women are "secondary breadwinners" compared to the male family head.

Efforts at Enhancing the Women

The period 1976-85, proclaimed the United Nations Decade for Women, had a plan of action with the goals of equality, development and peace. This marked a watershed in human resource development as it brought women, the other half of the world's population into development. People-centred development paradigm-sustainable human development (SHD)-was adopted by countries world-wide and aimed at exploring new ways of improving the lives and conditions of the world's poor. SHD involved, among others, an improvement in the status of and the opening up of economic opportunities for women (UNDP, 1995). It was realized that only when disparities in social, economic and political equality together with sex imbalances are addressed could an achievement in sustainable human development be made. In other words, a gendered approach to development is necessary if SHD was to be achieved. This approach was expected to address women's concerns within a socially constructed relationship between men and women and to consist of a set of tools (Oyekanmi, 2005).

During this period, various governments, including those of African countries, intensified efforts to shift women from the periphery to the centre of national development processes. This was hampered women's unequal and subordinate positions mainly from two factors; namely: (i) the co-existence of women's multiple roles as reproducer, producer and traditional manager of resources; (ii) the gender discriminatory cultural beliefs that infiltrate institutions at various levels of society (UNDP, 1995). These have a direct import on women's lives in terms of the share in power and decision making at the household, community and national levels and access to and participation in education, health care, employment, land and property ownership, credit and shelter. Thus, one finds a case of male bias permeating all parts of the African socio-economic structure (Abane, 2000).

An attempt at fostering development on Africa is the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), whose document was agreed upon in October 2001; and Nigeria's former President Olusegun Obasanjo was a very central figure in the promulgation of this initiative. The thrust of the document is that Africa development strategy must be experimental and not imposed (Omoweh, 2003). NEPAD's long term objectives as contained in the document (Articles 174-188) are to: (i) eradicate poverty in Africa and to place African countries both individually and collectively, on a path of sustainable growth and development process, and (ii) promote the role of women in all activities. One of the nine short and medium term objectives highlighted in the document is the promotion of the role of women in social and economic development by reinforcing their capacity in the domains of education and training; by developing revenue-generating activities though facilitating access to credit, and by assuring their participation in the political and economic life of African countries. NEPAD had the goal of eliminating gender disparity in the enrolment in primary and secondary education by year 2005 under the International Development Goals (IDG). This means that NEPAD has only one more year to achieve this goal. The document stated that the conditions for promoting sustainable Development include Peace, Security, Democracy and Political Governance Initiative, the Economic and Corporate Governance Initiative, Sub-regional and Regional Development Initiative. In fact, most of the goals set by NEPAD to be achieved by the year 2015 are not feasible given the limited resources available to it.

With regards to Nigeria, the enabling laws and programmes to achieve the objectives of NEPAD are not yet in operation. For example, former President Olusegun Obasanjo's government enacted the 'Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Act' of 2000. The Act defines corruption to include bribery, fraud and other related offences. The Act also provides for the establishment of the Independent Corrupt Practice and Allied Offences Commission. The composition of the commission was and is still questionable. It exposed the underlying discrimination against women that make them such a vulnerable population. The Act stipulates that the commission shall consist of a chairman and twelve (12) other members, one of whom shall be a woman (Akinbode,2003).

Globally, the following six issues have been identified in main streaming gender in governance: (a) the empowerment and autonomy of women and the improvement of women's social, economic and political status is essential for the achievement of both transparent and accountable government and administration and sustainable development in all areas of life; (b) equality in political decision-making performs a leverage function without which it is highly unlikely that a real integration of the equality dimension of government policy making is feasible; (c) under representation of women at most levels of government as well as in the areas of art, culture, sports, media, education, religion and law and in achieving the target endorsed by the UN Economic and Social Council; of having 30% women in positions at decision-making levels; (d) women may be discouraged from seeking political office by discriminatory attitudes and practices, family and child-care responsibilities, and the high cost of seeking and holding public offices; (e) owing to their limited access to traditional avenues of power through alternative structure, particularly in the non-governmental organizational sector; (f) the low proportion of women among economic and political decision makers at local, regional and international levels reflects structural and attitudinal barriers that need to be addressed through positive measures (Ladan, 2003). Government is increasingly conscious of the crucial roles women have to play towards the development of the nation. In year 2000, the National Policy on Women was adopted with the aim of ensuring that the principles and provision of equal rights, obligations and opportunities before the law and non-discrimination against any citizens is enforced. The policy thrust covers equity, social order, social well being, resource allocation, economic growth, efficiency etc.

The National Policy on Women draws heavily from national and international initiatives related to Women in Development and aims at ensuring the following:

(a) raising national awareness of the citizens' constitutional rights and on a long term basis, mobilizing and educating the public on human rights in order to remove legal, cultural, religious and other constraints against the attainment of social justice and equity in the society; (b) ensuring the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women; (c) instituting an effective Gender and Development (GAD) management structure for the co-ordination of all GAD activities in the country and ensuring the efficient implementation by all sectors concerned; (d) empowering women through enhanced strategic human resources development; and

(e) establishing a data bank based on the implementation of a comprehensive (nationwide) baseline survey. The objectives of the National Policy on Women are:

(a) Ensuring that the principles and provisions contained in the Nigerian Constitution are effectively enforced; (b) Bringing into the mainstream, gender perspective in all policies and programmes based on a systematic gender analysis at all levels of government.

Prior to this, the National Commission for Women was established to coordinate the machinery for women development programmes and to specifically: (a) Promote the welfare of women in general; (b) Promote the full utilization of women in the development of human resources and bring about their acceptance; (c) Work towards total elimination of all social and cultural practices tending to discriminate against and dehumanize womanhood; (d) Device ways and means of encouraging self reliance in women; (e) Conduct research and formulate plans to improve the status of women and attain policy objectives in relation to women; (f) Coordinate, structure and monitor the activities of women voluntary organizations, granting them appropriate aid and evaluating their performances.

The organization has made modest achievements such as the organization of workshops to sensitize women and the public, mobilization of NGOs to promote women issues and the production of an acceptable National Policy document on women development. Other public programmes have also been initiated in the past to legitimize concerns for the plight of women. For example, the 1985-1993 Better Life for Rural Women Programme which was aimed at assisting rural women and

improving their living conditions, the Family Support Programme (FSP) which had component issues such as health, education, agriculture, women in development, child welfare, youth development, disability, destitution, income generation and shelter. The actions of successive government have resulted in change in the women lifestyle of both in the rural and urban centres.

They have also made meaningful use of the few appointments they have had to decision making positions for instance, NAFDAC and Prof. Dora Akunyili, UNIBEN with Prof. Grace Alele-Williams, Peoples' Bank and Kuforiji Olubi, Oceanic Bank and Cecilia Ibru, Ministry of Finance and Dr. Okonjo Iweala to mention just a few. The National Commission for Women (NCW) since its inception has strived to harness, consolidate and develop this resource and creativity to the benefit of the women. Many national NGOs have also been active in the planning and implementation of programmes for women for instance, National Association of Women Lawyers, National Association of Women Journalists, the activist Women's Groups aimed at total emancipation of women and eradication of inequalities and oppression, for instance, Women in Nigeria (WIN); Research Driven Groups who are concerned with resources and documentation of activities of women in gender-related fields such as Women Law and Development Centre.

The efforts of these NGOs have cut across all ethnic and religious groups in the country especially in areas such as mobilization for primary health care, mass literacy, agriculture and rural development, income generating activities especially in the informal sector.

Strategies/Instruments for Enhancing Women Empowerment

Fapohunda (2009) advocated strategies for the enhancement of the status of women towards making sustainable development a reality. First, the onus of women emancipation lies with women. Women must therefore struggle for own freedom. Second, programmes of activities should be evolved for women aimed at addressing their problems. Mass media and that of religious organizations should be enlisted to create mass mobilization campaigns on the need to ensure egalitarian principles from the basis of early socialization of children. Third curriculum reforms need to be effected to break the gender stereotypes in the society. Women need to take up more challenging jobs and be prepared to put in more than their male counterparts so as to register their impact.

In addition to the aforementioned, male-centred structures such as patriarchy which results in the ascendancy of men in authority and decision making both within and outside the home need to be softened to bring about equal access to all citizens. Gender solidarity among women should be promoted. NGOs who are mainly the funding agencies can do more in such areas as promoting and advocating gender sensitive policies; developing and providing gender analysis training to policy makers; providing technical and policy support to government in forming and implementing gender sensitive policies and programmes; advocating legal reforms to ensure gender equality.

Finally, there is need to train women in skills attainment and education to facilitate their entry to decision making positions. In many societies, especially Africa, where women are regarded as their husband's property, so it is unethical for them to aspire too much. As 'property' they could not acquire property.

Conclusion

There is no doubt however that in spite of all the provisions of these conventions- International Agreement on Social, Cultural and Economic Right of Women (1966), International Agreement on Political and Civil Right of Women (1966) and the Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979), some form of discrimination are still practiced in Nigeria to the detriment of women. However, history was made in 1997 over women inheritance right. The case was based on the Oli-Ekpe Custom, an Nnewi customary practice under which only males can inherit properties, Justice Niki Tobi, in delivering the land mark judgment declared:

“We need not travel all the way to Beijing to know that some of our customs including the Nnewi Oli-Ekpe custom relied upon by the appellant are not consistent with our civilized world in which we live today including the applicant. In my humble view, it is the monopoly of God to determine the sex of a baby and not the parents. Although the scientific world disagrees with this Divine Truth. I believe that God the Creator of human beings is also the final authority of who should be male or female. Accordingly, for a custom or customary law to discriminate against a particular sex is to say the least affront on the Almighty God Himself. Let nobody do such a thing”

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