

Text and Content Analysis of Cultural Influence on Gender Marginalization in Bassey Ubong's *Queen Asaari*

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Abstract

Culture, which consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artefacts, norms and value, and general way of life, that makes and defines a people, has other malicious attributes which places men far above the women, thus, marginalized their existence and deprived them the right for national decision making in fronts which includes political, social, religion and economic. Apparently, the effects of this is the abuse of power and engagement in proceeds of corruption, such as bribery, money laundering, looting, favouratism, nepotism and other heinous acts that blatantly affects the people and brought under-development to the Nigerian society as portrayed in Bassey Ubong's *Queen Asaari*. The gargantuan effects of this cankerworm are the near break down of law and order, which has generated civil unrest and state of anarchy in the Nigerian state. This study therefore aims at interrogating the inter-relationship between culture and gender marginalisation in the Nigerian society, drawing reference from Bassey Ubong's *Queen Asaari*. To achieve this, Content and Analytical Methodology, Social System Theory and Liberal Feminism Theory are employed as guide. The effect of this study will create positive attitudinal change amongst Nigerians, thereby effectuating change around societies. Among the major recommendations, this study posit that cultural laws, norms and values which promotes gender marginalization should be abolished from the Nigerian society, as that would promote gender equality.

Keywords: Text, Content, Analysis, Cultural Influence, Gender Marginalization

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Background to the Study

Historically, the notion, culture, was explicitly normative; representing more often than not Eighteenth and Nineteenth – century, understanding of socio-psychological sophistication. Culture to this trail is a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world; and through this knowledge, turning a stream of flesh and free thought upon our stock notions and habit. It is against this that Arnold (1993) in Mathew (2013) averred that culture was a remedy to such human failings as 'the want of sensitiveness of intellectual conscience, the disbelief in right reason, and the dislike of authority'. Mathew further writes that “the goal of culture was, therefore to overcome barbarity and realize higher goods, such as intellectual conscience, reason and reference to authority, encapsulated in a broader, neo-classical understanding of civility and civilization.

On a general note, culture, which consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artefacts, norms and values, and general way of life, which makes and defines a people through their economic cum political inclination. It also consists in patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their attached values (Ake et al, 2019).

On a simpler note, the essential core of culture according to Shimawuah (2021) consists of traditional ideas and especially their attached values. Culture systems may, on the hand, be considered as product of action, on the other hand, as conditioning influences upon further action. Against this backdrop, Tailor (1871) in Shimawuah (2021) views culture as the complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. In view of Oke (1984) in Shimawuah (2021), culture is the distinctive way of life of a group of people, their complex design of living. To this fact, Shimawuah concludes that culture includes all man-made parts of the environments that characterized a whole set of implicit, widely shared beliefs, traditions, norms, values and expectations that characterize a particular group of people.

Dealing with the tradition as microcosm to culture, Malueke (2012) in his article insisted that “traditional culture reflect the values and beliefs held by members of a community for periods often spanning generations”. To this, every social grouping in the world according to Malueke, has specific traditional cultural practices and beliefs, some of which are beneficial to all members, while others have become harmful to a specific group, such as women.

These harmful traditional practices which ultimately negates women development and involvement includes early and forced marriages, virginity testing, widow's rituals, female genital mutilation (FGM), breast sweeping/ironing, the primogeniture rule, practices such as 'cleansing' after male circumcision, and witch-hunting. Despite their harmful nature and their violation of national and international human rights laws, such practices persist in Nigeria because they are not questioned or challenged and therefore take on an aura of morality in the

eyes of those practicing them (Ake et al, 2021). It is therefore to establish the influence of culture on gender marginalization in the Nigerian society as portrayed in Bassey Ubong's Queen Asaari, which forms the thrust of this study.

Concept and Meaning of Gender

Gender refers to the roles and responsibilities of men and women that are created in our families, our societies and our culture. The concept of gender also includes the expectations held about the characteristics, attitudes and likely behaviours of both women and men (feminist and masculinity). Gender roles and expectations are learned and can change over time and they vary within and between cultures. Systems of social differentiation such as political status, class, and ethnicity, physical and mental disability, age and more, modify gender roles. The concept of gender is vital because applied to social analysis; it reveals how women's subordination (or domination) is socially constructed. As such, the subordination can be changed or ended. It is not biologically predetermined nor is it fixed forever.

It is to this fact that Eckert & McConnell (2003) writes that we are surrounded by gender lore from the time we are very small. To this fact, Eckert & McConnell avers that gender is embedded so thoroughly in our institutions, our actions, our beliefs, and our desires – and these ideas are so commonplace that we take it for granted that they are true, accepting common adage as scientific facts.

Further, tracing its etymology, West and Zimmerman (1987) as noted by Butler (1990), in Eckert and McConnell (2003) avers that gender is not something we are born with, and not something we have, but something we do – something we perform. While differentiating sex with gender, Eckert and McConnell insisted that sex is a biological categorization based primarily on reproductive potential, whereas gender is the social elaboration of biological sex, but it exaggerates biological differences and it carries biological difference into domains in which it is completely irrelevant. Against this backdrop, one can generally posit categorically that gender refers to the social roles and relations between women and men. This includes the different responsibilities of women and men in a given culture or location. Finally, unlike the sex of men or women, which is biologically determined, the gender roles of women and men are socially constructed and such roles can change over time and vary according to geographic location and social context.

Concept of Gender Marginalization

Gender marginalization is by now an accepted theoretical concern and enough empirical evidence is available to substantiate a strong presence of gender discrimination, oppression and subordination in all societies, whether developed, developing or the underdeveloped (Mandy and Jawad, 2017). More so, Mandy and Jawad aver that “the status of women in a society is a significant reflection of the level of social justice in that society”. A girl according to Mandy and Jawad is disadvantaged from the time she is born. In most developing and under-developed countries today, the girl child according to Mandy and Jawad has a lower status and enjoys fewer of the rights, opportunities and benefits of childhood than the boy child who has first call on family and community resources.

To buttress further, WHO (2020) inversely noted that “social and economic inequality/marginalization, commonly experienced by women, such as lower rates of schooling and employment, less pay for similar jobs, under representation in leadership positions, and the higher level of psychosocial stressors and problems, from care giving burden to intimate partner violence, all contributes to the wide spring of under-cultivation and under-productivity for national development.

In a refined occasion, mostly against the above backdrop, the situation of the girl child results commonly from prejudices rooted in culture and customs. The birth of a daughter is unwelcomed. Marked preference for sons has led to the neglect of the girl child. Improvements in literacy, fertility rate and greater workforce participation of women have not significantly improved the lot of the girl child. The patriarchal values placed on the counterpart (boy child) are so culturally deep rooted in the minds of the people that they always give preference to male child and female child is still unwanted and has to be eliminated through abortions and most undergo strenuous deprivation and violence. Victims as such, irrespective of religious identity, are forced to fend for themselves, and their redemption through equal rights and active participation in the democratic process sounds quixotic or ridiculously chivalrous (Ake et al, 2019).

Gender Marginalization in Nigeria

That women in Nigeria are presently discriminated against and largely marginalized in many fronts, especially in politics, is a known fact. As early as the colonial era, the marginalization of women has been a standard practice in Nigeria's Patriarchal Political System until 1976; women were not even allowed to vote in Northern Nigeria (Ake et al, 2019). This marginalisation has continued into the 4th republic.

The negligible presence of women in institutionalized politics in the Nigerian society is equally apparent in their low participation as party executives, elected officials, and political appointees (Olugbemi, 2004, in Ake et al, 2019). Democratizations in Nigeria since 1999 has created openings that politicize gender identity; there remains both a dearth of political opportunities for women and severe self-reinforcing constraints on gender participation. Though the number is increasing, women remain grossly under represented. Nigerian women have encountered a number of problems while venturing into politics. There is large scale discrimination from the men folk, both in voting for candidates and in allocating political offices, whether government or party offices.

More often than not, men constitute a larger percentage of party membership and this tends to affect women when it comes to selecting or electing candidates for elections, since men are usually the majority in the political party set-up. They tend to dominate the party hierarchy and are therefore at advantage in influencing the Party's Internal Politics.

More so, marginalisation of women in economic development and in social and political spaces is a worldwide phenomenon; however, it is worse in developing countries. In Nigeria, despite the adoption of the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1985 and similar local policies, such as the National

Gender Policy of 2006, inequality still exists due to a myriad of cultural and structural challenges. This has constrained women's participation in all spheres of life with serious implications for human resource development and, in that capacity, economic development of the country and the general state of gender equality.

In a nutshell, it is also glaring that there is simply no place in Nigeria today for a woman to head a country of 170 million, including men who often see women as second-class citizens or single objects of desire. Social, economic, cultural and religious factors are largely responsible for Women and Political Marginalisation in Nigeria. Women's marginalisation in politics, particularly in the Muslim dominated part of the society, where politics is seen as men's exclusive preserve. Women are mostly seen as minority in a male dominated sphere. While this increase in female political (or leadership) positions should be applied, gender equality in terms of female political representation is beyond numbers. Equality in numbers does not automatically translate into better policies for female citizens (Adeniyi, 2003).

Factors Promoting Gender Marginalisation in Nigeria

Factors promoting gender marginalisation in the Nigerian society from ancient till present are many, ranging from cultural, traditional, religious, believe system, norms and values, and mores and forms; to political, social and economic. Culture, as clandestine, posits as major phenomenon which stereotypes women as wholesomely inferior to men in all ramification. On a neutral note, rigid culture and tradition according to Zakari et al (2017) quoting Manchanda and Boss (2015) in Frank et al (2021) are often major contributors towards gender discrimination in most African countries.

To further buttress this assertion, Frank et al (2021), quoting Gberevbie et al (2014) in Garima et al (2018) writes that “there is an effect of cultural belief where female child is taken as second fiddle and does not have the cultural right to compete with male counterparts. Garima et al according to Frank et al, further noted that “male child enjoys the birth right of females as per the cultural and family norms of Nigerian societies”.

Furthermore, Zakari et al (2017) in Frank et al (2021) writes that illiteracy is one of the prime causes of gender discrimination in Quetta city, which is also synonymous to the Nigerian experience in the 21st century. On this note, parents who are illiterate and those belonging to the low socio-economic group, according to Frank et al (2021) are not in favour of educating their daughters because it brings them no returns.

Effects of Gender Marginalisation on National Development

The main consequences of being marginalised are from a social and economic perspective. The unchallenged cultures of male dominance led to the subordination and even exclusion of many women, and also many men do not conform to hegemonic forms of masculinity. This effectively sidelines more than half of the world's talent, experience and knowledge, leaving our societies operating at under 50 percent capacity. Against this backdrop, Kathy (2016) commented that gender marginalisation/discrimination mostly in a workplace can lead to low productivity, which ultimately affects the society.

Sociological System Theory

Sociological Systems Theory has always been uneasy about culture. Parsons and Shils (1951) in Dirk, (1991) had conceived of culture as the system of value-orientation whose generalized symbols of action orientation solved the problem of double contingency in social systems. But already when concluding the famous "truce" between anthropology and sociology concerning the use of the terms culture and social system, respectively, Dirk noted that Parson and Shils rather ambivalently accepted culture as a factor which shapes human behaviour by "transmitted and created content and patterns of values, ideas, and other symbolic-meaningful systems", but compared this to a notion of social system which is interested in "the specifically relational system of interaction among individuals and collectivities" (Parsons & Kroeber, 1958, in Dirk, 1991).

Furthermore, Dirk avers that "there seems to be something more basic going on with respect to the social which poses problems that may or may not be solved by cultural rules". Without really revising either the notion of the solution of the problem of double contingency or the terms of the truce, Parsons (1973) according to Dirk (1991) later went on to relegate culture to a distinction between correct and incorrect behaviour. Yet Parson according to Dirk always insisted on the possibility of speaking of the cultural system as that specific aspect of action which is organized around symbols, ideas, beliefs, and other "stable patterning of meaning".

Liberal Feminism Theory

Liberal feminism theory on the other hand focuses on physical equality and is opposed to gender role stereotypes and discrimination against women based on assumption that women are supposed to be, look, or behave as if they are passive, weak, and physically helpless. Liberal feminism rejects the idea that certain characteristics or interests are inherently masculine (or feminine), and upholds and explores a vision of heroic womanhood, thus, believes that discrimination is not systemic (Philip, 1980). Liberal Feminism called for women equality and freedom of choice (Eisenstein, 1979). For the most part, liberal Feminists see gender inequality emerging from the creation of separate and distinct spheres of influence and traditional attitudes about the appropriate role of men and women in the society (Pateman, 1987).

Methodology

This research work employed the case study and content analysis research approaches of the qualitative research method. It involves explaining the issue, describing, analyzing and interpreting data on the analysis gender marginalisation as portrayed in *Queen Asaari*. It is qualitative because it deals with the analysis of this play by a notable Nigerian playwright and descriptive because it involves the use of ideas to describe and analyze the nature and effects of gender marginalisation in the play texts. To achieve this, the study employed the primary and secondary sources. The primary source is the play text and the researchers' ideas concerning the nature and effects of gender marginalisation in the Nigerian society, while the secondary source includes materials from the institutional publications, articles, journals, text books, internets, research materials, among others.

Synopsis of *Queen Asaari*

Queen Asaari, according to Bassey Ubong (2006) demonstrates the ingredients of leadership required by those who gives up themselves to the task of building a new prosperous society, which is devoid of proceeds of corruption, such as: bribery, nepotism, favouratism, money laundering and the clandestine divide and rule system. Poised to do what is right, wages herself against all forces of graft, thievery, declension, chicanery and subterfuges.

The major action in the play began when Queen Asaari, a woman, decides to take up the position of Obonganwan, a traditional title meant for a queen which is equivalent to a king, at the demise of her father, pending when Ekpe-Owo, her immediate younger brother, who had for long left home to the riverine country, would come home to reclaim his position as the Obong (king) of Eburutu kingdom. Her decision and refusal of announcing the death of ObongIdang, her father, rather increased the crisis and complications as Essessien, Mbara and Nsansan, the three council members are eager to occupy the kingship and the Chief Priest positions of the community.

In a nutshell, Essessien, who secretly has the ambition of becoming the next Obong, by agreeing to become the ObongMfa, the Chief Priest, accepted to join Mbara and Nsansan to fight Queen Asaari. Before now, on so many occasions, Essessien had on countless occasions tricked Ekpe-Owo into changing his mind from coming home to take over his kingship position, believing that they could defeat Queen Asaari into making him the Chief Priest that would have made him declare himself the next Obong (king) of the community. He also won the trust of Mbara and Nsansan. In Unison, they tricked Asabo, the most trusted servant of Queen Asaari into poisoning Queen Asaari but with the help of Betse, Queen Asaari's younger sister, Asabo was caught while trying to trick Queen Asaari to eat his poisoned food and later beheaded by Eton.

At the climax, Essessien, Mbara and Nsansan, acknowledging that all their plans of making Essessien the ObongMfa, whose major duty is to conduct the great sacrifice that could usher in the coronation of a new Obong (king) after the demise of their late king, and their threats and death attempts on Queen Asaari, decides to attack Queen Asaari with daggers. Succeeded inflicting deep injuries on Queen Asaari in the palace, and overwhelmed by the magical prowess of Queen Asaari, Essessien, Nsansan and Mbara quickly ran out without knowing that a snuff box, belonging to Mbara had already fell to the ground. In pain, queen Asaari took the snuffbox as evidence.

Before passing out, Queen Asaari quickly calls Bokime, her first son, and explained all that transpired between her, Essessien, Nsansan and Mbara. She made him accept to wear the Obong (King) crown, and later power and mantles of a king were transferred from mother to son. At her demise, she handed the snuff box to Bokime which would serve as an evidence of her death. The play come to conclusion as Ekpe-Owo arrives to hear of his father's death, and meeting the lifeless body of his elder sister. With his help, as the new ObongMfa, Essessien, Mbara and Nsansan were arrested and beheaded after Bokime, with the help of the snuffbox, revealed to the people that Nsansan, Essessien and Mbara where the killers of Queen Asaari.

Queen Asaari and Theme of Gender Marginalization in Nigeria

From Aristophanes *Lysistrata*, to J. P. Clark's *Wives' Revolt*, even in Effiong Johnson's *Install The Princess*, it has been established that gender marginalization, discrimination and the clandestine inequality have been interrogated from the ancient Greek myth, to the Roman empire, down to the Medieval, Renaissance, Restoration and to the African antiquity. Apart from the later, it is pertinent to deduce categorically that these movements, basically patriarchy in nature, were triggered by political cum economical inclinations. The later, guided by unscrupulous tradition, culture, norms, and values seem more pervasive as it has ridiculed all measures targeted at correcting the abysmal, thereby effectuating gender equalities, even when the former are considered archaic, thus, changes in course of time.

Gender marginalization as perceived in the African myth, is most visibly noticed in the Nigerian society in fronts which includes politics, economic, religion and the family. Women in the Nigerian society are considered as second filial, thus seem ironical if any tries to attain high political and religious positions; attempts to such height, is maliciously attacked and evicted by the male elites, with the whip of cultural instruments. Evidence of this is seen in the play when Essessien, Mbara and Nsansan, tried to evict Queen Asaari as Obonganwan because she is a woman. Mbara's statement below justifies this statement:

Mbara: But she is still a woman; irrespective of how good, her sex makes her bad. Besides, she is sitting where she should not, and so she must pay for it, for she has shifted the ancient landmarks! (33).

Fear of Queen Asaari's uprightness and transparency, Essessien, Mbara and Nsansan, maliciously unite to antagonize Queen Asaari into declaring Essessien as ObongMfa, who will in turn, declare Mbara as the Obong (King) of the community. They knew that Queen Asaari had on so many occasions exhibited the qualities of a good leader, yet, they refused to support her. Mbara's statement below also justifies the above statement:

Mbara: That is part of her cunning – I don't want to call it wisdom. She has avoided the kings' throne but she has wielded more power than ten kings put together (13).

Apart from this, it is also observed in the play that the three years that Queen Asaari has ruled as queen, there were massive development in the land which surpasses that of the former rulers before her. The statement of the Maiden below clarifies this:

Maiden: Your reign, time of plenty and good luck. Farms are green, livestock are numberless. Boats fill with catch, trees bend with fruits. The barren have children, the poor have food. Husband of widows, father of the orphans (24-25).

The Maiden further noted:

Maiden: Behold Eburutu, once a thing of scorn: now is a leader in our tribe. It is now a clan of great seafarers and merchants. Mention her name, enemies tremble and wonder. Such a wonderful story, where is it from? (25).

Queen Asaari further expatiated this statement when she said to Mma Sidibe:

Asaari: ...yet they are proud of me. Would you say I have not run the affairs of Eburutu well in three years? We now have more lands and more creeks. Our traders travel further and wider. How many of our neighbours' trade with white people the way we do? Ah, I nearly forgot – we have won seven wars! How many men can boast of such achievement in three years? (15-16).

Even with the knowledge of the tremendous efforts of Queen Asaari towards making sure that peace, harmony and development are returned and sustained in the community of the play, as noted by Mbara as thus:

Mbara: I must confess to the world – or at least to myself – that this is an extraordinary woman. She has extraordinary inner strength and an extraordinary outer strength that cannot be explained. And her three years as queen have been the best that human memory can recall. She has all it takes to lead a people as proud, as complex, and as difficult as the people of our clan (32-33).

Essessien, Mbara, Nsansan and Mma Sidibe still believes that her position as the supreme head of Uburutu community and other higher positions should be attributed to men, thus, should not be handle by her and other women alike. Even at this, the same positions, if handled by men are mismanaged, and seen as theatre of corruption where greed, bribery, embezzlement, looting, nepotism and favouratism are at apex. Queen Asaari's statement below buttresses this ideology:

Asaari... the Clan appoints men to guard the Queen, her household, the palace, the secret treasures of the clan, the images of the gods, and the sacred instruments of the king's office; yet the men, paid from the purse of the clan, from the sweat of the women and the groans of the men, take leave of their duty posts. Only a baby or a mad person, would not know that there is a reason for that (30).

Evidence of this is seen in the Nigerian society where issues of tribal sentiments, favouratism and divide and rule system are prevalent due to the corrupt nature of the male elites in the federal, state and the local government. These men, occupying positions such as the president, vice president, and national house of assembly leaders, governors and other higher offices in the Nigerian state abuse the positions given to them that the Nigerian front is gradually seen as a lawless state and gradually leading to state of anarchy where evil is highly promoted and the perpetrators goes score free due to weak judicial system.

It is to these facts and many more that Queen Asaari decided in the play to hold on to the kingship stool, pending when her younger brother, the rightful heir to the throne of Eburutu Kingdom would come home and take over the ruler-ship, thereafter, upheld the stool of ObongMfa (Chief Priest). Even at the point of her death, she made sure that she educates and equip Bokime, her son, who she later made Obong (King) with traditional powers. She also taught him on how to be upright in the discharge of duty. Her statement below justifies this statement:

Asaari: Tradition. Tradition can be painful, but it is good, for it makes our clan continue and remain strong. Never, son, must you move the ancient landmark. Essessien cannot be ObongMfa, for it is only my family that can produce ObongMfa. Mbara wants Essessien to be ObongMfa so that Essessien can declare him king by an oracle (21).

Extensively, it is also established that one of the major reason why women are not attaining higher position in the Nigerian society is that they are never united in the quest for leadership due to jealousy and greed. In the play, MmaSidibe (Women leader) decided to support Essessien, Mbara and Nsansan to fight against Queen Asaari, her fellow woman. MmaSidibe's statement below justifies this statement:

MmaSidibe: We shall listen and listen well. If the last cock crows and the sun disappears from the sky, yet we do not hear akwa Ibid (Town Crier) speaking to us, all the women in our clan will march to this palace. They will come with their youngest children, depriving them of their evening food. Here, in this hall, and around your palace, the children will cry at the top of their voices. The ones that refuses to cry, we shall pinch them (16).

This statement clarifies her earlier request that “queen Asaari should end her tyranny by selecting Essessien as the new ObongMfa (15)”.

Conclusively, the playwright also raised the issue that good leadership for better society does not rely on gender or sex but the willingness to carry out what is best for the people. Queen Asaari's statement below buttresses the above statement:

Asaari: . . . what I want you to understand is that being a good leader has little or nothing to do with sex. It is having the will to carry out what you know is the best for most of the people; and having the courage to do what is just, fair, and even what may befall you.

Conclusion

From the study, it is established beyond doubt that a society's well-being depends on ensuring that all its members feel that they have a stake in it and do not feel excluded from the mainstream. Every individual and all peoples are entitled to participate in, contribute to and enjoy civil, economic, social, cultural and political development in which all human rights and fundamental freedoms can be fully realized. This requires all groups, but particularly the most vulnerable, to have opportunities to improve or maintain their well-being. It is also eminent to deduce that victims of gender-based violence irrespective of religious identity, marginalized women are forced to fend for themselves, and their redemption through equal rights and active participation in the democratic process sounds quixotic.

In a later note, mostly on the aspect of workforce, marginalization can have damaging effects on individuals' **mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing**. Faced with exclusion, marginalized employees (women) often become disengaged with their work and even more isolated. They report feelings of anger, fear, depression, anxiety, sadness, and stress, all centered around something that's out of their control: someone else's blatant prejudice. For country wanting to stay relevant, marginalization is a cancer.

Conclusively, it is rather imperative to state categorically that elimination of poverty, pain, suffering and general backwardness in fronts which includes economic, political, social, and religious and the family can only be achieved only by addressing the disproportionate burden of poverty, and lack of access to education and health services, and lack of productive opportunities borne by women. It then means that gender marginalization represents a huge loss of human potential, with costs for men as well as for women.

Recommendations

Due to the negative effects of gender marginalization to the Nigerian socio-political front, the study recommends the following:

1. For anything good to happen to Nigeria, the women should be given greater opportunity to serve, as they constitute a larger portion of the national population. The women should be seen participating in decision-making processes of this country.
2. In the same vein, local adaptation of international norms as well as a focus on domestic reforms in laws and culture might be a reasonable approach towards women's development.
3. The study posit that cultural laws, norms and values which promotes gender marginalization, should be abolished from the Nigerian society, as that would promote gender equality and national development.

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