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From Tradition to Transformation: Evolving Gender Norms in Contemporary Africa

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Abstract

Purpose: The study aims to explore the evolution of gender norms in contemporary Africa, examining the shift from traditional roles to transformative gender identities and relations.

Materials and Methods: Anchored on Social Constructionist theory, this study employs a qualitative research design to investigate into the nuances of evolving gender norms. Through content analysis of various texts, narratives, and media, the research investigates how gender norms are constructed, challenged, and reshaped within the African context.

Findings: The findings reveal a complex interplay between traditional values and emerging gender perspectives, influenced by factors such as globalization, education, and activism. While progress is evident, persistent gender biases and inequalities highlight the incomplete nature of this transformation. The conclusion underscores

the fluidity of gender norms and the potential for further evolution towards gender equity.

Implications to Theory, Practice and Policy: This study holds significant implications to scholarship, as its outcomes and suggestions aim to refine the social constructivist theory, which underpins the analysis, and to enhance policymaking to promote women's rights in African societies. Additionally, it boosts initiatives that confront enduring patriarchal standards by incorporating gender education into academic curricula, encouraging public conversations about gender equality, and backing grassroots campaigns that push for transformative gender norms. These measures are pivotal in accelerating the progress towards a more inclusive and equitable future for all Africans.

Keywords: *Gender, Norms, Africa, Socio-Economic, Political, Cultural, Transformation*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Tradition acts as a crucial link that connects previous and current generations, representing a collective knowledge and shared principles that are transmitted through customs, rituals, and convictions. It embodies a diverse and interconnected fabric of cultural traditions, where the customs and traditions passed down from ancestors are safeguarded and passed on to future generations, cultivating a feeling of personal and collective identity. The core of tradition lies not only in its age but in its significance and significance within a community, moulding social norms and impacting individual behaviours. Traditionally, it covers a diverse range of elements, such as language, art, ceremonies, and moral values, which collectively shape the distinct identity of a civilization. The parts of tradition are not fixed; they undergo changes over time, adjusting to new conditions but preserving fundamental principles that offer a steady basis despite societal transformations. Therefore, tradition plays a key role in the preservation of culture, providing continuity in a swiftly evolving world. It offers individuals a feeling of belonging and attachment to their cultural background, directing their actions in the present and shaping their future choices. Nevertheless, the interaction between tradition and modernity frequently initiates a lively discussion, as societies navigate the balance between safeguarding valued customs and embracing innovative concepts and technology that have the potential to bring about significant changes. Therefore, tradition continues to be a significant, although intricate, aspect of human communities, mirroring their pasts, principles, and ambitions.

Transformation is a significant and far-reaching shift that affects several aspects of existence, such as individuals, communities, and institutions. This dynamic process represents a deviation from the current state, resulting in significant changes in structure, function, and identity. In the context of societal evolution, transition frequently parallels the process of adjusting to new circumstances, which is propelled by technological progress, cultural changes, and economic breakthroughs. For individuals, it represents the process of personal development and transformation, which is shaped by their experiences, acquisition of knowledge, and self-reflection. In the context of organisations, transformation refers to strategic changes that are made in response to evolving market conditions, advancements in technology, and shifting consumer tastes. These changes are crucial for the organization's existence and ability to compete. Although fundamentally difficult, transition is crucial for advancement, promoting adaptability, creativity, and long-term viability. It symbolises the ability to adjust and rejuvenate, which is crucial for successfully navigating the intricacies of a constantly changing world. While transformation has the capacity to bring about positive change, it can also involve displacement and uncertainty. Therefore, it is necessary to establish strong structures to provide support and facilitate adjustment. Therefore, comprehending the intricacies of change is essential for formulating successful plans and policies that leverage its advantages while minimising possible disadvantages.

Transformation signifies a significant and far-reaching alteration that affects multiple aspects of existence, encompassing individuals, communities, and institutions. This dynamic process represents a deviation from the current state, resulting in significant changes in structure, function, and identity. In the context of societal evolution, transition frequently reflects the process of adjusting to new realities, which is propelled by technology improvements, cultural changes, and economic progress. For individuals, it represents the process of personal development and transformation, which is shaped by experiences, education, and self-reflection. In the context of

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Gender comprises a range of identities, responsibilities, and experiences that go beyond the traditional male and female categories, significantly impacting personal identity and social interactions. It is a complex concept that combines society norms, cultural expectations, and individual self-perception, greatly influencing one's life trajectory, possibilities, and interpersonal connections. Gender, within the context of society, influences the availability of resources, rights, and duties. It plays a crucial role in shaping power relations and hierarchies. Furthermore, the comprehension and articulation of gender are always developing, mirroring wider societal shifts and efforts towards inclusivity and acknowledgment of variety. Gender continues to be a crucial perspective for examining matters of equality, identity, and human rights. It has a significant impact on several areas such as policy-making, healthcare, education, and the workplace.

Gender norms are the unspoken guidelines and anticipated behaviours, roles, and expressions that are determined by perceived gender. These norms are strongly rooted in cultural, social, and institutional structures. These standards have a profound impact on individual experiences, affecting opportunities, interactions, and perceptions in several areas of life. They establish and enforce societal norms pertaining to the qualities and behaviours associated with masculinity and femininity, which significantly influence individuals' decisions, ranging from their professional trajectories to their personal connections, and also have an impact on their ability to obtain rights and access resources. Gender norms, although traditionally seen as fixed and long-lasting, are now being acknowledged as flexible and capable of change, reflecting larger movements for inclusivity and fairness. The questioning and questioning of these established standards are crucial to current discussions on gender identity, equality, and rights, fueling movements that promote a more sophisticated and comprehensive comprehension of gender. Gender norms have a crucial role in creating both individual identities and experiences, as well as larger societal structures and dynamics. This emphasises the significance of critically analysing and changing these constructions in order to promote a fairer society.

Statement of the Problem

The discourse on the evolving gender norms in contemporary Africa highlights critical issues as societies across Africa confront the interplay between deeply rooted traditional practices and emerging transformative forces shaping gender norms. Traditional gender norms in many African societies are characterized by a distinct division of roles and responsibilities that often limit women's participation in public and economic life. Such norms are entrenched in various societal facets, including cultural, religious, and institutional structures, dictating expectations and influencing the status and treatment of individuals based on their gender. While these norms offer

a sense of identity and continuity, they can also perpetuate inequalities and hinder the realization of gender equality. The transformation of these norms is not merely a process of change but a complex renegotiation of cultural values and societal expectations in the face of globalization, economic pressures, and the increasing diffusion of universal human rights ideologies. This evolution is occurring at different rates and with varying degrees of success across the continent, influenced by local contexts and the interplay of multiple factors, including education, economic development, and external influences (Adeyemi & Olajubu, 2020).

The transformation process raises significant concerns regarding the tension between preserving cultural heritage and promoting gender equality. While some view traditional practices as the bedrock of African identity, others see them as impediments to progress and equality. The evolving gender norms reflect a broader shift towards questioning and challenging established gendered power structures, yet this shift is met with resistance from various quarters, including community leaders, religious institutions, and even those who stand to benefit from the change. The dynamics of this transformation are further complicated by economic factors, as gender norms often intersect with economic roles and statuses, influencing women's economic independence and bargaining power within households and communities. Moreover, the pace and nature of gender norm transformation vary widely, not only between countries but also within them, highlighting the need for context-specific approaches in addressing gender-related challenges (Mkandawire-Valhmu & Stevens, 2021). Education emerges as a critical area of focus in the discourse on gender norm transformation in Africa. It is both a tool for and a beneficiary of evolving gender norms, offering avenues for empowerment and challenging traditional gender roles. Enhanced educational opportunities for girls and women can lead to greater economic participation, autonomy, and a redefinition of gender roles within the family and society at large. However, access to education is still not universal, and educational content itself can reinforce or challenge traditional gender stereotypes. The impact of education on gender norms is thus complex and multifaceted, shaped by factors such as curriculum content, teacher attitudes, and broader societal norms and values.

The role of media and technology in transforming gender norms cannot be understated. The proliferation of digital platforms has facilitated the spread of alternative narratives and role models that challenge traditional gender prescriptions. Media representations can either reinforce stereotypical gender roles or provide counter-narratives that promote gender equality and diversity. However, the digital divide and varying levels of media literacy across different demographics in Africa affect the reach and impact of these transformative narratives, highlighting the need for inclusive strategies that leverage media and technology for gender norm transformation. As societies evolve, the intersectionality of gender with other identity markers such as race, ethnicity, class, and age become increasingly salient. Gender norms do not operate in isolation but are intertwined with other social hierarchies and power dynamics, complicating the process of transformation. This intersectionality underscores the necessity for a nuanced understanding of gender norms and their evolution, recognizing the diverse experiences and challenges faced by individuals at different intersections of identity. The penultimate question then arises: what extent do traditional gender norms in African societies retain their influence amidst the forces of modernization, globalization, and internal social reform movements, and how do these dynamic interactions reshape the social, economic, and political landscapes? What are the critical factors shaping gender roles in contemporary Africa, and how do they interplay to mold or modify the

existing frameworks and perceptions of gender identity and equality across the continent? In evaluating the changing gender norms within African societies, how effectively are these shifts enhancing the lives of women, youth, and marginalized communities, and are they truly fostering more equitable, inclusive, and prosperous societies, or are there domains where progress remains elusive? These questions are central to the ongoing discourse on gender norms in Africa, reflecting the complexity and urgency of the issue at hand. This exploration is pivotal in understanding the nuanced landscape of gender norms in Africa, where tradition and transformation intersect, presenting both challenges and opportunities for advancing gender equality. To this end, this study seeks to:

- i. Critically analyze the interplay between traditional gender norms and their evolution in the context of contemporary African societies
- ii. Examine the Factor shaping gender roles in Africa
- iii. Highlight existing cultural norms in each geographical region in Africa that marginalize women in their tradition.
- iv. Evaluate the outcomes of changing gender norms on specific demographic groups within African societies, with a particular focus on women, youth, and marginalized communities.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Tradition

Tradition is a fundamental concept that holds significant meaning in every society, encompassing the principles, customs, and standards that are inherited and transmitted over successive generations. It serves as a guiding light of individuality and consistency, offering a feeling of inclusion and a structure for comprehending the world. The concept of 'tradition' is extensively examined in academic discourse, spanning multiple disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and history. Every academic viewpoint provides a distinct perspective for comprehending the intricacies of tradition, including how it is upheld, questioned, and altered within society.

According to Shils (1981), tradition is a crucial mechanism that allows civilizations to pass on accumulated knowledge, values, and customs from one generation to another. Shils emphasises the importance of tradition in providing a comprehensive understanding of its role. He views tradition not only as a relic of the past, but as a dynamic force that actively involves individuals and communities in the present. This view recognises that traditions are based on historical continuity but may also be interpreted, negotiated, and modified in response to changing circumstances. Shils highlights the twofold function of tradition in ensuring stability and enabling adaptation, indicating that traditions are not fixed artefacts but rather dynamic entities that foster social cohesion and flexibility. They embody the knowledge and experience of previous generations while also being adaptable to current requirements and understandings, making them essential for both personal identity and group existence. Tradition is regarded as an important stabilising force that provides a feeling of belonging and consistency in the face of the rapid changes of contemporary life. It promotes a collective identity that is essential for maintaining social unity and adaptability.

Hobsbawm (1983) presents a critical viewpoint on tradition, questioning its perceived genuineness and uninterrupted existence. He introduces the concept of 'manufactured traditions' to refer to customs that are commonly believed to be ancient but are actually new constructs created for contemporary socio-political objectives. According to Hobsbawm, these traditions are deliberately constructed to inspire a feeling of heritage and continuity, thus legitimising institutions, authority, or group identity. This viewpoint exposes the artificiality of numerous customs, highlighting their function in creating a collective history that may not be factually correct but is used to bring together and energise communities. Tradition, in this sense, is regarded as a potent instrument in the formation of identity and the exertion of authority, with the ability to mould shared recollections and impact societal and political movements. Hobsbawm's theory stimulates a reassessment of the genuineness of tradition and its consequences, promoting a thoughtful involvement with history and a discerning comprehension of the functions that traditions might fulfil in the current context.

Geertz (1973) defines tradition as a complex network of symbolic meanings that influence human behaviour and social interactions. He perceives tradition as a collection of communal symbols and significances that offer a framework for comprehending the world and establishing one's position in it. The symbols and meanings are not just passed down from generation to generation; instead, they are actively interacted with and understood by individuals and communities, therefore playing a vital part in shaping social reality. According to Geertz, tradition serves as a storage of shared memories and a constantly evolving realm of interpretation. It is crucial for preserving cultural continuity and coherence. It provides a structure in which individuals and communities navigate their life, interpreting their experiences and actions in reference to a wider cultural story. Tradition has a crucial role in shaping identity and providing significance, as it is firmly ingrained in the social fabric and serves as a means of passing on cultural information and values. Geertz emphasises the interpretive aspect of tradition, emphasising how it influences and mirrors the intricate interaction between individual actions and group identity.

Williams (1977) offers a new definition of tradition within the field of cultural studies, portraying it as a dynamic and changing process rather than a fixed and unchanging legacy. According to his perspective, tradition is a space where many societal influences and historical circumstances come together to create and maintain cultural standards and customs. Williams argues that tradition undergoes a continuous process of cultural creation, in which many generations and social groups contribute their own viewpoints, experiences, and criticisms, resulting in its perpetual evolution and reformation. The continuous involvement with tradition is essential for cultural vitality and creativity, as it enables the reassessment and modification of cultural customs in response to evolving social circumstances. Tradition is not solely focused on preserving the past, but rather it is a dynamic process that both impacts and is influenced by the cultural dynamics of the present. Tradition plays a crucial role in comprehending cultural continuity and change, providing valuable insights into the evolution of civilizations and the contributions of individuals and groups to the formation of their cultural environment.

Thompson (1992) examines tradition through the lens of media and communication studies, highlighting the significance of communicative behaviours in both transmitting and altering tradition. The author emphasises the significance of many communication mediums, ranging from oral storytelling to digital media, in mediating tradition. These mediums influence the way

traditions are remembered, interpreted, and modified. According to Thompson's analysis, tradition is a form of communication that goes beyond time, linking the past, present, and future via passing on cultural knowledge and practices. This viewpoint highlights the flexible characteristic of tradition, illustrating how it is constantly modified by the methods through which societies exchange information and the platforms they utilise. In the age of worldwide interconnectivity, tradition is not confined or protected but rather participates in a global interchange of concepts and customs, resulting in a more intricate and diverse process of transmission and reception. Tradition is a result of communication and an ongoing process that is crucial for preserving cultural identity and continuity. However, it is also subject to modification and reinterpretation when faced with new communication circumstances.

Tradition, in my understanding, is a dynamic and intricate combination of customs, convictions, and principles that are intricately intertwined throughout history, connecting previous and future generations with the current one. The cultural heritage is not a static collection of traditions, but a dynamic process that societies constantly interpret, negotiate, and adjust to fit their changing circumstances and ambitions. Tradition, although strongly connected to history and cultural memory, is not limited by them. Instead, it acts as a means of communication between different time periods, involving diverse perspectives, interpretations, and influences. This conversation is vital for cultural identity since it fosters a feeling of connection and belonging. Additionally, it plays a significant role in cultural development by enabling creativity and adaptation in response to new problems and insights. Tradition serves as both a stabilizing force and a means of adaptation for communities. It provides a foundation based on their collective legacy, while also allowing them to adapt to changing circumstances. This ensures that the core values and significance are preserved, even if the ways in which they are expressed and manifested vary over time. Tradition represents the complex interplay between maintaining continuity and embracing change. It embodies the shared knowledge and experiences of a group, while also being receptive to reinterpretation and rejuvenation.

Transformation

Transformation, a phrase commonly used in many academic fields, refers to a significant and sometimes drastic change that modifies the fundamental nature or organisation of an object or system. Transformation in the field of social sciences refers to significant changes in social structures, cultural norms, economic systems, or political institutions. It encompasses both the processes and the results of these changes. Scholars from several disciplines, including sociology, political science, economics, and cultural studies, examine this complex subject in diverse ways. They offer nuanced interpretations depending on their disciplinary viewpoints and research interests.

Giddens (1991) defines transformation as a fundamental and all-encompassing process that has a significant impact on the structure of social existence within the framework of modernity. From his point of view, transformation is a complex process that fundamentally changes how individuals and groups see, interact with, and operate in the world. The dynamics of modern society are inherently connected to rapid changes generated by capitalism, industrialization, and urbanisation. These changes need constant adaptation and reassessment of social practices and institutions. Giddens emphasises the significance of reflexivity in this phenomenon, wherein individuals and communities do not simply accept change passively, but actively engage in and influence their

developing realities through critical involvement. This active involvement emphasises change as a dynamic and continuous process, essential for the growth and advancement of societies, allowing them to navigate and adapt to the numerous difficulties and opportunities given by the contemporary world. Within this particular setting, transformation is not merely a response to external influences, but rather a purposeful undertaking of societal introspection and adjustment, emphasising its crucial function in the development of social frameworks and interactions.

In his work published in 1942, Schumpeter explores the concept of economic change by introducing his idea of 'creative destruction,' which he presents as a crucial factor in the advancement of capitalism. Transformation in the economic domain is described as a persistent process of innovation, in which outdated technology, products, and business models are consistently substituted with new ones. The cyclical process of production and destruction drives economic growth and structural change, reflecting the dynamic and always changing nature of capitalism economies. Schumpeter's analysis of transformation emphasises its dual nature, encompassing both destructive and generative aspects. This illustrates how transition promotes adaptation and evolution within the economic domain. Viewed from this perspective, economic transformation is identified as a crucial catalyst for advancement and growth, essential for the strength and long-term viability of economies. Schumpeter's analysis focuses on the importance of innovation and its disruptive impacts. He explains how these forces drive transformation in capitalist systems, providing valuable insights into the processes that lead to ongoing renewal and change in economic landscapes.

Huntington (1991) examines the idea of transformation in the political realm, specifically focusing on democratisation. He perceives political revolution as a sequence of purposeful and substantial alterations that shift societies from authoritarian rule to democratic ones. This process of transformation is intricate and diverse, encompassing profound changes in power dynamics, methods of governance, and the nature of interactions between citizens and the state. Huntington highlights the notion that political transition is dependent on various elements such as strategic decisions, institutional dynamics, and external influences, which play a role in determining its direction and results. Huntington's analysis of democratisation offers a thorough framework for comprehending political transformation. It emphasises the importance of this process in changing society ideals, governance practices, and the entire political environment. Political transformation is seen as a crucial means to improve accountability, involve citizens, and promote democratic governance. This highlights its significance in the wider context of societal development and change.

Hall (1997) analyses the process of cultural transformation, specifically looking at the changes in cultural identities and representations caused by global phenomena such as migration, technological progress, and globalisation. Cultural change, according to his definition, is a dynamic process of negotiation and hybridization. It involves the ongoing reinterpretation and reconfiguration of established cultural forms and meanings in response to various influences and interactions. Hall's viewpoint emphasises the fluid and disputed character of cultural change, illustrating how it involves both persistence and alteration, shaped by power dynamics and opposition. In this research, Hall explains how cultural transition influences and mirrors modern identity formations, cultural practices, and expressive forms. He highlights its crucial function in mediating the intricate interaction between global and local influences, as well as tradition and

innovation. Cultural transition is a crucial aspect of change, necessary for comprehending the changing landscapes of significance and individuality in a more interconnected world.

Castells (1996) explains the changes that occur throughout the information age, highlighting the significant influence of information and communication technologies (ICTs) on society. Technological transformation is described as a significant change in how society is structured, how communication takes place, and how things work, driven by the widespread use and integration of information and communication technologies (ICTs). According to Castells, the revolution is best represented by the rise of networked society, in which the principles of networks fundamentally change how people interact, power is distributed, and organisations are structured. The analysis emphasises the extensive and significant impact of technology on different aspects of life, indicating that comprehending the nature and consequences of technological change is crucial for understanding current societal dynamics. Castells' research illuminates the capacity of technology to bring about significant changes, showing how it alters social circumstances by facilitating novel ways of connecting, interacting, and organising, therefore modifying the structure of contemporary society.

In the domain of political science, transformation denotes a significant and often fundamental change in the structures, processes, and relationships that define a political system. It encompasses shifts in governance, policy orientation, institutional frameworks, and political culture, often driven by internal developments or external influences. Political transformation can result in the alteration of power dynamics, the introduction of new political norms and practices, and the redefinition of citizen-state relationships. Whether through gradual reforms or revolutionary shifts, transformation in political science reflects the evolving nature of political entities and their capacity to adapt to changing circumstances and demands.

Gender Norms

Gender norms constitute a pivotal aspect of sociocultural dynamics, shaping individuals' roles, behaviors, expectations, and opportunities based on their perceived gender. These norms are entrenched patterns of behavior that are deemed acceptable or typical for individuals within a specific gender category, influencing myriad aspects of daily life and interpersonal interactions. While they are culturally specific and can vary significantly across different societies and historical periods, gender norms universally play a crucial role in organizing social life and informing individual identities. Scholarly investigations into gender norms offer diverse perspectives, illuminating how these norms are constructed, maintained, and challenged, and their implications for gender equality and individual agency.

Judith Butler (1990) explores gender norms through the lens of performativity, arguing that gender is not an innate quality but rather an identity repeatedly constituted through performative acts in accordance with societal norms. Butler posits that these norms are inscribed within a heteronormative framework that prescribes distinct and complementary gender roles and behaviors, which individuals enact and re-enact in their daily interactions. This performance is not a matter of individual choice but is compelled by social sanctions and rewards, embedding gender norms deeply within the fabric of everyday life. By examining the performative nature of gender, Butler underscores the constructed and contingent nature of gender norms and highlights the

possibilities for their subversion and reconfiguration, advocating for a more fluid and inclusive understanding of gender identity (Butler, 1990).

Raewyn Connell (1987) introduces the concept of gender order to elucidate the structuring of gender relations within a society. Connell defines gender norms as part of the broader social processes that establish and reproduce the relative positions and relations of men and women. These norms are integral to the gender order, influencing patterns of power, labor division, and emotional relations among genders. Connell's framework situates gender norms within a dynamic and relational field, emphasizing their role in sustaining gender hierarchies and shaping individual experiences and societal structures. By focusing on the interconnectedness of various social domains, Connell provides a comprehensive analysis of how gender norms are embedded within and reinforced by the institutional and material conditions of society (Connell, 1987).

Lorber (1994) views gender norms as the societal expectations and prescriptions that dictate appropriate behavior and roles for individuals based on their gender. Lorber argues that these norms are institutionalized through various social mechanisms, including language, law, and media, which delineate and enforce the boundaries of acceptable gender expression. Through this institutionalization, gender norms become deeply ingrained in social consciousness, shaping identities, opportunities, and power relations. Lorber's analysis emphasizes the performative aspect of gender, suggesting that adherence to gender norms is continuously enacted through social practices, which in turn reinforces these norms. By examining the mechanisms through which gender norms are maintained and challenged, Lorber contributes to the understanding of their resilience and the potential pathways for transformative change (Lorber, 1994).

West and Zimmerman (1987) introduce the concept of "doing gender," which posits that gender is not a fixed attribute but an ongoing social process that individuals engage in through their interactions. According to West and Zimmerman, gender norms are the expectations that guide this process, informing how individuals present themselves and interpret others' behaviors in various contexts. These norms shape everyday interactions and are reinforced through social approval and disapproval, embedding them within the routines of social life. West and Zimmerman's perspective highlights the active production of gender through interaction, underscoring the situational and negotiated character of gender norms and their significance in the constitution of social order and individual identities (West and Zimmerman, 1987).

Ridgeway (2009) focuses on the role of gender norms in structuring social interaction and the perpetuation of gender inequality. Ridgeway posits that gender norms operate as background expectations that inform individuals' perceptions and evaluations of themselves and others, influencing behavior and decision-making in various settings. These norms not only prescribe gender-specific behaviors but also shape the distribution of resources and status, contributing to persistent gender disparities. Ridgeway's work underscores the cognitive and interactional dimensions of gender norms, demonstrating how they are implicated in the reproduction of gendered social structures and the perpetuation of inequality. By elucidating the mechanisms through which gender norms influence social outcomes, Ridgeway provides insights into the challenges and opportunities for achieving gender equality (Ridgeway, 2009).

Within the domain of political science, gender norms refer to the societal expectations and roles that dictate appropriate behavior and opportunities for individuals based on their gender. These

norms influence the distribution of power, participation in political processes, access to resources, and the formulation of policies. They shape the political landscape by defining the roles and expectations for men and women in governance, civic engagement, and policy-making, often resulting in gendered disparities in representation and influence. Understanding gender norms in political science is crucial for analyzing and addressing the root causes of gender inequality in political participation and representation.

Theoretical Underpinning

The paper is anchored on the social constructivist theory. The theory, primarily attributed to the works of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, who, in their seminal 1966 book "The Social Construction of Reality," argue that all knowledge, including our understanding of reality itself, is derived from and maintained by social interactions. This perspective suggests that our perceptions of reality are shaped by the collective agreement and reinforcement of values, norms, and institutions within a society. Social Constructionism posits that many of the categories we consider natural or inherent, such as gender norms, are, in fact, social constructs that have evolved over time and vary across different cultures and historical periods (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

The foundational tenet of Social Constructionist theory is the assertion that reality, as we perceive and experience it, is not an external objective entity but a construct shaped by social interactions and agreements among individuals within a society. This perspective contends that our understanding of the world is not directly derived from its inherent qualities but is mediated through cultural, historical, and linguistic frameworks that imbue it with meaning. Such a standpoint profoundly challenges essentialist views that posit identities, roles, and societal structures as natural or biologically predetermined. Instead, it suggests that these elements are the result of historical and cultural contingencies, negotiated and re-negotiated through social practices. By emphasizing the constructed nature of reality, Social Constructionism provides a lens through which the variability and changeability of societal norms and perceptions can be understood, highlighting how they evolve in response to changing social contexts and interactions.

Within the framework of Social Constructionist theory, knowledge itself is seen not as a mere reflection of an objective reality but as a construct that emerges from social processes and interactions. This perspective implies that what societies come to acknowledge as 'knowledge' is deeply intertwined with power dynamics, social structures, and cultural contexts. As individuals engage with one another, they collectively interpret their experiences and codify these interpretations into 'knowledge' that then guides future actions and perceptions. This process underscores the dynamic and contingent nature of knowledge, revealing how it is shaped by and in turn shapes the social contexts in which it circulates. In this light, knowledge production is understood as an inherently social phenomenon, reflecting the interests, biases, and perspectives of those who participate in its creation and dissemination.

The role of language and communication in maintaining social constructs is another critical aspect of Social Constructionist theory. Through language, individuals and groups articulate their experiences, define their realities, and negotiate their identities, thereby contributing to the construction of shared social worlds. Language is not merely a tool for describing reality but an active force in its creation, imbuing objects, actions, and individuals with meaning and significance. Through communicative practices, social norms and expectations are articulated,

reinforced, or challenged, and collective understandings are established or altered. This emphasis on language highlights the performative aspect of social constructs, suggesting that they are sustained and modified through ongoing discursive processes. Thus, understanding the ways in which language and communication contribute to the construction and perpetuation of social realities is crucial for comprehending the mechanisms through which social norms and structures are maintained and transformed

In applying Social Constructionist theory to the study of evolving gender norms in contemporary Africa, one can examine how historical, cultural, and socio-political contexts have shaped and reshaped the definitions and expectations of gender. The theory provides a lens to understand how gender roles, traditionally perceived as fixed and biologically determined, are actually fluid and subject to change based on social consensus and contextual influences. Moreover, Social Constructionism is pertinent in analyzing how colonial legacies, global influences, and local cultural practices intersect to influence gender norms in Africa. It aids in dissecting how external pressures, such as globalization or international human rights discourses, interplay with indigenous cultures and traditions, contributing to the transformation or reinforcement of gender norms (Connell, 2005).

The relevance of Social Constructionist theory in this context also extends to understanding resistance to change. As gender norms are deeply ingrained and institutionalized through language, education, media, and law, the theory helps elucidate why certain norms persist despite changing economic or political circumstances and how new gender identities and roles are negotiated within this framework (Butler, 1990).

To crown it all, the Social Constructionist theory offers a robust framework for exploring the fluidity and constructed nature of gender norms in Africa, emphasizing the role of social interactions, historical contexts, and cultural practices in shaping gender perceptions and roles. By unpacking the social processes that underlie gender norm construction, researchers can gain insights into the potential pathways and barriers to transformation in gender relations across the continent.

Gaps in Literature

Some existing studies explore into various aspects of gender norms, including violence against women, political representation, the impact of culture on gender roles, changing gender relations, and the archaeology of gender in Sub-Saharan Africa. Alesina, Brioschi, and La Ferrara (2016) explore the determinants of violence against women in Africa, focusing on cultural factors arising from pre-colonial customs. Their findings suggest that ancient socioeconomic conditions have established social norms about gender roles, family structures, and intrafamily violence, which persist even when initial conditions change. This study highlights how women's contemporary economic roles and traditional norms from ancient times are associated with contemporary violence against women in Africa (Alesina, Brioschi, & La Ferrara, 2016). Motsage (2023) examines gendered institutions and their impact on women's political representation in Africa. The study reveals that many political systems in Africa are patriarchal, with traditional leadership structures dominated by men, contributing to the under-representation of African women in politics. This work underscores the importance of challenging formal and informal political institutions to enhance gender equity (Motsage, 2023).

Mayer and Barnard (2015) discuss the interplay between gender and culture in contemporary South Africa, providing insights into the gender transformation in the workforce. Their research emphasizes the persistent gender stereotypes and the changing work identity of women in various sectors, illustrating the ongoing cultural shifts towards gender equity (Mayer & Barnard, 2015). Jumanne (2021) surveys the changing nature of gender relations in Africa, highlighting how new interpretations influenced by liberalism and Western democracies have impacted African traditions. The study suggests a need for Africans to balance external influences with deeply rooted ancestral norms to preserve cultural integrity while promoting gender equality (Jumanne, 2021). Wadley (2018) provides an archaeological perspective on gender in Sub-Saharan Africa, exploring how gender roles and social transformations are reflected through rites of passage, burial practices, and artefact analysis. This study sheds light on the historical complexity of gender norms and their evolution over time.

The research analyzed shed light on notable progress in comprehending the dynamics of gender norms in present-day Africa. Nevertheless, they also highlight a significant deficiency in the existing body of knowledge: the requirement for a detailed examination of the interaction between conventional values and contemporary gender equality initiatives in various African settings. Current research has discussed the overall impact of historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors on gender norms. However, there is a noticeable lack of detailed analysis that combines these aspects to provide a comprehensive understanding of the transformation processes at the state levels in each of the regions in Africa. Therefore, this research gap underscores the necessity for a study that not only delineates the evolution of gender norms but also critically assesses how traditional practices can be harmonized with contemporary gender equality frameworks. Furthermore, there is a compelling need to investigate the variability of these norms across different African societies, recognizing the continent's vast cultural diversity. Such a study would significantly contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms through which gender norms evolve and inform policy-making, aimed at promoting gender equality and empowerment in Africa. This is the rationale that underpins the current study, which aims to examine the interrelation between tradition and transformation in evolving gender norms within the continent.

3.0 MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study is rooted on a qualitative design. Data for the study were sourced from secondary materials, including textbooks, academic journals, newspapers, and international news outlets such as Al Jazeera, CNN, Reuters, and AIT. Additional information was gathered from relevant online content. The collected data underwent content analysis to examine and interpret the evolving landscape of gender norms in Africa, highlighting both traditional influences and transformative advancements. This methodological approach provided a comprehensive overview of the subject, supporting the study's objectives to document and analyze gender norm evolution in the African context.

4.0 FINDINGS

Traditional Gender Norms and their Evolution in the Context of Contemporary African Societies

The complex interaction between traditional gender norms and their transformation in modern African nations provides a diverse range of topics for investigation regarding social, economic, and political aspects of life. The duties, obligations, and expectations of men and women have been historically shaped by traditional gender norms, which are firmly ingrained in the cultural fabric of diverse African countries. However, as these societies adapt to the challenges of the 21st century, these norms are increasingly coming into contact with and being changed by the influences of modernization, globalization, and internal social reform movements. To fully grasp the broader patterns of gender norm change in Africa, it is crucial to know this complex interaction, which reveals how conventional roles are being reinterpreted or abandoned in response to emerging societal paradigms.

Modernization and Gender Norm Evolution: Modernization has served as a transformative force in reshaping gender norms within African societies, a process that is vividly observed in the realms of urbanization, education, and economic development. As cities expand and modernize, they become hubs of opportunity and change, influencing traditional lifestyles and perceptions. Urbanization, for example, offers women unprecedented access to the formal job market, challenging the conventional notion that confines them to domestic roles. A notable instance of this shift can be seen in Rwanda, where urban women increasingly partake in entrepreneurial activities and formal employment sectors, fostering economic independence and altering traditional gender expectations (Abbott, P. & Rwirahira, J., 2017). This participation not only redefines their roles within the family and society but also contributes to broader economic growth and diversification, illustrating the symbiotic relationship between gender norm evolution and urban economic dynamics.

The impact of education on gender norms in Africa underscores a pivotal route through which modernization influences societal transformations. Educational access equips women and girls with the knowledge and skills necessary for active participation in various societal spheres, thereby challenging entrenched gender stereotypes and promoting gender equality. For instance, in Nigeria, increased female educational attainment has been linked to greater economic participation and leadership roles for women, marking a departure from traditional expectations that limited their sphere to domestic responsibilities (Aderinto, A. A., 2014). Education not only empowers women individually but also has ripple effects on societal perceptions, as educated women assume roles that were traditionally reserved for men, thereby fostering a culture that values gender equality and challenges discriminatory norms.

Furthermore, economic shifts driven by modernization catalyze significant changes in gender norms. As African economies diversify and integrate into global markets, new sectors emerge, offering opportunities that challenge traditional gender roles. In sectors such as technology and finance, African women are breaking barriers and setting new precedents. For example, in Kenya, the rise of women in the tech industry, often referred to as the "Silicon Savannah," showcases how modernization fosters environments where women can excel and innovate, challenging the status quo and inspiring a redefinition of gender roles in the workplace (Mutunga, J. M., 2019). This

economic participation empowers women, influences family dynamics, and shifts societal norms, demonstrating how economic modernization is a key driver in the evolution of gender norms in Africa.

Globalization's Impact on Gender Norms: Globalization has emerged as a transformative force in the realm of gender norms within African societies, where the influx of global ideologies and the advent of digital communication have played pivotal roles in reshaping perceptions and behaviors. The Internet and social media have democratized access to information, allowing African individuals, especially the youth, to engage with global gender discourses, thereby challenging traditional perspectives. For example, the influence of global women's movements can be seen in countries like South Africa, where campaigns for gender equality and against gender-based violence resonate with global feminist agendas, fostering a climate of awareness and advocacy (Britton, H. E., 2016). Such exposure has not only empowered women and marginalized genders by providing platforms for expression and organization but has also compelled societies to reconsider and often recalibrate their gender norms, thereby fostering environments that are increasingly receptive to gender equality and diversity.

Yet, globalization's influence on gender norms is not unidirectional; it also encounters and sometimes reinforces existing cultural frameworks and resistance. The challenge arises when global gender norms confront entrenched traditional values, creating tensions that necessitate nuanced navigation to ensure cultural respect while promoting gender equality. In some instances, global economic dynamics, under the banner of globalization, have inadvertently bolstered traditional gender roles. For instance, the global demand for certain agricultural products in Tanzania has reinforced women's roles in agriculture without necessarily challenging the underlying gendered division of labor or empowering women with control over resources or earnings (Deere, C. D., 2014). This exemplifies the complexity of globalization's impact, which can both challenge and reinforce traditional gender norms, underscoring the necessity for context-sensitive approaches that respect cultural nuances while advocating for transformative change.

Moreover, the intersection of globalization and internal advocacy plays a crucial role in shaping gender norms. In countries like Kenya, local gender rights organizations leverage global narratives and support to bolster their advocacy, utilizing international frameworks and partnerships to challenge and reshape national policies and attitudes toward gender equality (Mwaura, P. N., 2018). These interactions illustrate how globalization, through the facilitation of knowledge exchange and solidarity, can amplify local voices and initiatives, driving progressive changes in gender norms. However, the success of these initiatives often hinges on their ability to resonate with local contexts and values, demonstrating that while globalization is a powerful agent of change, its influence on gender norms is most effective when aligned with local dynamics and aspirations.

Internal Social Reform Movements and Gender Evolution: Internal social reform movements in Africa are instrumental in driving the evolution of gender norms, harnessing the collective energy and commitment of various stakeholders to challenge entrenched inequalities and promote gender justice. In nations such as Liberia, the rise of women to political power post-conflict has not only altered the gendered landscape of leadership but also inspired a broader recalibration of societal norms regarding gender roles. The Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace, led by Leymah Gbowee, catalyzed significant political change and highlighted the pivotal role women play in

peacebuilding and governance, subsequently influencing gender perceptions across the continent (Gbowee, 2011). Such movements demonstrate the capacity of organized advocacy and collective action to not only address specific gendered grievances but also to catalyze broader societal transformations, laying the groundwork for a more inclusive and equitable societal structure.

Moreover, the realm of legal reform presents a vital arena where internal social movements have exerted significant influence, with numerous African countries enacting laws to advance gender equality and protect women's rights. In Rwanda, for example, post-genocide legal reforms have significantly enhanced women's representation in government and the workforce, reflecting a broader shift toward gender egalitarianism (Burnet, 2011). These legal advancements, often spearheaded by women's rights organizations and feminist activists, underscore the crucial role of legislation in shaping societal norms and providing a framework for the protection and promotion of gender equality. By institutionalizing gender rights, these reforms not only challenge existing disparities but also set a precedent for the normalization of gender equity in public and private spheres.

Grassroots campaigns and local advocacy are equally pivotal in addressing and reshaping gender norms at the community level. In countries like South Africa, community-based organizations have played a critical role in raising awareness and combatting gender-based violence, reflecting a localized approach to gender norm evolution (Vetten, 2014). These organizations work within communities to educate, mobilize, and empower individuals, thereby fostering a grassroots movement that challenges traditional gender roles and advocates for change. By engaging directly with the community and utilizing culturally relevant methods of communication and action, these movements facilitate a more nuanced and effective transformation of gender norms, ensuring that change is both meaningful and sustainable. Through these concerted efforts, internal social reform movements in Africa are progressively redefining the gender landscape, promoting norms that reflect principles of equality and respect for all individuals.

Factors Shaping Gender's Roles in Africa

The evolution of gender norms in Africa has been the subject of extensive scholarly inquiry, reflecting the complex interplay of historical, cultural, economic, and political factors shaping gender relations on the continent. This research provides a comprehensive review of key literature on the topic, highlighting key themes, trends, and debates.

Historical Context: Historically, gender norms in Africa have been deeply rooted in traditional customs, religious beliefs, and social hierarchies. Scholars such as Ifi Amadiume (1987) and Oyeronke Oyewumi (1997) have explored how colonialism and imperialism further entrenched patriarchal structures, often at the expense of women's rights and agency. The legacy of colonialism continues to influence gender dynamics in post-colonial Africa, with ongoing struggles for autonomy and empowerment (Mama, 2001; Mohanty, 2003).

Economic Dimensions: The economic dimension of gender norms in Africa has been a focal point of research, with scholars examining patterns of labor participation, access to resources, and income disparities. Sen (1990) and Kabeer (2005) have highlighted the importance of economic empowerment in advancing gender equality, arguing that women's access to education, employment, and financial resources is essential for their social and political empowerment. Studies by Duflo (2012) and Okumu (2018) have documented the progress and challenges of

women's economic empowerment initiatives in various African contexts, shedding light on the role of policy interventions, microfinance programs, and entrepreneurship in fostering women's economic independence.

Political Dynamics: Political participation and representation have emerged as critical areas of inquiry within the study of gender norms in Africa. Researchers such as Tripp (2000) and Goetz and Hassim (2003) have explored the factors influencing women's political mobilization, including electoral systems, party politics, and civil society activism. The case of Rwanda has attracted particular attention, with scholars like Tripp (2015) and Mutesa (2019) examining the country's quota system and its impact on women's representation in parliament. Comparative studies by Ibrahim (2019) and Assefa and Klasen (2020) have provided insights into the varying levels of women's political participation across North African countries, highlighting the influence of historical legacies, cultural norms, and state policies on women's rights and citizenship.

Cultural Perspectives: Cultural norms and traditions continue to play a significant role in shaping gender relations in Africa, often intersecting with economic and political factors to perpetuate inequalities. Anthropological studies by Bourdillon (1993) and Mbilinyi (2016) have examined the diverse cultural practices and belief systems that inform gender roles and identities across African societies. These studies emphasize the need for culturally sensitive approaches to gender empowerment initiatives, recognizing the agency and resilience of local communities in challenging oppressive norms and practices (Mohanty, 2006; Nnaemeka, 2006).

Social Dynamics: In addition to economic, political, and cultural dimensions, the evolution of gender norms in Africa is intricately linked to social dynamics and interpersonal relationships. Studies by Smith (2005) and Chege (2014) have explored the role of family structures, kinship networks, and socialization processes in shaping gender identities and behaviors. Social institutions such as family, community, and religion exert significant influence on individuals' attitudes, behaviors, and opportunities. Studies by Amin (1997) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2014) have explored the impact of socialization processes on gender identity formation, highlighting the role of social norms, expectations, and stereotypes in shaping perceptions of masculinity and femininity. Moreover, the intersectionality framework, introduced by Crenshaw (1989), emphasizes the interconnectedness of gender with other social categories such as race, class, and sexuality, highlighting the diverse experiences and vulnerabilities of individuals within African societies. These studies highlight the influence of social norms, peer pressure, and media representations on gender roles and expectations, underscoring the importance of community-based interventions and grassroots activism in challenging harmful stereotypes and promoting gender equality.

Intersectionality: Intersectionality has emerged as a key framework for understanding the intersecting forms of discrimination and disadvantage experienced by marginalized groups, including women in Africa. Scholars such as Crenshaw (1989) and Collins (2000) have emphasized the importance of considering how factors such as race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality intersect with gender to shape individuals' experiences and opportunities. In the African context, intersectional approaches have shed light on the unique challenges faced by women from diverse backgrounds, including rural women, indigenous women, and LGBTQ+ individuals, and the need for inclusive policies and programs that address their intersecting needs and identities (Nzegwu, 2002; McFadden, 2018). Emphasis on the importance of taking an intersectional approach to

gender analysis, particularly in diverse and heterogeneous contexts like Africa. This framework recognizes that gender inequality is not experienced uniformly and calls attention to the intersecting systems of power and privilege that shape individuals' lived experiences.

Colonial Legacies and Globalization: The legacy of colonialism continues to shape gender norms in Africa, with scholars exploring the ways in which colonial policies and practices have influenced gender relations and power dynamics on the continent. Post-colonial scholars such as Nnaemeka (1998) and Oyewumi (2002) have highlighted the impact of colonial discourses on constructions of gender, sexuality, and race, and the ongoing struggles for decolonization and self-determination. Moreover, the forces of globalization have introduced new dynamics into African societies, including changing notions of femininity and masculinity, the spread of Western consumer culture, and the rise of transnational feminist movements (Mohanty, 2003; Cornwall et al., 2007). Scholars like Mama (2005) and Rai and Waylen (2013) have examined the implications of these global trends for gender equality and social justice in Africa, calling for critical engagement with both local and global forces shaping gender norms and practices.

Legal and Policy Frameworks: Legal and policy frameworks play a crucial role in shaping gender norms and promoting gender equality in Africa. International instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action provide important guidelines for state action on gender equality. Scholars like Chinkin (1994) and Charlesworth (1995) have analyzed the impact of international law on advancing women's rights in Africa, highlighting the role of regional mechanisms such as the African Union's Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol) in promoting gender equality and addressing gender-based violence.

Highlight Existing Cultural Norms in Each Geographical Region in Africa That Marginalize Women in Their Tradition

Southern Africa Region: The Case of South Africa and Lesotho: South Africa and Lesotho exhibit a rich tapestry of traditions and norms that, while often central to communal identity and cohesion, can also perpetuate gender inequalities and restrict women's roles in society. By dissecting these norms within each geographical region, one can uncover the nuanced ways in which cultural practices influence women's lives and status in these two African nations. Southern Africa, a region distinguished by its rich cultural diversity and significant historical transitions, continues to navigate the complexities of tradition and modernity. Countries like South Africa and Lesotho, while distinct in their historical trajectories and cultural compositions, share common challenges regarding gender norms and the marginalization of women. In both nations, deeply ingrained cultural practices and societal expectations often delineate women's roles in ways that limit their rights, opportunities, and participation in various spheres of life. Examining these norms provides critical insights into the persistent barriers to gender equality and the efforts needed to address them in Southern Africa.

South Africa: Cultural Norms and Women's Status

In South Africa, despite being one of the continent's most progressive countries in terms of constitutional rights, the reality on the ground for many women, particularly those in rural areas, remains starkly different. Practices like ukuthwala, though traditionally a consensual and ceremonial form of courtship, have been increasingly reported in a distorted form, involving the

abduction and forced marriage of girls and young women. This distortion of tradition not only violates the rights of these women but also places them in vulnerable positions where their education and personal development are abruptly halted. The manipulation of such customs underlines a broader issue where traditional practices are skewed to serve patriarchal interests, often at the expense of women's rights and dignity. For instance, in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal provinces, where ukuthwala is more prevalent, the practice has sparked national outrage and calls for stringent enforcement of laws protecting women and girls (Jewkes et al., 2015).

Moreover, the intersectionality of race and gender in South Africa adds layers of complexity to the issues faced by women. The historical context of apartheid, with its enduring socioeconomic stratifications, continues to affect the opportunities available to black women disproportionately. In the workforce, they often occupy the lower rungs of employment, facing wage disparities and limited prospects for advancement. Such economic marginalization is compounded by persistent gender-based violence, a scourge that reflects entrenched societal norms regarding masculinity and femininity. These norms not only tolerate but in some instances, perpetuate violence against women, framing it as an assertion of male dominance or a misguided form of conflict resolution. The normalization of such violence in certain communities underscores the critical need for continued advocacy, education, and legal reform to challenge and change the cultural narratives that devalue and endanger women in South Africa (Gouws, 2017).

Lesotho: Cultural Traditions and Women's Dynamics

In Lesotho, a nation where traditional values and practices continue to shape the fabric of society profoundly, women often find themselves navigating a complex landscape of cultural norms and expectations that define their roles within both the family and the community. The patriarchal structure of Basotho society inherently places women in positions where their rights, particularly regarding property and inheritance, are compromised. Women's access to land, a critical resource in Lesotho's predominantly agrarian economy, is often contingent upon their relationships with male family members, effectively limiting their economic autonomy and reinforcing their dependency status. For instance, despite legislative attempts to ensure equitable land rights, in practice, women, particularly in rural areas, may find themselves disenfranchised, unable to claim or inherit land due to prevailing customary practices that favor male heirs. This systemic marginalization not only affects their economic well-being but also diminishes their status and decision-making power within the community, perpetuating a cycle of dependency and vulnerability (Murray, 2014).

Moreover, the cultural institution of levirate marriage in Lesotho further exemplifies the challenges faced by Basotho women in asserting their autonomy and rights. This practice, where a widow is expected to marry one of her deceased husband's relatives, underscores the extent to which women's lives are dictated by patriarchal norms and traditions. Such practices, deeply rooted in concerns over lineage preservation and family support, often disregard the widow's consent and well-being, placing her in a position where her rights and desires are secondary to familial and societal expectations. Despite legal frameworks aimed at protecting women's rights, the reality for many Basotho women is a daily negotiation of their roles and rights within a context that frequently prioritizes tradition over individual autonomy. The challenge, therefore, lies in implementing and enforcing legal protections in a manner that effectively addresses the entrenched cultural norms

and practices that continue to marginalize women in Lesotho, ensuring that reforms translate into tangible improvements in their lives (Makoa & Setšabi, 2018).

To crown it all, both South Africa and Lesotho face significant challenges in transforming cultural norms that marginalize women. While legal frameworks in both countries aim to promote gender equality, the persistence of traditional practices and societal attitudes underscores the need for comprehensive approaches that address cultural, economic, and legal dimensions of gender inequality. Engaging community leaders, educating the public about women's rights, and empowering women economically and politically are crucial steps toward achieving gender equality in Southern Africa.

In Central African Region

Also known as Middle Africa, a region recognized for its extensive biodiversity and rich cultural heritage, encompasses a group of countries with diverse traditions, languages, and historical backgrounds. Among these nations, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon stand out for their unique cultural landscapes and economic structures, notably influenced by their colonial pasts and resource-rich environments. Despite advancements in education and political frameworks, both countries exhibit persistent cultural norms that marginalize women, reflecting broader patterns of gender inequality prevalent across the region. The exploration of these norms within Equatorial Guinea and Gabon offers insights into the challenges and complexities of promoting gender equality in Middle Africa.

Equatorial Guinea: Cultural Norms and Women's Roles

In Equatorial Guinea, the intersection of cultural traditions and the roles assigned to women has a profound impact on their societal status and individual autonomy. The societal fabric of this nation is woven with expectations that delegate to women the primary responsibility for domestic chores and child-rearing, often at the expense of their educational and professional aspirations. Such cultural norms not only delineate the scope of women's participation in the broader economic and political domains but also influence their self-perception and societal valuation. For example, despite the country's economic growth, the labor force participation rate for Equatoguinean women remains significantly lower than for men, reflecting the persistent barriers women face in achieving economic independence. The practices of polygamy and bride price, prevalent in various communities, further complicate this scenario by embedding women's economic reliance on men, thereby curtailing their freedom and negotiation power within marriages (Field Listing: Labor Force Participation Rate, 2020).

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Moreover, the legal and customary frameworks governing inheritance and property rights in Equatorial Guinea often place women at a disadvantage, perpetuating their economic marginalization. While statutory laws may advocate for gender equality, customary practices prevalent in rural and some urban areas continue to prioritize male heirs, sidelining women from accessing critical economic resources such as land and property. This disenfranchisement is not merely a matter of economic inequality but also reflects a deeper societal undervaluation of women's rights and contributions. Instances where women are excluded from inheriting family assets are not uncommon, reflecting a broader pattern of gender discrimination that affects various aspects of their lives, from education and employment to participation in decision-making processes. Such systemic gender biases necessitate robust interventions that challenge the cultural and legal norms underpinning women's marginalization, advocating for a more inclusive approach that recognizes and upholds women's rights as fundamental human rights (Women, Business and the Law 2020).

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Gabon: Traditional Practices and Gender Dynamics

In Gabon, despite the nation's wealth from oil reserves, the interplay between wealth and cultural norms creates a unique context for gender relations. While educational and employment advancements have been significant for Gabonese women, they still face substantial societal expectations that confine them predominantly to roles within the domestic sphere. Cultural practices such as levirate and sororate marriages are symptomatic of deeper patriarchal norms that define women's value and roles in relational terms to men. For example, a widow compelled to marry her late husband's relative under levirate practices may find her autonomy and rights severely curtailed, her status and welfare tied to her compliance with these traditions. These practices, deeply embedded in some Gabonese communities, highlight the tension between traditional norms and the principles of individual rights and gender equality. They reflect a broader cultural paradigm wherein women are often viewed and valued in terms of their relationships to men, undermining their autonomy and marginalizing them from the broader economic and political arenas of Gabonese society (Women in Africa, 2021).

Furthermore, the arena of political and economic participation in Gabon reveals additional layers of gender-based disparities. Despite legal frameworks aimed at ensuring women's representation and rights, cultural perceptions of leadership as a male prerogative significantly hinder women's visibility and influence in these sectors. For instance, despite women's substantial engagement in the workforce, their presence in leadership roles within major corporations or government bodies remains limited, a disparity that mirrors broader societal views on gender and authority. In rural areas, these challenges are compounded by limited access to essential resources like credit and land, which are critical for economic independence and empowerment. Such disparities not only limit women's economic opportunities but also reinforce their dependency on male relatives or spouses, perpetuating a cycle of economic disenfranchisement and marginalization. This context underscores the need for targeted interventions that address both the cultural and structural barriers to women's full participation and equality in Gabon, ensuring that progress in legal and policy realms translates into tangible improvements in women's everyday lives (Gender Inequality Index, 2020).

In West African Region

In many West African societies, patriarchal norms are deeply entrenched, relegating women to subordinate roles within the family and community. Practices such as early and forced marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), and widowhood rites reinforce the subjugation of women and restrict their autonomy and agency. Traditional beliefs in some West African cultures also attribute supernatural powers to men, further reinforcing gender hierarchies and justifying discrimination against women.

Nigeria: Cultural Norms and Gender Marginalization

In Nigeria, a country characterized by its ethnic diversity, with over 250 ethnic groups including Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba, cultural norms significantly impact women's roles and statuses across various regions. The northern regions, predominantly Muslim, adhere to religious and cultural practices that enforce strict gender roles, often confining women to subordinate positions. For instance, the concept of *Purdah* restricts women's mobility, limiting their access to education and employment opportunities (Usman, 2015). Additionally, practices such as early marriage and preference for male children further exacerbate women's marginalization, depriving them of autonomy and educational prospects (National Population Commission [Nigeria], 2013). Despite Nigeria's constitutional commitment to gender equality, these entrenched norms continue to impede women's empowerment, particularly in rural areas where traditional beliefs are most pervasive.

In contrast, the southern regions of Nigeria, though more urbanized and influenced by Western education, still harbor cultural practices that marginalize women. In some ethnic groups, widowhood practices subject women to degrading and harmful rites, reflecting deep-seated patriarchal values (Ntoimo & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2014). Similarly, property inheritance laws and practices often favor males, undermining women's economic rights and independence. Even in urban centers, where women enjoy better access to education and employment, societal expectations and family pressures can still limit their career advancement and participation in

public life, reflecting the complex interplay of modernity and tradition in shaping gender norms across Nigeria.

Senegal: Cultural Traditions and Women's Status

Moving to Senegal, a country where Islam is the predominant religion, women's experiences and roles are profoundly shaped by both Islamic and local cultural norms. In the northern regions, particularly within rural communities, women face significant constraints due to traditional practices such as forced and early marriages, which are often justified by misinterpretations of religious texts (Diop, 2014). Female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), although declining, still persists in certain areas, reflecting enduring patriarchal norms that seek to control women's bodies and sexuality (UNICEF, 2016). These practices, coupled with limited access to education and healthcare, underscore the multifaceted barriers to gender equality in Senegal.

In southern Senegal, particularly in the Casamance region, matrilineal systems offer women relatively higher status and influence within their families and communities. However, even in these matrilineal contexts, women's participation in formal political and economic spheres remains limited (Faye, 2015). Moreover, the region's ongoing conflict has disproportionately affected women, exposing them to violence and disrupting their livelihoods, further highlighting the intersection of gender, culture, and conflict. Despite these challenges, Senegalese women have been at the forefront of peace-building and community activism, demonstrating resilience and agency in the face of marginalization. Across both Nigeria and Senegal, women's experiences are deeply influenced by the interplay of cultural norms, religious beliefs, and socio-economic factors. While both countries have made strides in promoting gender equality through legal reforms and policy initiatives, the persistence of traditional norms continues to pose significant challenges. Addressing these issues requires a nuanced understanding of the cultural and regional contexts that shape gender relations, as well as concerted efforts to empower women and transform discriminatory norms.

In East Africa

The East African region, known for its vibrant cultures, diverse populations, and dynamic economies, also presents a complex tapestry of gender norms that vary significantly across its countries. Among these nations, Rwanda and Zimbabwe stand out for their unique cultural landscapes and historical trajectories, which have shaped distinct gender roles and relations within their societies. While both countries have made notable strides in promoting gender equality, especially in legislative reforms and political representation, traditional norms and practices continue to exert a significant influence, often marginalizing women and limiting their opportunities and rights.

Rwanda: Cultural Norms and Women's Roles

In Rwanda, a country acclaimed for its high representation of women in parliament and other leadership positions, traditional norms still delineate distinct roles for men and women, influenced by both historical and contemporary factors. Before the 1994 genocide, Rwandan society was predominantly patriarchal, with customary laws favoring men in aspects of inheritance and decision-making. Although the post-genocide era has seen substantial progress in women's rights and empowerment, certain traditional practices persist that marginalize women, particularly at the

community and family levels (Burnet, 2011). For instance, despite legal reforms, property rights and land ownership often favor men, reflecting enduring patriarchal values. Moreover, societal expectations around femininity and domesticity continue to constrain women's autonomy and economic participation, with women primarily viewed as caregivers and homemakers, even as they engage in agricultural labor and other economic activities (Powley, 2006).

In addition to these economic and domestic roles, cultural norms around gender and sexuality in Rwanda also impose restrictions on women's bodies and choices, with expectations of modesty and chastity reinforcing gender hierarchies and limiting women's agency in public and private spheres. Despite Rwanda's global recognition for gender equality in governance, these cultural norms underline the complexity of achieving substantive gender equality that permeates all levels of society (Berry, 2015).

Zimbabwe: Cultural Traditions and Women's Status

In Zimbabwe, the tradition of lobola, or bride price, remains a deeply entrenched cultural practice that, while intended to honor and respect the bride's family, can also have implications that marginalize women. This custom, which involves the transfer of wealth from the groom's family to the bride's, is often interpreted as a transaction that commodifies women, potentially affecting their perceived value and agency within the marriage. For instance, the economic pressures associated with lobola can lead to early marriages or discourage the dissolution of unhappy or abusive relationships, as families may be reluctant to forego the economic benefits or return the lobola (Gaidzanwa, 1998). Moreover, the emphasis on lobola can reinforce patriarchal structures within families, where women's economic dependence on men is perpetuated, thereby impacting women's autonomy and decision-making power within both the family and the community at large.

Furthermore, the impact of customary laws in Zimbabwe extends beyond marital relationships, significantly affecting women's rights and statuses in matters of inheritance and property. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, customary practices often favor male heirs, leaving women, especially widows, vulnerable to property grabbing by relatives of the deceased husband. This practice not only deprives women of economic security but also undermines their social status and independence (Dzimiri, 2013). In rural areas, where these traditions are most pronounced, the intersection of gender, culture, and poverty can exacerbate women's marginalization, limiting their access to resources and opportunities for empowerment. For instance, women in rural Zimbabwe face considerable barriers in accessing education and healthcare, further entrenching gender disparities. The limited educational opportunities for girls, driven by cultural norms that prioritize boys' education or necessitate girls' contribution to household labor, perpetuate cycles of disempowerment and inequality, affecting generations of women.

Northern Africa

The North African region, encompassing countries along the Mediterranean coast and the Sahara, is marked by its unique blend of Arab, African, and Mediterranean influences. This region is characterized by rich historical legacies, diverse cultures, and significant linguistic and religious homogeneity, primarily shaped by Islam and Arab culture. Despite modernization and various degrees of secular governance, traditional norms, particularly those pertaining to gender roles, remain deeply embedded in the societal fabric, often influencing legal frameworks and everyday practices. Women in North African countries like Egypt and Algeria face distinct cultural and

systemic challenges that affect their status and rights, reflecting a complex interplay of tradition, religion, and modernity.

Egypt: Cultural Norms and Women's Status

In Egypt, a nation with a profound historical legacy and a pivotal role in the Arab world, women have been at the forefront of social and political changes yet continue to grapple with entrenched patriarchal norms. One significant aspect of Egyptian culture that impacts women is the emphasis on their roles within the family, often prioritizing domestic responsibilities and motherhood over personal or professional aspirations. This cultural ideal is reinforced through various channels, including media portrayals, educational content, and religious discourse, which collectively shape societal expectations and limitations on women's roles (Rizzo, Abdel-Latif, & Meyer, 2007). Furthermore, practices like female genital mutilation (FGM), despite being legally banned, persist in some communities, reflecting deep-rooted beliefs about purity, modesty, and marital prospects (El-Gibaly, Aziz, & Casterline, 2019). The interplay between legal reforms and cultural resistance underscores the ongoing struggle for gender equality in Egypt, where advancements in women's rights often encounter obstacles from traditionalist perspectives entrenched within the society.

In the public sphere, Egyptian women face additional hurdles, such as gender-based discrimination in the workforce and underrepresentation in political leadership. Although there has been progress, such as increased female participation in the labor market and legislative bodies, systemic barriers and societal scrutiny continue to limit women's full participation and advancement. The legal system, too, reflects certain biases, with laws and judicial practices that sometimes uphold discriminatory norms under the guise of protecting family values or social cohesion, thus complicating the pursuit of gender justice and equality (USAID, 2019).

Algeria: Cultural Traditions and Women's Status

Transitioning to Algeria, a country known for its rich cultural heritage and complex social dynamics, women encounter a similar amalgam of traditional and modern influences. Algerian society, deeply rooted in Islamic traditions and Arab cultural norms, assigns women specific roles and expectations, often centered around the family and domestic spheres. Despite constitutional protections and legal strides toward gender equality, societal norms and local customs in many communities continue to prescribe subordinate roles for women, impacting their autonomy and rights (Cheref, 2015). For instance, the family code, despite reforms, still contains provisions that place women under the tutelage of male guardians, affecting their legal capacity and independence (Amara, 2019).

In both urban and rural settings, Algerian women's experiences are shaped by these cultural and legal frameworks, influencing their educational opportunities, career paths, and social status. While urbanization and education have enabled greater visibility and participation for women in various sectors, traditional expectations persist, often framing women's achievements within the context of their familial and reproductive roles. Additionally, economic disparities and regional variations affect women's empowerment differently across Algeria, with rural women facing more pronounced challenges in accessing education, healthcare, and economic resources (Lazreg, 2009). Thus, while Egypt and Algeria have made significant legal and institutional efforts to promote gender equality, prevailing cultural norms continue to marginalize women, underscoring the need for a holistic approach that addresses both legal frameworks and societal attitudes. Engaging

community leaders, reforming educational curricula, and enhancing women's economic opportunities are crucial steps toward dismantling the deeply entrenched gender norms that persist in these North African societies.

Impact of Changing Gender Norms on Specific Demographic Groups within African Societies

The evolving gender norms within African societies present a multifaceted narrative of progress, resistance, and transformation. As these norms shift, their impacts resonate across various demographic groups, with significant implications for women, youth, and marginalized communities. The overarching question is whether these changes are steering societies towards greater equity, inclusivity, and prosperity. While there are undoubted advancements towards gender equality, challenges persist, and in some instances, new issues emerge as unintended consequences of these transformations. This paper also investigated into the effects of changing gender norms, assessing their real-world impacts and discerning the extent to which they are fostering tangible improvements in the lives of people across these specific groups in Africa.

Impact on Women: The evolving gender norms in African societies have heralded significant shifts in the roles and expectations of women, particularly in the realms of political and economic engagement. Rwanda, for instance, stands out as a beacon of gender parity in governance, with women constituting a substantial proportion of its parliamentary representation. This achievement not only challenges the traditional patriarchal structures but also sets a precedent for women's empowerment across the continent (Burnet, 2011). Such political empowerment is instrumental in shaping policies and legal frameworks that support gender equality across various sectors. However, the transition from traditional to more egalitarian gender norms is not without its challenges. As women ascend to roles traditionally dominated by men, they often continue to bear the brunt of household responsibilities, reflecting a lag in societal adjustments to new gender paradigms. This dual burden underscores the necessity for comprehensive policy reforms that address gender equity both in public and private spheres, ensuring that women's advancement in one area does not entail disproportionate responsibilities or pressures in another.

Economic empowerment represents another critical dimension of changing gender norms for women in Africa. Increased participation in the workforce and entrepreneurial ventures affords women financial independence and a more pronounced voice in decision-making processes, both within their families and communities. For example, in Nigeria, women's growing involvement in sectors such as finance and technology has not only elevated their economic status but also challenged the traditional gendered expectations of their roles in society (Aderinto, 2014). However, the transition is fraught with complexities. As women navigate their burgeoning professional roles, they often encounter entrenched biases and institutional barriers that impede full equality. Moreover, the pressure to balance career aspirations with traditional domestic responsibilities can lead to role strain, highlighting the need for supportive infrastructures, such as accessible childcare and equitable workplace policies, to mitigate these challenges and facilitate true gender norm transformation.

Despite these advancements and challenges, the impact of changing gender norms extends beyond individual women, influencing broader societal dynamics. In communities across Africa, women's empowerment has catalyzed shifts in perceptions of gender roles, contributing to more equitable

and inclusive societies. However, these changes are not uniform or universally embraced, often varying by region, culture, and socioeconomic status. For instance, in more conservative communities, rapid changes in gender norms may meet resistance, underscoring the importance of contextualized and sensitive approaches to gender advocacy (Mama, 2015). Additionally, as women gain visibility and influence in public domains, there is potential for backlash or increased gender-based violence, necessitating vigilant protection mechanisms and continued advocacy for women's rights. Ultimately, the journey toward gender norm evolution in Africa is ongoing, requiring sustained effort, dialogue, and collaboration to ensure that progress empowers all women, regardless of their background or status.

Impact on Youth: The youth demographic in Africa, encompassing a diverse and vibrant segment of the population, stands at the forefront of interpreting and enacting shifts in gender norms. With access to global media and educational content, young Africans are increasingly aligning with progressive gender perspectives that challenge traditional views. Educational institutions, in particular, play a pivotal role in this transformation, offering curricula that promote gender equality and encourage critical thinking about societal roles. In Ghana, for instance, educational reforms have integrated gender studies within school curricula, aiming to instill egalitarian values from a young age (Adom, 2016). This educational approach not only equips young individuals with a nuanced understanding of gender issues but also prepares them to be advocates for gender equality in their future personal and professional lives. However, the effectiveness of these educational initiatives can be contingent upon the broader societal acceptance and reinforcement of the principles taught, highlighting the interplay between educational systems and prevailing societal norms.

The influence of digital media on youth perceptions of gender is another critical factor in the evolution of gender norms. The internet and social media platforms provide unprecedented access to a plethora of viewpoints and narratives, allowing young Africans to engage with global gender discourses. This exposure can foster a more inclusive and critical perspective on gender roles, as seen in Kenya, where digital platforms have facilitated youth-led campaigns against gender-based violence and for sexual and reproductive rights (Okigbo, 2018). However, the digital divide remains a significant barrier, with disparities in access to technology affecting the degree to which young individuals can participate in these global conversations. Moreover, while the internet can be a space for progressive discourse, it can also perpetuate harmful stereotypes and misinformation, underscoring the need for critical engagement with digital content and digital literacy education.

Despite these advances, the translation of changing gender norms into tangible societal changes remains complex, particularly for the youth navigating these shifts. The receptivity to new gender norms among young Africans can sometimes be at odds with the expectations and traditions of older generations, leading to intergenerational tensions. In countries like Nigeria, where substantial cultural and regional diversity exists, young people advocating for gender equality often face resistance from more conservative segments of society (Adeyemo, 2019). These tensions can manifest in various domains, from family dynamics to employment opportunities, illustrating the multifaceted challenges young people encounter as they embody and promote evolving gender norms. Addressing these challenges necessitates a holistic approach that considers the economic,

social, and cultural dimensions of gender norm transformation, ensuring that the youth are not only recipients of change but active contributors to a more gender-equitable future.

Impact on Marginalized Communities: The evolution of gender norms within African societies holds varied implications for marginalized communities, where the intersections of gender with ethnicity, socio-economic status, and geographic location deeply influence the outcomes of such shifts. In many rural or impoverished areas, for example, traditional gender roles are often more deeply entrenched, and the dissemination of progressive gender norms facilitated by urbanization and technology may be slow to penetrate. However, when these norms do reach such communities, they can instigate significant changes. For instance, in rural Ethiopian communities, the introduction of gender-sensitive agricultural policies has empowered women farmers, providing them with access to resources and decision-making platforms traditionally dominated by men (Yirga, 2017). While these policies represent progress, they also highlight the need for targeted approaches that recognize and address the specific barriers faced by marginalized women, ensuring that the benefits of gender norm evolution are equitably distributed.

Moreover, the impact of changing gender norms on marginalized communities is not solely determined by external forces; internal dynamics within these communities also play a crucial role. For example, within some indigenous communities, there has been a resurgence of traditional matriarchal structures as a form of resistance to patriarchal impositions, offering unique models of gender equity that are rooted in cultural heritage (Kazeem, 2018). These internal shifts demonstrate the agency of marginalized communities in defining their own paths toward gender equality. However, they also underscore the complexity of gender norm evolution, which can be both influenced by and reactive to broader societal changes. For marginalized communities, the challenge lies in balancing the preservation of cultural identity with the adoption of beneficial gender norms, ensuring that their evolution reflects an authentic and self-determined process.

The broader implications of changing gender norms for marginalized communities in Africa extend beyond individual empowerment to influence social cohesion and collective identity. As these communities navigate the shifts in gender norms, they can experience both convergence and divergence within their internal dynamics and in their interactions with wider society. For instance, the empowerment of women within marginalized communities can challenge traditional power structures and catalyze social change, yet it can also provoke backlash or conflict if not accompanied by broader societal support (Meinck, 2019). As such, the evolution of gender norms within these communities must be approached with a nuanced understanding of the socio-cultural context, prioritizing dialogue and inclusivity to foster environments where all members can thrive. Through this, the transformation in gender norms can contribute to a more just and equitable society, where the rights and potentials of individuals in marginalized communities are fully recognized and realized.

The evolving gender norms in African societies are creating new landscapes of opportunity and challenge. While there is clear progress toward more equitable gender relations, the journey is complex and multifaceted, with varying impacts across different demographic groups. As Africa continues to navigate these changes, ongoing assessment and responsive strategies will be crucial to ensure that the evolution of gender norms genuinely enhances the well-being and potential of all its people.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The exploration of traditional gender norms and their evolution within contemporary African societies reveals a complex interplay influenced by various drivers such as modernization, globalization, and internal social reform movements. These forces collectively shape the landscape of gender roles, marking a significant transition from entrenched traditional norms to more fluid and equitable gender constructs. Modernization, through urbanization and economic development, introduces new opportunities and challenges that necessitate a reevaluation of gender roles, particularly as women increasingly participate in public and economic spheres. Globalization brings international gender discourses into local contexts, offering alternative perspectives and fostering dialogues that challenge parochial views. Internal social reform movements, fueled by local activists and NGOs, play a pivotal role in advocating for gender equality, pushing for legal reforms and societal acknowledgment of gender-based issues. These transformations, while progressive, are not uniform across the continent, reflecting Africa's diversity in culture, economic status, and political landscapes. The interplay of these factors illustrates a dynamic process of negotiation and adaptation, where traditional norms are continuously redefined in the face of changing societal paradigms.

Evaluating the outcomes of these shifting gender norms on specific demographic groups—women, youth, and marginalized communities—highlights a trajectory towards more inclusive and equitable societies, albeit with varying degrees of success and challenges. Women are at the forefront, experiencing both the benefits of increased agency and the burdens of navigating new expectations. Youth, as future custodians of societal values, embody a critical juncture in this transformation, often exhibiting more egalitarian views shaped by education and global connectivity. However, the pace of change is uneven, influenced by access to resources and prevailing cultural attitudes. Marginalized communities face unique challenges, where the intersectionality of gender with other forms of identity can either amplify or mitigate the impacts of changing norms. Despite these complexities, the general trend points towards gradual progress, with increasing recognition of gender equality as a pivotal component of societal development. Yet, vigilance is necessary to identify and address areas where progress is insufficient or where unintended consequences emerge, ensuring that the evolution of gender norms contributes substantively to the well-being and prosperity of all individuals within African societies.

Recommendations

Based on the above, the following recommendations were stated:

- i. To foster the positive evolution of gender norms in African societies, it is imperative to enhance educational initiatives that focus on gender equality, integrating these teachings from early schooling through to higher education. Education should emphasize critical thinking about gender roles and promote inclusivity, preparing future generations to champion gender equity actively.
- ii. Strengthening support for internal social reform movements is crucial. Governments and international partners should provide resources and platforms to amplify the voices of activists and NGOs advocating for gender equality. By legitimizing and empowering these

movements, societies can accelerate the transformation of gender norms and ensure that legislative changes translate into tangible societal benefits.

- iii. Addressing the unique challenges faced by marginalized communities requires targeted interventions that consider intersectionality. Policymakers should implement programs that specifically address the barriers to gender equality within these groups, ensuring that initiatives are culturally sensitive and community-driven. By acknowledging and addressing the specific needs of marginalized populations, gender norm evolution can be more inclusive and impactful, contributing to broader societal progress.
- iv. Addressing the specific regional practices that marginalize women is crucial. A targeted approach recognizing the unique cultural contexts of each region is essential. For instance, legislative reforms coupled with community education programs could be effective in challenging and eventually eradicating harmful practices like FGM in East Africa. Such measures should be culturally sensitive and involve local stakeholders, ensuring that efforts to promote gender equality resonate meaningfully within each community.

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