Patriarchal Stereotypes and Feminine Resistance in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*

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Abstract
This study examines the intricate interplay between patriarchal stereotypes and feminine resistance as portrayed in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*. By analysing the experiences of the protagonist, Efuru, the research delves into the oppressive mechanisms of patriarchal society and the strategies employed by this woman to challenge and subvert such constraints. Drawing on the feminist theory, the study illuminates how this novel serves as potent critique of gender inequality, exploring themes of motherhood, marriage, and economic independence. Through a close reading of the texts, the research aims to uncover the complexities of women's lives within patriarchal structures and to appreciate the resilience and agency displayed by the characters in their pursuit of personal fulfillment and autonomy. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the historical and cultural contexts that shape women's experiences, emphasising the importance of recognising and challenging patriarchal norms.
Keywords: Patriarchy Society, Patriarchal Stereotypes, Feminine Resistance, Nwapa's Efuru

Introduction
Efuru (1966), a novel written by a renowned Nigerian female writer, Flora Nwapa, engages the experience of an Igbo woman in the post-colonial Nigeria society that was dominated by men. The novel has been a strong channel for exploring themes of gender and societal expectations and has been used to question and challenge the patriarchal norms in Nigerian society. Through the novel, patriarchy is shown to be a social system that perpetuates traditional gender beliefs such that female characters are perceived to be emotional, overly dependent and highly sexualised; while their male counterparts are seen as stoic, stolid and not letting their emotions rule them (Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi, 143). The novel also depicts that this power structure prioritises men and masculinity while subordinating women and femininity. It is argued in the novel that within patriarchal societies, gender roles and characteristics are firmly established and usually served to uphold and fortify existing power inequalities. And that patriarchy is a social system

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where men have unlimited considerations to power, social status, and privileges. The reverse in the case for the female gender is discrimination and victimisation as she has no power over her own life. The stereotypes against her are deeply ingrained assumptions or beliefs about gender roles that reinforce male dominance and female subordination, which can manifest in various forms, such as assumptions about male superiority, female weakness, or rigid gender roles.

One example of a patriarchal stereotype in the novel is the idea that men are naturally more rational, capable, and assertive than women. This stereotype is often used to justify the under-representation of women in positions of power, leadership, and authority (Johnson Cheadle, 215). Another that is also evident in the novel is the idea that women are naturally suited for roles in the domestic sphere, such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for children. This stereotype can limit women's opportunities for education, employment, and financial independence just as it is portrayed. This can contribute to their economic and social subordination. Patriarchal stereotypes also manifest in the form of assumption in the novel about women's sexuality and morality (Ogochukwu Alozie, 39). For example, the stereotype that women are naturally "pure" or "chaste" can contribute to the stigmatisation and shaming of women who do not conform to this ideal. Similarly, the idea that women's primary value is their physical attractiveness is also evident in the novel, which can contribute to their objectification and sexualisation in the media and popular culture. Again, the stereotype against women is subservient. The patriarchal society portrayed in Nigerian women's novels often portrays women as passive and submissive.

This article aims to reveal the stereotypes against women in Nwapa's *Efuru* and to show how women in the novel were able to resist them. The article is significant because it tries to understand the power dynamics that govern gender relations in Nigerian society. It examines how patriarchal stereotypes are constructed to accentuate marriage, motherhood and domestic duties and challenges the idea that women are submissive and inferior to men. The article affirms that women could be strong, independent, and successful using the pioneer feminist novel *Efuru* written by Flora Nwapa. The novel tackles patriarchal stereotypes head-on by showcasing the limitations placed on Igbo women within a society dominated by men. The novel, through its protagonist, Efuru, navigates a rigid patriarchal world where men hold the positions of power, acting as village heads, priests, and decision-makers within the family. This is a society where women are only expected to marry, bear children, and support their husbands at the detriment of their own personal growth and financial development. Efuru's struggles to defy these norms highlight the limitations placed on women in the society. Her entrepreneurial spirit and desire to control her destiny clash with societal expectations, creating tension and conflict.

Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and the politics of its production
Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* was published in 1966 as the 26th publication in Heinemann's African Writers Series. It is the first Nigerian novel published both locally and internationally and the stepping stone in Nigerian literature and the Nigerian Feminist movement. Ayodele Oyeyemi describes the novel, using Rose Acholonu words, as "pathfinders" and a novel that was able to break the seals of silence and invisibility on the female protagonist by the early traditional male writers (38). The impact of the novel *Efuru* extends beyond the characters themselves. Nwapa's portrayal of female resistance

in the novel resonated with women readers across Nigeria by offering a powerful counter-narrative to dominant patriarchal structures (Nwachukwu, S. C, 113). The novel sparked conversations about gender roles and inequalities within Nigerian societies. It is crucial to recognise that the novel *Efuru* is not a universal story. This is evident in Efuru's privilege as a wealthy trader whose level of agency is not accessible to all women. The experiences of those less fortunate likely differed significantly (Adelani Adeeko, 42). Additionally, the novel's focus on Igbo culture limits its generalisability to other Nigerian contexts with varying social structures. Despite these limitations, the novel *Efuru* remains a significant contribution to Nigerian literature and feminist discourse. It provides a historical lens into female resistance within a particular cultural context, while also offering a timeless message about the fight for gender equality. The novel's enduring legacy lies in its ability to inspire critical discussions about gender roles and empower readers to challenge societal norms in their contexts. The critical reception of *Efuru* as a novel also adds another layer to the discussion of resistance. While praised for its portrayal of female agency, some scholars critique the novel for its limitations (Iheoma Ahuchaogu, 167; Ogochukwu Alozie, 39; T Ezeigbo, 490). Critics like Sandra Nwosu argue that Efuru's success relies on her exceptional character and failure to represent the broader struggles of Igbo women (183). Efuru's reliance on the oracle, a male-dominated institution, can also be seen as reinforcing patriarchal structures (183). Another scholar like Ifunanya N Ugochukwu viewed Efuru's strategic maneuvering within the system as a form of agency (50). She highlights the complexities of navigating a patriarchal society. The novel's open-endedness allows for these different interpretations, sparking debates about the nature of resistance and the possibility of achieving gender equality within a cultural context (Ifunanya N Ugochukwu, 50). Efuru's enduring value lies in its ability to provoke these conversations. By portraying female characters who resist patriarchal norms in various ways, the novel offers a starting point for discussions on gender roles, tradition, and the fight for equality. It is a testament to Nwapa's skill that the novel, *Efuru,* continues to resonate decades after its publication by prompting critical reflections on gender dynamics and inspiring readers to question societal limitations.

The ongoing conversation surrounding Efuru extends beyond academic circles. The novel's portrayal of female resistance has inspired creative re-imaginings in various artistic mediums. One of which is that Nigerian playwrights are now adapting *Efuru* for the stage to allow audiences to experience Efuru's journey more viscerally. Visual artists have also drawn inspiration from the novel, with Nigerian painters creating a series of works that depict Efuru's strength and resilience. These re-imaginings highlight the novel's enduring themes and its ability to connect with diverse audiences. Efuru's story transcends the limitations of time and place, offering a powerful message about female agency that continues to resonate with artists and audiences alike. The story about Efuru inspired many other feminists' writings in Nigeria and Africa, that the protagonists of the novels produced by many Nigerian and African feminists are modelled towards the protagonist of Efuru. As these creative interpretations emerge, Efuru's legacy as a catalyst for discussions on gender roles and societal transformation is further solidified. It is important to acknowledge that the conversation around Efuru and its portrayal of resistance is not without its complexities. While the novel empowers some readers, others might find Efuru's success an unrealistic portrayal, particularly for women facing starker social and economic limitations. The focus on individual female agency within the novel can overshadow the importance of collective action in dismantling patriarchal

structures (Nkiru Nzegwu, 166). While some argue that Efuru's success is exceptional and does not reflect broader struggles, others see her agency as a powerful message. The critical reception adds another layer, highlighting the debate between celebrating individual triumphs and advocating for collective action.

Feminine Resistance in Nwapa's Efuru
As the pioneer feminist Nigerian novel, Nwapa's *Efuru* serves as a powerful critique of the stereotypes against women and paved the way for discussions on female empowerment within the Nigerian cultural context. The patriarchal structure of the novel permeates every aspect of Efuru's life and shaped her opportunities by dictating her place in the Nigerian society. While Efuru challenges the status quo, the novel doesn't shy away from portraying the consequences of all she faces. Her decision to leave her first marriage due to infertility goes against the grain and humiliates her family (88). Men in the village gossip and mock her ambition, while even other women view her with suspicion (139). Efuru's success as a trader, however, disrupts the patriarchal order. Her wealth and independence threaten the traditional power dynamic, causing friction with male authority figures (162). Her success as a trader, while demonstrating independence, reinforces the idea that a woman's value can be tied to material gain. Men, like Adizua, acknowledge her prowess but see it as a tool for their own advancement (20). This subtly reinforces the notion that a woman's achievements ultimately serve the patriarchal order. Nwapa's portrayal isn't one-dimensional; Efuru relies on the support of some men, like the empathetic doctor and friend Adishiemea (96). The overall societal structure remains firmly patriarchal, constantly testing Efuru's resilience and forcing her to navigate a world tilted against her gender. The weight of patriarchy in Efuru extends beyond individual experiences. The cultural norms and beliefs reinforce the male-dominated system. For instance, a woman's value is often tied to her ability to bear children, as seen in Efuru's struggle with infertility and societal judgment. Even Efuru's father, who initially encourages her independence, prioritises her marriage and potential motherhood (Nwapa, 150). This ingrained mindset limits women's agency and reduces them to vessels for procreation in the society, and when conceiving isn't forthcoming, a heap of blame is transferred to the woman. This can be seen as displayed by characters such as Omirima who goes as far as accusing Efuru of adultery in the text (163). Also, there is Ossai, who tries persuading Efuru to wait patiently for Adizua as she waited for her husband till death to return to her (61). This shows that women can also be advocates in grooming patriarchy as well as men due to their past orientations.

Furthermore, the spiritual realm in the novel *Efuru* reflects the earthly hierarchy (148). Although Efuru seeks guidance from female deities, the ultimate power resides with the male chi (personal god) (Nneoma Nwoke, 63). This reinforces the notion that men hold dominion over both the physical and spiritual worlds. Efuru's journey becomes a testament to the resilience required to navigate a society where traditions and beliefs constantly push her towards conformity within a patriarchal framework. Efuru's inability to secure a place within her village due to her childlessness reflects the limitations placed on women who don't conform to societal expectations. It's important to acknowledge that Efuru's story doesn't paint a completely bleak picture. The patriarchal system in Igbo society, while deeply ingrained, offers some wiggle room for women to carve out their own spaces. Efuru's success as a trader demonstrates that women can achieve a degree of economic independence which becomes a source of

power within the system. Additionally, the strong network of female traders, the Alawives, provides Efuru with a sense of community and support. These women, bound by shared experiences and ambitions, challenge the notion of female isolation within a patriarchal structure. However, Efuru's struggles serve as a constant reminder of the limitations. Her inability to find lasting marital happiness due to her childlessness underscores the societal pressure on women to fulfill specific roles (163). Ultimately, Efuru's story in the novel *Efuru* highlights the complexities of navigating a patriarchal world. While she pushes boundaries and achieves a measure of success, the weight of tradition and societal expectations remains a constant force in her life. The novel *Efuru* shatters stereotypes about Nigerian women through its powerful protagonist. This is because Efuru defies the trope of the submissive and domestic woman. She is a shrewd businesswoman (Nzegwu, 2000) and this is evident in her success in trading goods despite societal expectations for women to focus solely on childbearing. Efuru even challenges the stereotype of female passivity by choosing her husbands, going against her father's wishes in the case of her first marriage (8).

However, Efuru's inability to bear children carries the weight of societal judgment. She undergoes a painful and dangerous female circumcision in hopes of reversing her barrenness by adhering to a traditional belief (13). This act reflects the complex reality of how even strong women can be constrained by cultural norms. Efuru ultimately transcends the limitations placed upon her by undergoing a journey of self-discovery, which leads her to embrace a spiritual calling and to challenge the stereotype of women needing to define themselves solely through motherhood (Nkiru Nzegwu, 65). Efuru's story paves the way for a nuanced understanding of Nigerian womanhood. One that celebrates independence, resilience, and the ability to forge one's own path. Her character also sheds light on economic stereotypes. Through her character, Nwapa challenges the notion of Nigerian women solely belonging to the domestic sphere by portraying Efuru as an astute trader who amasses wealth and social status through her own merit (Nkiru Nzegwu, 65). Efuru disrupts the stereotype of the dependent woman by defying expectations and taking control of her financial destiny. Nwapa's portrayal of Efuru's spirituality further dismantles stereotypes of women not being allowed to engage with the spiritual. Efuru's unwavering faith in *Chi*, the Igbo high god, stands in contrast to the portrayal of Nigerian religions as primitive or solely focused on appeasing ancestors (Rosemary E Ogolo, 46). Efuru seeks spiritual guidance through visions and consultations with diviners hereby demonstrating the sophistication and depth of Igbo religious practices.

Efuru's experiences also expose the limitations women faced within traditional religious structures. Despite her piety and devotion, she cannot become a priestess, a role reserved for men. This highlights the patriarchal nature of some aspects of Igbo religion. Efuru carves out her spiritual path. Her journey of self-discovery through faith challenges the stereotype of women being excluded from the spiritual realm. The protagonist's story demonstrates how women can find strength and meaning within their religious traditions, even while advocating for change (170). Efuru's unwavering faith continues to resonate with readers today, particularly those interested in the intersection of gender and religion in Nigerian societies. Efuru's character also compels a reconsideration of stereotypes surrounding marriage. Through the novel, Nwapa challenges the idea of marriage as solely about procreation by depicting Efuru's fulfilling unions despite her childlessness. Efuru's marriages provide companionship, emotional

support, and even contribute to her economic success, and showcase the multifaceted nature of marital bonds.

In the novel, Nwapa doesn't shy away from portraying the patriarchal constraints within marriage. This is evident in Efuru's control not being limited by societal expectations. She endures the social stigma of barrenness and the cultural pressure to have children, ultimately leading to the painful female circumcision (Nneoma Nwoke, 73). Additionally, her husband holds some degree of authority, as seen in her second husband's disapproval of her initial refusal to move to his village (Ifunanya N Ugochukwu, 49). Efuru ultimately redefines marriage on her terms. She walks away from unfulfilling unions and prioritises her own well-being and spiritual calling (Joy Ngozi Ohiare, 119). Efuru's journey dismantles the stereotype of women being trapped in loveless marriages. Her story celebrates the possibility of finding happiness and fulfillment outside of traditional marital expectations by paving the way for a more nuanced understanding of love and partnership within the Nigerian contexts (Filomina Chioma Steady, 8). Efuru's influence extends beyond dismantling stereotypes within the novel itself. Through her, Nwapa challenges perceptions of Nigerian women in literature more broadly. Efuru stands as a counterpoint to the trope of the "helpless native woman" often found in colonial literature. Her agency, intelligence, and resilience serve as a powerful correction to these one-dimensional portrayals.

However, it's important to acknowledge that Efuru's story is not universally applicable. Her experiences are specific to the Igbo culture and social context of the time. Generalising about the lives of all Nigerian women based on Efuru's narrative would be a mistake. Efuru's enduring significance lies in its contribution to a richer and more multifaceted understanding of Nigerian womanhood. Nwapa's work dismantles stereotypes while celebrating the complexities, strengths, and undeniable agency of Nigerian women. Efuru's story paves the way for a new generation of Nigerian literature that portrays women in all their fullness, challenging readers to move beyond limiting assumptions. Her character dismantles stereotypes across various aspects of her life. Nwapa challenges the image of the submissive, domestic woman by portraying Efuru as a shrewd businesswoman and a woman who chooses her path in love and marriage. While Efuru grapples with societal pressures and limitations, particularly regarding childlessness and religious participation, she ultimately carves out her own space for success and fulfillment. Furthermore, Efuru's unwavering faith in her traditional religion disrupts stereotypes surrounding Nigerian spirituality.

Efuru's enduring legacy lies in her role as a literary pioneer. Nwapa's work serves as a powerful counterpoint to stereotypical portrayals of Nigerian women in colonial literature. It continues to inspire readers to challenge assumptions and celebrate the multifaceted realities of women's lives across the continent. It is important to acknowledge that some might argue that Efuru's story reinforces certain stereotypes as well. Her singular focus on material success and her childlessness could be interpreted as aligning with Western ideals of individualism and careerism, potentially downplaying the importance of family and community in some Nigerian cultures (Iheoma Ahuchaogu, 165). Additionally, Efuru's ability to navigate the male-dominated world might be seen as an exception rather than the norm, offering an unrealistic portrayal of most women's experiences (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1988). These critiques can be countered by recognising the complexity of Efuru's character and the historical context. This story offers a valuable starting point for a broader conversation about the diverse experiences of Nigerian

women by challenging readers to move beyond simplistic stereotypes and celebrate the multifaceted realities of their lives. These stereotypes about women hold them back in numerous ways. From limiting career opportunities to impacting mental health, these negative portrayals can have a significant and lasting effect. They extend beyond the cultural parlance to the professional realm. Stereotypes about women being overly emotional or incapable of logical thinking can undermine their credibility in various settings. In their personal lives, women may face pressure to prioritise family and domestic duties over their ambitions. This stereotype can lead to an unequal division of housework and childcare by creating burdens that limit women's time and energy for other pursuits.

It is noteworthy that Efuru presents a nuanced portrayal of resistance. Efuru, the protagonist, carves her path as a palm wine trader, a profession traditionally reserved for men. This economic independence grants her agency and challenges the male dominance over wealth creation (Ogochukwu Alozie, 39). Efuru's success disrupts the patriarchal order, highlighting the power women hold when wielding financial power. Efuru defies societal expectations by choosing multiple husbands based on compatibility rather than societal pressure. This challenges the patriarchal control over female sexuality and marriage (Sandra Nwosu, 183). Efuru's marital choices prioritise her desires over societal norms. It demonstrates agency in a realm typically dictated by men. Efuru utilises her wit and cunning to negotiate favorable trade deals and navigate male-dominated spaces. A notable instance is her manipulation of Chief Nebuchi and exploiting his weakness for palm wine to secure safe passage (Nwachukwu S.C, 114). Efuru's strategic maneuvering demonstrates that women can find success by playing the system, even if it means subverting patriarchal expectations of female behaviour. Efuru, despite defying some norms, honours aspects of Igbo tradition. She consults the oracle, a role traditionally held by men, to gain guidance in her trade (Nkiru Nzegwu, 167). This selective adherence to tradition allows Efuru to maintain a foothold within the social structure while carving her own space. By combining economic independence, defiance of marital norms, strategic manipulation, and selective adherence to tradition, the characters in Efuru demonstrate various forms of resistance against a patriarchal society. Their actions pave the way for discussions on gender roles and societal expectations in a male-dominated world.

It is important to acknowledge the complexities within these acts of resistance. Efuru's economic success, while empowering, can be seen as reinforcing patriarchal structures. Her wealth allows her to acquire multiple husbands, potentially perpetuating the objectification of women within marriage (Nze, 2003). Similarly, her manipulation of men, while strategic, could be interpreted as upholding the notion that women must use cunning to navigate a male-dominated world (Cheadle, 2000). The characters do not overthrow the patriarchal system entirely, but they do chip away at its edges. Their actions demonstrate the various ways women can push back against societal limitations, even within a complex cultural context. This challenges readers to consider the multifaceted nature of female agency and the ongoing struggle for gender equality.

The novel's enduring impact extends beyond literature, inspiring artistic re-imaginings and sparking conversations about gender roles and societal change. The limitations of Efuru's story and the question of collective action remain crucial points for discussion. The novel's ability to provoke discussion and inspire creative responses solidifies its place as a groundbreaking work that continues to resonate with readers and

artists alike. The evolving landscape of technology and digital spaces offers exciting possibilities for reimagining Efuru's resistance narrative. Imagine an interactive graphic novel where readers can choose Efuru's paths, exploring the consequences of defying or conforming to societal expectations. Virtual reality experiences could immerse audiences in Efuru's world by allowing them to experience the challenges and triumphs of her journey firsthand. Efforts to make the story more relatable could risk homogenising Efuru's specific cultural context. It's important to strike a balance between accessibility and preserving the richness of Nwapa's original work. One final aspect to consider in the ongoing discussion of Efuru and its portrayal of resistance is the role of the environmental context. While the novel focuses primarily on Efuru's social struggles within a patriarchal society, the Igbo relationship with the natural world also plays a significant part in the story. Efuru's success as a palm wine trader relies heavily on her knowledge and respect for the palm trees and the environment they thrive in. This focus on ecological balance can be seen as a form of resistance against a purely exploitative approach to resources. Efuru's understanding of the interconnectedness of nature and human well-being could be interpreted as a subtle critique of patriarchal dominance, which often prioritizes short-term gain over long-term sustainability.

Conclusion

Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* offers a rich and multifaceted exploration of female resistance against patriarchy. The novel portrays Efuru and other characters navigating a complex social structure, defying expectations through economic independence, challenging marriage norms, and strategically manipulating the system. Efuru's impact extends beyond literature, inspiring artistic re-imaginings and sparking conversations about gender roles and societal change. The novel's limitations and the question of collective action remain crucial points for discussion. Future interpretations might explore technology's role in reimagining the narrative and fostering solidarity among women. Additionally, examining the environmental context and Efuru's respect for nature could offer insights into the connection between social justice and ecological well-being. Ultimately, Efuru's enduring value lies in its ability to provoke critical reflection and inspire action. As new interpretations emerge, this groundbreaking work will likely continue to be a catalyst for discussions on how women can dismantle patriarchal structures and work towards a more just and sustainable future. The damage caused by stereotypes is not just felt by individual women but the community at large. Societal expectations based on gender roles can also limit the potential of men. For instance, men who express emotions or choose traditionally feminine careers might be seen as less masculine (Filomina Chioma Steady, 23). Ultimately, dismantling stereotypes about women empowers not just them, but also men to pursue their goals and live fulfilling lives, free from restrictive gender norms. There's also a concerning ripple effect of these stereotypes on how girls are raised and develop their sense of self. Studies show that exposure to gender stereotypes from a young age can limit girls' interests and aspirations (Ohiare, Joy Ngozi, 119). When bombarded with messages about what girls "should" be like, they may shy away from activities or subjects deemed masculine, even if they hold genuine interest. This can hinder their achievements, and restrict their career options later in life (Nkiru Okoye, 63). Furthermore, the pressure to conform to narrow beauty standards can breed insecurity and body image issues, impacting girls' mental and emotional well-being (Nneoma Nwoke, 75).

Therefore, challenging stereotypes about women is not just about creating equal opportunities in the present, but also about fostering a future where girls can embrace their full potential and pursue their dreams without limitations. It is important to acknowledge that progress is being made. More women are entering leadership roles and social movements are challenging traditional gender norms (Sandra Nwosu, 184). Dismantling these stereotypes requires a multi-faceted approach. Educational systems can play a crucial role by promoting gender equality and exposing children to diverse role models in all fields. Media representation also matters greatly. By showcasing women in a variety of roles and celebrating their accomplishments, we can challenge narrow portrayals and inspire future generations. Dismantling stereotypes requires ongoing effort from individuals, institutions, and society as a whole. By fostering a culture that values and celebrates women's talents and contributions, we can create a world where women can thrive without limitations. It is worth noting that the fight against gender stereotypes is not without its challenges. Some people fear that dismantling these norms threatens traditional values or family structures. However, research suggests that gender equality strengthens families and communities as a whole (Rosemary E Ogolo, 8). Stereotypes can be so ingrained that we may not even recognise our own biases. Unconscious bias training and promoting open conversations about gender roles are crucial steps towards creating a more equitable society. Challenging gender stereotypes is not about erasing differences between men and women. It is about creating a world where everyone, regardless of gender, has the freedom to pursue their goals and reach their full potential. This benefits not just women, but all of society. By fostering a culture of inclusion and opportunity, we can unlock the talents and perspectives of everyone, leading to a more prosperous and fulfilling future for all. Gender stereotypes cast a long shadow over women's lives, impacting everything from career choices and mental health to child-rearing expectations and societal limitations. These harmful ideas restrict not only women's potential but also men's ability to fully express themselves. However, there is hope. By fostering educational equality, promoting diverse media portrayals, and challenging unconscious biases, we can dismantle these stereotypes and create a world that celebrates everyone's unique talents and contributions. This fight for gender equality isn't just about creating fairness in the present, it is about unlocking a brighter future where everyone has the freedom to thrive.

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