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### Female perception of power as discussed in *in the chest of a woman*

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#### Abstract

The study attempts to investigate the language of feminism and its impact on society using Efo Kodjo Mawugbe's work *in the chest of a woman*. The main concern is to identify the issues behind the endless conflicts between genders in social life, racism, and men/women oppression. Furthermore, the study is concerned with the voices of women who keep demanding for their social rights. The plot analysis, descriptive and analytical methods are used to examine the data. The researcher tries to answer the main questions that the study concerns with as to get suitable results through

standing on the themes and characterization of Efo Kodjo Mawugbe work. The findings have revealed a group of results that play great roles in destroying the traditional-communities. The study further reaches to the reasons that drive women to empower themselves in order to have their rights. The study has recommended that life must be governed with law and justice to control each person. Again, there is an interesting way to transfer ethics and the concealed feelings of human being.

**Keywords:** Female, Gender, Power, Justice

#### 1. Introduction

According to Uzor (2016), Feminism is the belief that men and women should have equal rights, and opportunities. She added that we live in a world where the genders are far from equal which serves to harm both men and women alike, and she believes that feminism is a positive movement that continues to bring beneficial social change to society by which some people are not convinced that it is true.

Recognizing that women are concentrated in the lowest level and are sometimes treated as the second class, feminism begins with premise that women and men's position in society is the result of social factors and natural ones.

Actually, the feminism existence was forced by the oppression caused by the patriarchy system, a system that places men as the ones who rule women in every aspect of their life.

Patriarchy the rule of fathers is the basic cause of woman oppression (Murphy, 1995) [8]. Male

Women in Africa especially in Ghana still face discrimination and inequality in the society.

"Though gender equality is a principle of Ghana's constitution, societal progress has been slow" (Kwasi Gyamfi Asiedu). In modern Ghana, many feminists use social media platforms as means to criticise the male dominated society. Example is the Facebook page "Our Collective Vagina (OCV)" created by Maame Akua Awereba. Feminism needs to be completely accepted in our various communities. "Embracing feminism is the only route to achieving gender equality, and empowers men and women to live freer and more complete lives" (Alannah Marsden).

African men make African women believe that they, the men, are more assertive and powerful, and the women are just weak and meek. They make women see themselves as inferior to them, and therefore have no say or view in the activities of the society. The women are made to understand that they should just be submissive or docile to the men. The main objective of the study is to examine the language of feminism and its impact on society. The specific objectives will be to: Analyze the female perception of power as discussed in *In the Chest of a Woman*.

#### 2. Literature review

##### The Concept of Feminism

Feminism is a movement aimed at defining, establishing, and defending equal political, economic, and social rights and equal opportunities for women. Its concepts overlap with those of women's rights. Feminism is mainly focuses on women's issues

but because it seeks gender equality, some feminists argue that men's liberation is therefore a necessary part of feminism, and that men are also harmed by sexism and gender roles.

### Gender

Burton (2001) explains that gender roles refer to the set of social and behavioral norms that are considered to be socially appropriate for individuals of a specific sex in the context of a specific culture, which differ widely between cultures and over time. There are differences of opinion as to whether observed gender differences in behavior and personality characteristics are, at least in part, due to cultural or social factors, and therefore, the product of socialization experiences, or to what extent gender differences are due to biological and physiological differences.

### A Critical look at Radical Feminism among others

Radical feminism had its start in small, leaderless, women-only consciousness-raising groups, where the topics of intense discussion came out of women's daily lives -- housework, serving men's emotional and sexual needs, menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause.

From these discussions came a theory of gender inequality that went beyond discrimination, to oppression, and a gender politics of resistance to the dominant gender order. Radical feminism's theoretical watchword is *patriarchy*, or men's pervasive oppression and exploitation of women, which can be found wherever women and men are in contact with each other, in private as well as in public. Radical feminism argues that patriarchy is very hard to eradicate because its root -- the belief that women are different and inferior -- is deeply embedded in most men's consciousness. It can best be resisted, radical feminists argued, by creating non-hierarchical, supportive, woman-only spaces where women can think and act and create free of constant sexist put-downs, sexual harassment, and the threat of rape and violence. Radical feminism turns male-dominated culture on its head. It takes all the characteristics that are valued in male-dominated societies -- objectivity, distance, control, coolness, aggressiveness, and competitiveness -- and blames them for wars, poverty, rape, battering, child abuse, and incest. It praises what women do -- feed and nurture, cooperate and reciprocate, and attend to bodies, minds, and psyches. The important values, radical feminism argues, are intimacy, persuasion, warmth, caring, and sharing -- the characteristics that women develop in their hands on, everyday experiences with their own and their children's bodies and with the work of daily living.

### Black Feminism

School of thought which argues that sexism, class oppression, gender identity and racism are inextricably bound together. The way these concepts relate to each other is called intersectionality. The term *intersectionality theory* was first coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. In her work, Crenshaw discussed Black feminism, which argues that the experience of being a black woman cannot be understood in terms of being black or of being a woman. Each concept is considered independently, but must include the interactions, which frequently reinforce each other. The Combahee River Collective argued in 1974 that the liberation of black women entails freedom for all people, since it would require the end of racism, sexism, and class

oppression.

### 3. Methods

#### Biography of Efo Kodjo Mawugbe

Efo Kodjo Mawugbe lived between the ages of 1954 and 2011. He was born to Michael Ayivi and Madam Comfort Tulasi who were both workers of Kwame Nkrumah University of

Science and Technology's African Hall. Mawugbe though did not come from a wealthy home strived his way through the education ladder with successes. Mawugbe had his primary and middle school education at Weweso Local Authority School; and later attended Mawuli School where he obtained his General Certificate of Education, (GCE), Ordinary and Advanced levels. He continued his formal education at the University of Ghana where he studied Theatre Arts and majored in Playwriting from 1975 to 1978. Mawugbe made strenuous effort to push his vision of becoming one of the greatest playwrights far such that he was well known in Ghana and the world at large.

#### Plot Summary of the Play

Once in the Kingdom of Ebusa, an ambitious Princess, Nana Yaa Kyeretwie sets out to prove to the men of the Kingdom that women are equally capable when it comes to courage and leadership skills. She is therefore greatly disappointed when her mother the Queen Mother of the Kingdom bequeaths the Kingdom to her younger brother Kwaku Duah. This decision baffles Nana Yaa and she protests vehemently. The Queen Mother and the elders could not withstand the dissent of Nana Yaa who is ready to kill somebody on the durbar grounds. The

Queen Mother decrees to resolve the objection, that, any of the two thus Nana Yaa and

Kwaku Duah who first bears a son, should have that son to rule as King after Kwaku Duah.

Even though Nana Yaa and her brother both gave birth to females, Nana Yaa, who is desperate to have the throne in her lineage takes steps to disguise her daughter as a boy in order that she would succeed Kwaku Duah and rule as King. When Owusu, Nana Yaa's daughter is sent to the palace to be trained in the art of kingship, the King wheedles Ekyaa his daughter to seduce her cousin Owusu so that when she ascends the throne she would become

'his' wife, the Queen. Ekyaa's efforts to make her cousin love her proves futile. Ekyaa gets pregnant out of wedlock, an offence punishable by death. Ekyaa holds the entire durbar spellbound when she names Owusu as the man responsible. Owusu's crime is punishable by the severing of his genitals. Nana Yaa collapses and later dies of shock when Owusu is to be executed. It is discovered at the point of execution that Owusu is a girl who could not have made Ekyaa pregnant. Owusu must still die for a forbidden act of sitting on the judgment stool as a woman. Women could only sit on it if they are properly sworn in as Queen; a rite which Owusu did not go through. Ekyaa subsequently names Akwesi Amoako the son of Nana Oppong as the father of her unborn child. Nana Oppong is also condemned in line with Owusu's decree to die alongside Ekyaa and Owusu. The king becomes a victim of the customs which nearly results in the loss of an heir to the throne, his daughter and the unborn grandchild. The King attempts to relinquish himself making the Elders and people of the kingdom ready to change, by setting the customs aside to

pardon the condemned persons.

### **Analysis of gender as portrayed in Mawugbe's in the Chest of a Woman**

There have been questions and counter-questions about why Mawugbe chooses to present issues in his play the way he did. While some students argue that he could not deal with the subject of gender accurately, others think there are too many biases and inconsistencies in the play. As a playwright, I am sure he definitely has a goal for his work. He, however, creates characters which he gifts with certain qualities and attributes to aid them carry out his objectives. Two main objectives can be traced from the interview: the dramatist's desire to change unprofitable customs and traditions, and to project women in society. The action of the play begins by presenting two very important characters; Nana Yaa Kyeretwe the queen mother of Kyeremfaso; and her daughter Owusu Agyeman who she disguises a boy. Nana Yaa as presented in the play is an intelligent, bold, ambitious, courageous, daring and very confident personality. She confronts every issue with the self-assurance that she would win. Mawugbe portrays Nana Yaa as a woman who has a fighting spirit. This she showcases in the flashback of the play when her mother insisted, that Kweku Duah her kid brother be King. She categorically establishes her resentments about this daylight robbery which the elders and her mother try to operate on her. (Pp.30-31)

It appears the playwright embedded in her some special wisdom through which he could execute his plans of causing change and promoting women, as discussed earlier. Nana Yaa, however, plots to make use of her daughter. This makes her disguise the girl as a boy so as to outsmart everybody in the kingdom. She also brainwashes Owusu into believing in her capabilities. Nana Yaa takes all means possible to reach her goal. She confesses her actions to Owusu.

### **Men as Custodians of Power**

In Ghana, kings, chiefs, queens as well as elders are the most powerful personalities in their respective kingdoms, towns and villages. They are well respected and their authority reaches the lengths and breadths of their territories so much that their words rule as final over issues. The customs and traditions of a people it appears mandate their leaders to have the last word in cases of punishment, conferring of honours and even banishments. This is demonstrated in

Mawugbe's play where the words of the queen mother ruled in the decision on who should succeed her when she joins her ancestors. The first elder re-stated what the queen mother said. He says, "Well, Princess, your mother insists that never in the history of Ebusa has a woman ruled where there is a man to do so. And so you have to accept..."(p.20). The 2nd elder states that, "Nation building belongs to the energetic." (p.20). This ideology coupled with traditional beliefs left the elders and the queen mother with no other choice than to choose Kweku Duah over Nana Yaa. The final decision, says it all when Nana Yaa is informed that she could not rule because of the presence of her younger brother. It is also clear from what happened in the world of the play with reference to what pertains in our Ghanaian society that if a family, community or kingdom does not

have a man as a leader, such a setup may not be accorded the respect it deserves.

### **Conflicts and Themes**

In order to hype tension in the play so as to arrive at certain thematic concerns that he wishes to communicate, the playwright introduced conflicts in the play. The clash between Owusu and Ekyaa concerning Owusu's resolute decision not to have anything to do with her cousin is a very thorny one. The aftermath soliloquy by Owusu reveals a conscience pricking experience. Reflecting on her reaction towards Ekyaa, she sinks into a state of sobbing as a sign of regret of her display of physical strength. She subjects herself to an inner battle resulting in a physical manifestation. She then poses rhetorical questions which only ended in uncontrollable tears. She bursts out, "O! Spirits of our mothers, Are you around? Why didn't you forewarn me of the insecurity that lay strewn on this Carved-out path chosen for me by an Ambitious woman of a mother?" (p.56).

Once more, Owusu feels tortured by the circumstance in which she gets herself entangled and castigates herself with blames descriptively; "Look at me now, ye spirits...I am a thief...Yes, a thief...A thief disguised and sent into a palace through an opened window by the mother to steal a stool and sit on it." (Pp.56-57). She again gets emotionally traumatised and wishes she could reveal her true identity.

This final confession by Owusu underscores the truth that her motherly imposed has reached irreversible heights. The mental flogging that Owusu experienced just too sacrificially satisfy a mother's ambition is worse than an accidental sting of death. Nana Yaa over the years has defied all odds to keep the secret of Owusu's sex a secret. She takes dangerous steps in doing so. The cruelty and ill motives of Nana Yaa in her attitude and relations to others, particularly the male characters in the play is frightening: She kills her own husband (by poisoning), dares to lure her brother into standing to defend manhood so she could kill him. He killed the chief executioner, sold citizens into slavery, cut off the tongue of the nurse who supervised Owusu's birth for fear that she might squeak. Her wish to ensure that her daughter ascends the throne, Mawugbe built in her a high degree of confidence; this he did to convince the men that the silence of women over the years must not be taken to be weakness on their part.

Owusu is needed in Kwaku Duah's palace, and must be told the truth so that she could carry out her part of the plan with all carefulness. This is because, if Owusu is not properly informed with the truth, danger may loom on both mother and daughter, when the elders should find out the secret earlier than expected. In this self-conflict, Nana Yaa explodes:

I am trapped! ...

I am cornered...

Invisible sharp-pointed spikes of bamboo

Aimed at my head everywhere I turn;...

This was not the hour you promised to show up...

At my old age or when my brother has passed on ...

I wish you could postpone yourself to save me

The unbearable agony of thinking of what to tell my daughter...

No!... I mean my son. (p.10).

It is obvious that both Owusu and Nana suffer a great deal of harbouring the various degrees of secrets. While Owusu battles with her identity, Nana for her side struggles with letting Owusu know the mystery that surrounds her identity. It is quite evident from the above experiences that: The act of keeping a secret could be burdensome, is a theme that must inform people before accepting the challenge to keep any secret.

The playwright also maps out a confrontation and subsequent fight between Nana Yaa and Ofori. This is to intensify conflict in the play so that society may be educated based on the outcome of those struggles, as to what could be a better practice. Nana Yaa stands to defend the right of womanhood, while Ofori stands to prove the superiority and bravery of men. This fight comes because Nana Yaa is being denied the right to succeed her mother when she passes on. The statement by the queen mother that "But you are not a man" (p.18) and the elders supporting the idea infuriated Nana Yaa to react the way she did in the flashback of the play. In settling the scores on why somebody qualifies and another not fit to rule, brought tension between Nana Yaa and her elders. Nana Yaa gets agitated and begins to abuse the men who in turn reacted angrily.

Nana Yaa filled with renewed vigour dared the men folk to do their worst. The following stage direction captures Nana Yaa's reactions, "(Nana quickly dashes to the nearest palace executioner and snatches his long knife from his scabbard and holds it in the air)" (p.21). Nana Yaa challenged the men asking any of them who deems himself man enough to come for the knife and cut off her tongue. Ofori, steps out to defend the pride of men by confronting Nana Yaa:

Ofori: Let me have the knife.

Nana Yaa: (Throws the knife on the floor at his feet) ... (Man picks knife)

Ofori: (Confidently) Now stick out your tongue and step forward and let me cut it for you. (Nana sticks out her tongue and begins to move back as Ofori advances towards her. She suddenly draws a similar long knife concealed in her cloth to the amazement of everybody)

Ofori: (Jumps back in fight)...

Nana Yaa: ...You thought it was easy...

Nana Yaa: ...Go back four paces then we attack.

Ofori: What are the rules?

Nana Yaa: No rules, anything goes. (There is complete silence as the combatants stalk one another. The men keep chanting "Ofori-o-Ofori-o" as the two combatants stalk each other) 2nd Elder: See how she stalks him like a leopard ready to attack its prey.

Nana Yaa: I am going to kill you and give your heart to the vultures... (They keep on stalking like two wrestlers, each looking for the slightest opportunity to plunge the knife into the other. Somehow Ofori falls heavily on his back losing the grip of his knife)

Elders: Look, our man has fallen. (Nana quickly kicks the knife far off and sits on him and pins him to the ground) Pp.22-23.

Nana is, however, disappointed when she was stopped from killing Ofori. The playwright used the duel between Nana Yaa and Ofori to indicate the understanding that, the calm nature of women in society must not be mistaken for cowardice. Comparatively, the courage displayed by Nana Yaa and the fear shown by the men of the kingdom underlines the theme:

Courage is NOT the monopoly of men.

Again, Nana Yaa in an attempt to change custom and tradition questions the elders: "...where is it written that a woman cannot rule when there is a man? I want someone to tell me." (p.20). The playwright might have engineered such a confrontation to lay bare the fact that many leaders enforce certain practices without understanding them. The 2nd Elder in reacting to the above question confirms my suggestion on the playwright's idea; the elder says, "That has been the practice since time immemorial." (p.19)

Nana Yaa's challenge to the men in the flashback had a hidden intention which she confesses to Owusu in the following dialogue:

Owusu: Why did you engage that man in the duel?

Nana Yaa: Hmm... as a matter of fact, it wasn't the man I wanted. It was a careful trap meant to lure the one with whom I once shared the same womb.

Owusu: Who... My uncle?

Nana Yaa: Yes

Owusu: (shocked) Your own brother?

Nana Yaa: I thought he would rise up to defend the honour of manhood so that I could kill him and succeed our mother. But his stars were awake. (Pp. 30-31).

Owusu having accepted to embark on this deadly voyage carved by her mother, Kyeretwie rejoices with hope in a soliloquy:

"Ye spirits above, may you let me live to see the successful end of the wheel of change I've set in motion. A wheel of change that shall leave all men convinced that, In the chest of a woman is not only an extension of the breasts and a feeble heart but a flaming desire to possess and use power!" (Pp. 35-36)

Once again, Efo uses Owusu to accept the challenge to do her mother's bidding. This probably is to indicate that, it is never a one man's business in fighting for a worthy course. In addition, the struggle for freedom comes with a lot of challenges based on the many things mother and daughter had to suffer before getting the customs out-of-the-way. In spite of all the obstacles that came her way, Nana Yaa stood her grounds to fight for the common good for women. The actions of Nana Yaa can broadly be captured in the theme: Vaulting aspiration can sometimes yield positive results.

The playwright also used Nana Oppong to face the other elders on who made the customs of Ebusa and why they cannot be amended. When Owusu falls victim to his own pronouncements pertaining to the customs, the king felt she should be given the chance to defend herself but Nana Oppong protests vehemently. When Owusu and Ekyaa were to be executed, the elders pushed for setting the customs aside but Nana Oppong refused. He strongly believes in preserving what binds the kingdom of Ebusa together. He reacts to

Okyeame Boateng's statement:

Okyeame Boa: Nana Oppong, all we are asking is that for once let us cast the custom aside and...

Nana Oppong: Speak no more, You elder with an infant mind... What a thing to say. "Cast the custom aside"? To ask that the custom be set aside amounts to asking Daasebre to strip himself naked and walk through the

streets of Ebusa... (p.94).

Nana Opong had a heated argument with the other elders who he feels want to sabotage his office as the Gyaasehene (keeper of the people's custom). He therefore reproaches and matches the elders boot for boot. This exchange between the elders is registered as follows:

1st Elder: Nana Opong, why must they die?

Nana Opong: What says the people's custom?

Okyeame Boa: Nana Opong, who made the customs?

Nana Opong: Answer that question for yourself.

Okyeame Boa: The customs were made not by gods they were made by men and therefore can be unmade by men.

Nana Opong: Only inexperienced young men intoxicated with the sweet wine of youthful exuberance speak with such undue recklessness. But take note, before we unmake the customs, we'll first have to unmake your position as Okyeame and go on to unmake Daasebre

Kwaku Duah's position as king... (p.94).

Here again, the playwright treats Nana Opong in a manner that ended him in the very jaws of the custom he stands to defend. He gets condemned to death by the same custom. This is the core of the playwright's message, which he envelops in the fate that befell Nana Opong.

Another educative theme can, however, be formulated from Nana Opong's fall to be: Unhealthy Traditions must give way to reforms. The attempt by Nana Yaa to turn Owusu into male through disguise is against a natural course. In her ambition to have a son who will succeed her brother, she visits powerful shrines all of which predicted a son for her but contrary to those forecasts, she gave birth to a girl. In fighting nature, with reference to her plans, she kills many, some sold into slavery with others losing their tongue for fear that they may betray her course. By killing her fellow human beings, she distorted the destiny of such people. Her murderous hand that lurked in the society just to satisfy her ego is unfathomable.

Again, Owusu had no choice but to submit to his mother's plot even though he suffers secretly. He was denied the passage of puberty rites and many other entitlements naturally reserved for women. Owusu is enslaved by a mother's ambition, oppressed and suppressed against his will; at a point he could not bear the torture anymore and so bursts out as if to purge his own emotions by stating "It's a dangerous game you want me to play, mother, I...I... want to be a girl and taste the joy of womanhood. I have suffered for far too long." (p.29) Owusu sustained himself in that manly role excellently though the act is a bit absurd, since it is opposite to natural programming. However, the playwright treated the character that way to create the awareness that when given the chance, women will excel. Owusu's ability to live the role of a man led to the fight between her and Ekyaa. Ekyaa desires Owusu in love knowing not that she is a girl just like herself. Owusu does everything possible to conceal her identity to an extent that she had to hit Ekyaa so hard when she tries to touch her chest. This encounter disturbs Owusu psychologically and so contemplates revealing the truth of her true sex to her cousin. Owusu faces death when Ekyaa falsely accuses her of being responsible for her pregnancy. Owusu's situation was worse when it was discovered that she is a girl, who had rested her buttocks on the throne without having been

properly enthroned.

She got condemned to die in the end because of fulfilling her mother's ambition. Mawugbe's treatment of this character built the suspense on which the play thrived.

## Analysis

### The Power of Women in the play

The beginning of the play introduces two very significant characters; Nana Yaa Kyeretwie (the queen mother of Kyeremfaso), and her daughter, Owusu, whom she (Nana Yaa) disguises as a male.

"This play is seen as a discovery for the celebration of women and their right to all that they may aspire to. As the lead female character declares, "In the chest of a woman not only an extension of the breast and a feeble heart, but a strong desire to hold and use power". The play however, presents incidents and female characters that appear to contradict this sentiment." (Asiedu, A.M. 2010)

Nana Yaa Kyeretwie, the protagonist of the play, deviated from society's constructed norms. She challenged society's notion that men should lead while women follow. She showed some characteristics as evidence to prove her distaste for that notion.

Nana Yaa Kyeretwie is a bold, valorous, desirous, intelligent, and daring woman. She faces every issue with self-confidence and optimistic mind-set. Nana Yaa Kyeretwie being a woman portrays traits associated with men. The playwright overempowered her. When the play begins, Nana Yaa Kyeretwie is teaching her "son", Owusu war strategies through the use of the "oware" game. It is obvious the oware game symbolises Monarch's military duties. As they play, Nana Yaa Kyeretwie points out the maneuvers and drills in military tactics. It is very uncommon for a woman to have so much intelligence on war strategies. The first Royal Bard ushering the Queen mother during the durbar in the final leg sings her praise with. (Pages 76-77)

Another characteristic portrayed by Nana Yaa Kyeretwie is her fighting spirit. She shows her displeasure when her mother, the queen mother, and the elders bequeaths a small fraction of the kingdom to her whilst giving the whole Ebusa Kingdom to her brother who is younger than her. Nana Yaa shows great anger against custom and tradition which states that males should have precedence over females when it comes to succession to the throne.

The abovementioned characteristics makes Nana Yaa Kyeretwie stand tall. Her intelligence in keeping the sex of Owusu secret without anyone noticing makes her stand tall among her fellow women and even men.

## 4. Conclusions

Finally, gender is widely considered to be men, and women come as appendage; however, based on all that has been said and done, the researcher defined gender in the following categories and from a perspective- Gender, like culture is the way of life of a people with particular focus on how men and women, ladies and gentlemen as well as boys and girls are viewed in their societies and as such their treatment on equal grounds. Again, it deals with matters of concern to both men and women and the effort to balance life, erase negative mentalities like what has been portrayed in Mawudge's work and other biasness that have been created about men and women so that both sides will be treated equally with respect and dignity. In, *In the Chest of a*

*Woman*, Mawugbe throws light on women who have been kept in the box, and left behind, giving excess power to men. He deals with the perception that women must be given equal respect and privileges just as given to men. Furthermore, it views how men and women are portrayed in society, prompting dramatists to create concepts which are represented in their drama; with the intention to playback to society, actions that retard progress in order to effect change.

## 5. Recommendations

Based on the findings in the research, the following recommendations are made towards the development of the Cultural Arts, Gender issues in Ghana and beyond.

- Undoubtedly, women/men have greater roles in building societies, so the researcher recommends the lecturers to teach some literary works that in light their students to be wise in dealing with women/men in life fairly.
- Gender is said to be everywhere at all times, it will be appropriate for both published as well as unpublished works of the writers in this work to be interrogated further in the light of gender.
- Life would not be a life without law and justice to govern each person. Therefore, the researcher recommends putting in consideration the choosing of some international novels and short stories particularly those whom explain the equality in justice under the religious and social laws, as well as giving women their own rights that play great roles in stop breaking societies.

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