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## Societal Stereotypical Attitudes as Inhibitors to Female Employees Attaining Top Level Management Positions in Nigeria's Service Industry

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### **Abstract:**

*The strategic objective G.2 of 1995 Beijing Conference, the three preceding conferences, and the three follow-up Reviews (i.e. Beijing+5, Beijing+10 and Beijing+15) aimed at liberating and empowering women for effective leadership, decision making and gender equity promotion through the advancement of equality, development and peace for all women all over the world. This paper assesses the role of societal stereotypes as inhibitors to female employees attaining top management positions in Nigeria's service sector. The study adopted the quantitative method both in the collection and analysis of survey questionnaire data from 119 respondents in a population of management cadre employees in two sub-sectors of the Nigerian service industry – insurance and hospitality firms. This research revealed that only 9% of females who made up 65% of Nigerian service industries' staff occupied top managerial positions partly because of societal stereotypes leaving 91% at middle management. Conversely, a third of the 35% males were at top positions. Hence, gendered occupational segregation and stereotypes still exist and form key inhibitors to females reaching the top echelon of their careers. Further analysis showed a negative, albeit weak, correlation between the level of societal stereotypes and the ability of female employees to reach top management positions in the service industry. The implication of these results is that the higher the level of societal stereotypes towards females, the more difficult it is for them to get to the top of their career. The study concludes that stakeholders need to actively promote and implement Positive Action and gender equity policies that truly empowers women for their Continuing Professional Development that could engender national growth and sustainable economic development.*

**Keywords:** Stereotypical attitudes, management positions, service industry, female managers, Nigeria

### **1. Introduction**

The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women has been responsible for the organization and monitoring of conferences on women, the world over, for decades. This action began with Mexico (1975) followed by Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985) and Beijing (1995). The four previous sessions of this initiative have been followed by the Five-year, Ten-year and Fifteen-year Reviews rightly branded Beijing+5, Beijing+10 and Beijing+15 respectively. One of the main goals of the 1995 conference is contained in the Beijing declaration in which participating nations 'affirmed their determination to advance the goals of equality, development and peace for all women all over the world for the interest of humanity' (The UN, 1995). The strategic objective G.2 of 1995 Beijing Conference was to liberate and empower women for effective leadership-decision making and promote gender equity. Kabeeb (2005) argues that gender equity policies have the potential to empower women if the international community provides the needed support to take up a role within the society that adds value to women's life while also encouraging the female gender to add value to the society as a whole.

Equal opportunities irrespective of race, colour, gender, sexual orientation, religious affiliation etc. had been in existence since 1954 and the title V11 of the Civil Rights bill of 1964 (Nielsen, Nelson and Lancaster, 2010; Heen, 1984) was amended into the Equal Employment Opportunity Act on 1972 which forbade all forms of discrimination irrespective of race, color, religion, sexual orientation, or national origin (Twomey, 2012; Dietrich, 2004). *Comparative Worth* and *Affirmative Action* were examples of gender equity policies expected to be enabling for promoting women's human rights. As a paradigm, Comparative Worth compare jobs that are supposedly different both in terms of tasks and gender composition (Alksnis, Desmarais and Curtis, 2008). It was a concept adopted in Europe and America as a principle of paying women and men equivalent wages for jobs involving comparable levels of skill. Blum (1987) considers comparative worth as an important concept for workers and that which organize them for collective action.

Affirmative Action on the hand is designed to help in bringing new opportunities to women in the labour market and creating opportunities for members of historically disadvantaged groups. Balafoutas and Sutter (2012) explains that "... *Affirmative action programs try to promote an equal representation of women in upper-level positions...*" (p. 579). However, granting that this policy was designed to assist the female gender workers get to the peak of their career by attaining top management positions, critics have

argued that the concept has become extremely controversial as it grows into an erroneous perception of the means to take away jobs from men and whites in the developed nations, particularly Europe and America. Many reasons had been advanced for inequality between the male and female gender, but in the West African sub-region (particularly in Nigeria), gender stereotypes had been and are still major clogs in the wheel of women's effort to advance in all spheres of life.

*"Gender stereotypes consist of shared beliefs about the characteristics and attributes associated with each sex..."* (Gupta, Turban, Wasti & Sikdar, 2009, p. 399). They are broadly held socio-cultural phenomena that are usually evident from negative and prejudicial views towards a targeted group. Attitudes are automatically formed as a means by which people defend their social standing. Gender Equity Policies' success had always been content specific because of each country's uniqueness in economic, political and technological terms. In Nigeria for instance, there is a national gender policy developed by the Government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2006) that is as good as non-existing judging by its level of success (or lack of it) in achieving the core goals. Some of the core strategies listed in the policy document for achieving the objectives are:

- Gender education and capacity building to enhance necessary technical expertise and positive gender culture;
- Legislative reforms to guarantee gender justice and respect for human rights;
- Gender as a core value for transforming the Nigerian society;
- Confronting patriarchy.

Despite that some grounds had been gained, as a good number of NGOs and women groups have emerged and have been sensitizing the female gender about what their rights are, one may argue that the government of Nigeria appears to be paying lip service to most of the challenges still embedded in the society. Goal 3 of the MDGs is to promote equality and empower women, but experience shows that women in Nigeria continually face inequality in all aspects of life. A case in point is the proportion of girls enrolled in primary schools that is still considerably lower than that of boys, in spite of considerable gains of recent times. This problem is now co-existing with the ever present North-South country divide in female education participation; the roots of all these problems are easily and partly traceable to Nigerians stereotypical attitudes. For instance, it is observed that early marriages are still commonplace in the northern part of the country where many parents still believe (erroneously) that educating a girl child is a waste and that they should be given away in marriage to a man sometimes old enough to be their grandfather even without the girl's consent (female graduates from northern Nigeria sometimes have to contend with the struggles of not being married away after university education).

With this trend in Nigeria, it is conceivable that other countries in the West African sub-region, and indeed other African nations may be contending with similar challenges. Reducing this hidden trend in persistent gender stereotypes that tend to prevent women from attaining top management positions in the African nations is pivotal to achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda for humanity's sake and economic sustainability. In view of all these career advancement challenges facing women in Africa in general, and Nigeria in particular, this paper's main focus was to assess the influence of societal stereotypes as hindrances to the upward mobility of female employees working within the Nigerian service sector.

## 2. Methodology

The study adopted the quantitative method both in collecting and analysing the data. The population consist of management staff of two sub-sectors of the service industry in Nigeria and convenient sampling technique was adopted; these sub-sectors were the insurance and hospitality firms. Primary data was collected from 119 members of management using a structured questionnaire that adopted five-point Likert Scaling with items rated from Strongly Not in Favour = 1 to Strongly in Favour = 5. The 119 retrieved questionnaire copies represent about 55% of a total of 216 copies sent out to identified respondents. From the collected data, the two main variables in the hypothesis were correlated using Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient ( $r$ ) with the aid of SPSS 21. The reliability of the questionnaire items was investigated using Cronbach Alpha coefficient.

## 3. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the research by reporting the reliability coefficient, followed by the distribution of respondents by management positions. Results on the perceptions of employees on whether or not they believed the stereotypes of male employees being better managers than females are also presented; lastly, the connection between societal stereotypes and the potential for female employees to reach top management positions is explained with comparisons drawn from extant literature. As a prelude to further data analysis, the questionnaire items were validated to ensure that they measured what they purported to measure. The Cronbach Alpha Coefficient was .72, a level that is acceptable and comparable to what obtains in global empirical research.

From table 1, there were a total of 119 respondents and 42 (35%) of them were males while the remaining 77 (65%) were females. Of the 42 male members, 14 of them (making 33%) were in the top level management positions compared with only 7 (9%) out of 77 of the female members. The remaining 91% of the female population occupied middle level positions; but even out of the 28 male members that remained, 21 (50%) were at middle level. Only 7 (17%) of the male occupied lower level positions. From the statistics in table 1, male was at a very high advantage considering the fact that they made up only 35% of the total workforce; but the female who made up the majority (65%) of the total workforce could not even reach the 10% mark. In Germany, the primary and secondary sectors of the economy were found to be male dominated while the service sector had women overrepresentation (Lilja and Luddeckens (2006). These two researchers also found that women earn less than their male German counterparts and the situation in Sweden, where women also dominate both the service sector and the nursing profession, was similar. Therefore, the results in this section of the paper corroborates extant literature particularly on the dominance of women in the service sector, and the fact that women face similar challenges irrespective of nationality.

The issue of quotas which could have served as a tool for positive action to minimise one of the direct effects of societal stereotypes for women was said to be discussed in the Nigerian government's policy documents with low implementation; this supports the fact that most of the so called positive action policies for enabling women, the world over, were never adequately implemented. Hence, instead of enabling this gender, they became hidden disabling policies for lack of implementation. The same study of 2006 by Lilja and Luddeckens reported that the proportion of female managers in the United Kingdom moved from 19% in 1979 to 26% in 1989 showing an increase of nearly 7% in ten years. Though, this improvement in female employees' access to managerial positions might have looked very tiny at the first glance judging by female managers past experiences, these achievements were no mean feat and really commendable; they also showed that all hands must continually be on deck to tackle the menace of societal stereotypes as inhibits for female managers' upward movement in their career ladder. The two researchers also discovered that female managers in Swedish private sector were a meagre 19% compared to 81% for males, this is worrying statistics, but nonetheless crucial findings needed as a wake-up call for those who thought that much had been achieved.

An encouraging statistic in this area came from the Swedish public sector where female managers' proportion positively compares at 56% to males 44%. Though this is a welcome development, it needs to be received with utmost caution; perhaps a larger sample might be needed before a generalised statement could be made for the Swedish women managers in the public sector judging by the size of the sample taken by the two researchers (three respondents from each country), as this sample may need to be enlarged for more in-depth analysis and generalisation.

It was also discovered that the 2 MDs of the companies sampled in this study were men; this type of gender-based skewed distribution of top positions towards men in a sector that is predominantly women dealt a serious blow to the so called gender equity policies of the Nigerian government, and is an indication that a lot more weight still need to be pulled by all who advocate for the elimination of all forms of gender inequality, if the 2030 Sustainable Development Agendas to be achieved to a reasonable degree. Why to a reasonable degree? Yes, simply because it is rather unthinkable that stereotypes can ever be eradicated in any culture, rather they could be minimised. Lilja and Luddeckens (2006) in their study of women in middle management in Sweden, UK and Germany are of the assertion that in those three countries, people's perception would be very hard to change concerning stereotyping of genders and leaders. They found in their study that though men and women are perceived differently nowadays by the society, most people still prefer to have men as leaders.

Historical background often makes it hard for people to take today's women managers serious but as negative attitudes slowly fade away, women are increasingly getting accepted into management positions sometimes in the face universal stereotypical attitudes, some of which are country and context specific. Therefore, the results of this research that connects societal stereotypes to female managers' career advancement supports Lilja and Luddeckens (2006) findings about Germany, the UK and Sweden. In essence, female managers in these three countries are also having to contend with these problematic issues like Nigerian female managers.

Management positions	Male	Female	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
<b>Top</b>	14	7	21	18
<b>Middle</b>	21	70	91	76
<b>Low</b>	7	-	7	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>∑f = 42</b> <b>(35%)</b>	<b>∑f = 77</b> <b>(65%)</b>	<b>∑f = 119</b> <b>(100%)</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by Management positions  
Source: Developed from Field Data

Further descriptive analyses were conducted among the respondents. When asked to respond to a questionnaire item indicating that: *Male managers are more competent than their female counterparts*, the results showed that 35% of the 119 sampled managers (male and female mix) were of the opinion that male managers are more competent than females. These results also point to another way by which females are stereotyped as less competent, and of lesser value than males to the extent that even some of the female employees also perceived themselves as inferior to males in terms of their managerial capability. This may, perhaps, be connected to people's upbringing where it is acceptable in Nigeria's context even for females to feel inferior in certain careers purportedly meant for males. Also, about 24% of the employees revealed that male managers feel uneasy about having female either as superiors, consultants or equal-status colleagues. Additionally, 41% indicated that the place for women is in the home and that women do not need paid jobs because it is men's responsibility to cater for all family needs. These results by any standard appear very startling particularly in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The result could be deemed possible indication of what is happening in the larger society within Nigeria. All the variables actually corroborated the real life experiences of what Nigerian, and perhaps, African women contend with on day to day basis; what is, however, more worrying is the fact that those opinions may be more extensive than it appears within the populace.

The Nigeria MDGs report (2006) indicated that women in Nigeria continue to face inequality in many aspects of life; one of such is in the area of the ratio of girls to boys' enrolment in elementary schools. Although, the trend for the ratio was positive with 2% increase in females' enrolment (i.e. 79% in 2004 to 81% in 2005 per 100 males), it was still found to be considerably low in comparison. The same document noted that there was a clear north-south country divides within Nigeria in female participation in education. Some gains were recorded in terms of girl-child education; in a number of southern states, for instance, girls outnumbered their male counterparts in school. This positive trend on elementary education is similar to the 2015 End Point report in which the ratio of girls to boys' enrolment increased to 94% in 2013 (MDGs Nigeria, UNDP and UK Aid, 2015). However, in the northern state of Zamfara for instance, only 29% of the primary schools' pupils were girls. Additionally, the trend for the secondary education was not as

encouraging as the percentage of girls to boys at the elementary level. The secondary school level dropped from 48% in 1999 to 44% in 2003. At the tertiary level, the trend was positive with increasing number of females being enrolled in the university. Unfortunately, the overall improvement has not been sustained. For instance, the 2015 End Point report shows that the improvement in girls to boys' ratio has suffered setback with a reduction in the enrolment ratio (MDGs Nigeria, UNDP and UK Aid, 2015).

In spite of the dwindling nature of overall girls' enrolment figures, particularly in the tertiary institutions, the general trend earlier in the millennium indicated that women were being increasingly favoured in wage employment after graduation, especially in the non-agricultural sector. Politically too, it was also gathered that the number of women in the parliament had increased, though this was only clearer at the national level than the states' and local governments'. The number of female deputy governors in Nigeria rose from only one (1) in 1999 to three (3) in 2003, though they were all from the southern part of the country; and out of the 774 local government chief executives, only five (5) were female and that was an increase from only 2 in 1999. But in the year 2007, the number of female deputy governors rose to 6 and there were so many females in the federal legislature, house of representative, and state legislature. In essence, the positive results on female empowerment did not hold for long.

The relevant content of the *Nigerian MDGs End Point 2015 report* indicated that the country has not performed well in women empowerment. For instance, in relation to the number of seats held by men, the proportion of seats held by women in the National Parliament in 2015 was a meagre 5.11% against the expected target of 35%. The report further explains that despite the gains made in appointive political positions in recent years (30%), women still face challenges in reaching the top positions in Nigeria; this is partly connected to "The prevailing patriarchal culture and practices [that] remain a major factor against women's access to top elective positions" (MDGs Nigeria, UNDP and UK Aid, 2015, p. 5). This means that although there is significant improvement made in the area of gender parity, the key goal of women empowerment was unmet, not least because the proportion of women in wage employment was only able to reach 7.7% in 2010, the latest report to date. In support of these results, Toh and Leonardelli (2012) argue that an 'environment with tight cultures' negatively impact the number of women in managerial and leadership positions in such society.

Implicit from the results and the foregoing discussion is the reasoning that although women have made some inroads, it can be argued that there is still much ground to be made. Hence, women need to try harder to consolidate on the gains made, make amends in the areas of weaknesses and surge forward in order to take a vantage position to keenly contest increasingly available opportunities as and when they arise. These steps are paramount since the stereotypical attitudes still permeate the society at large and inhibit women's upward movement to better opportunities. Rhode (2003) opine that women need to be mentally tough, aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and consistently solicit the needed support from stakeholders and supporters of women's advancement in order to consolidate past gains and turn present weaknesses around to positive action initiatives.

David and Cooper, (1993) list the biggest obstacles for women's advancement as follows;

- Old fashioned attitudes about women's role;
- Direct and indirect discrimination;
- Absence of proper childcare and
- Missing flexible structure for work and careers.

The interesting dimension to most of these findings is that though they were carried out in an environmental, sociological and political context different from Nigeria's context with all its attendant instability, the reports were very similar to the findings of this study, and what had remained constant was the fact that the gains by the women movement had not been significant. James et al. (1994) in their writing on 'Barriers to Workplace Advancement Experienced by Native Americans' explain that in the early days, the Europeans view of native Americans could be summed up with the following adjectives:

- Devils, sub-humans, savages noble or ignoble, warriors, lazy drunkards, princesses, fierce animals, unskilled, uneducated etc.

The so called adjectives are strong stereotypes, some of which still exist today. The result of the stereotypes for the native Americans were that the minority children were generally seen to have received less positive feedbacks compared to negatives, and the minority, including females, lagged behind white males in mathematics participation. This result showed that stereotypes had permeated the society for too long and need to be tackled head-on as the effects do not serve the societal interests; rather it prevents the active female gender labour from contributing adequately to the growth and development of new millennium world as a global village. Additionally, results of the research by Buddhapriya (2009) shows that among other challenges, lack of gender-sensitive policies was partly responsible for women's inability to advance their career; experience shows that this bears semblance to what exists in Nigeria.

### 3.1. Correlation Analysis of Societal Stereotype and the Number of Females in Managerial Positions

Results of the correlational analysis indicates a negative, albeit weak, relationship ( $r = -2.03$ ) between the two variables. This shows that though weak, negative association exists between the level of societal stereotypical attitudes and upward managerial position mobility of female staff in the Nigeria services sector. By interpretation, a decrease in societal stereotypical attitude towards women leads to an increase in the chance for a female manager to achieve upward mobility to a higher managerial position.

The graph in figure 1 corroborates the findings about the connection between societal stereotypes and female managers upward career mobility. The figure shows a downward slope in the relationship. More specifically, an increase in *societal stereotypical attitudes* (Variable X) along the horizontal axis obviously lead to a corresponding decrease in chances for females to reach top managerial positions (Variable Y) along the vertical axis. The downward slope to the right points to a negative relationship. In the context of this research, the negative slope means that a decrease in one variable led to an increase in the other or vice versa. The implication of this

is that when the stereotypical attitudes increases to the right, there is the likelihood of a corresponding decrease in the amount of top level management jobs available to female managers to tap into.

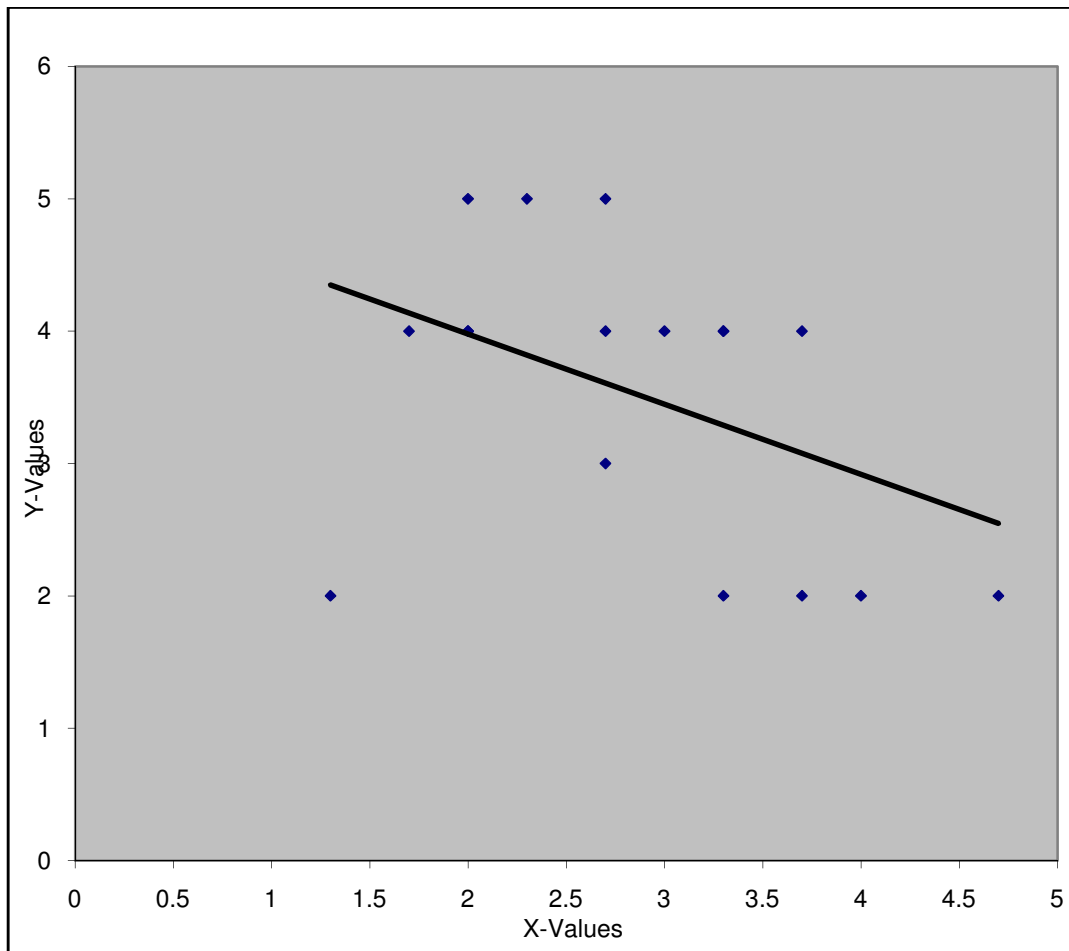


Figure 1: Graph showing the relationship between societal stereotypical attitudes and female chances of reaching managerial positions using selected responses  
Source: Plotted from field data

Key:

- Along X axis, 1 unit is equivalent to 2 cm
- Along Y-axis, 1 unit is equivalent to 2cm
- X is the independent variable while Y is the dependent variable.
- X = The level of societal stereotypical attitude
- Y = Number of female Employees in Management positions.

#### 4. Conclusion, Implications and Recommendation

This study showed that only 9% of women who made up 65% of Nigerian service industries staff occupied top managerial positions partly because of societal stereotypes, leaving 91% at middle management. Conversely, a third of the 35% men were at top positions. Hence, gendered occupational segregation and stereotypes still exist; hence, stakeholders must actively promote Positive Action that truly empowers women for national growth and development. This study found that although new opportunities emerged for female employees to ascend further up the career ladder, societal attitudes, norms and beliefs were strong inhibitors for them getting to the top echelon in their workplace.

The study corroborated the results of some earlier studies like that by LilJa and Luddeckens (2006) that shows female workers in the UK, Germany and Sweden dominating the service sector just as it was discovered in the course of this study in Nigeria's case. In addition, some stereotypical attitudes were also found to have many similarities when the four countries were compared. The revelation that men dominated top management positions in a sector where they were in the minority is particularly worrying and indicates how dire the situation is for female employees; this revealed the attendant need for women to actively and positively strategize and mobilize themselves to take leading roles in issues of concern to females.

Girls education is currently receiving a boost as the percentage of girls in formal education at all levels is constantly increasing, this reassure stakeholders that at least with basic education and awareness of their basic human rights, fighting for positions of authority (management, for instance), decision making and leadership roles could become a reality.

In concluding, the following statistics on the ratio of Nigerian female employees to men in some sectors would provide a general food for thought.

- Women represent 87% of those employed in the service sector (Nigerian National Gender Policy Monograph, 2007);
- 76% of civil servants are men compared with 24% women and women currently hold only 14% of total management positions overall;
- Women represent 17.5% and men 82.5% of those employed within the medical profession;

Given the above statistics, the worrisome representation of women to men, mostly caused by gender-related biases, are just a few of what this study confirmed. It would now be obviously justified that females are not just crying wolf. The situation in Nigeria is that even when it has been expressly stated in the policy document that a specified percentage of top managerial positions should go to women on merit, this has not materialised. This is partly due to institutionalised biases and stereotypes against women. Essentially, the positive action policy in the real sense of it has always faced challenges right from inception. There is therefore a danger of complacency in thinking that the positive action policies, where they exist, were being adequately implemented, if at all.

In view of the above, women liberation can only truly materialise when all stakeholders on female career and life-long advancement can come to the realization that many decision makers, particularly in the developing world, do not lead by example at the implementation stage of various gender-equity policies. Therefore, interested parties connected to women issues need to be continually educated and empowered on basic human right issues in order that current gains are consolidated and weaknesses turned to strengths for the common good of the global village.

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