

## THE “COMFORT ZONE” OF GENDER INEQUALITY: A REFLECTION

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### Abstract

Globally, gender inequality has remained a persistent problem confronting humanity. The global community recognizes it as “an unfinished business of our time”. Despite centuries of efforts, the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gaps reported in June 2024 that achieving gender equality in all regions may not be possible until the year 2158. While diverse factors are known to contribute to gender inequality, this paper argues that gender inequality persists because gender inequality is a “comfort zone”. Making use of documentary sources including relevant examples of how “this” comfort zone plays out in gender relations and interactions between men and women, especially in Africa, the author tries to establish the theory of the comfort zone of gender inequality. Findings revealed that gender inequality is beneficial to the powers-that-be, and being in a comfort zone of gender inequality is a choice. In other words, the choice to keep gender inequality alive is a rational one and it is authoritative power that sustains it. Given “the comfort” that goes with gender inequality, it then follows that commitment to gender equality is often low, making the efforts to achieve gender equality a struggle all over the world. It is therefore recommended that feminists and human activists keep up with the struggle because, just like sit-tight presidents who find it difficult to transfer power or leave office, those in the comfort zone of gender inequality would not want to leave the zone, as it is a “familiar” terrain. Thus, a need for more “push” and a consistent struggle to achieve gender equality.

**Keywords:** Gender, equality, inequality, comfort zone, authoritative power, reflection,

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## **Introduction**

Globally, gender inequality has remained a persistent problem confronting humanity. The global community recognises it as “an unfinished business of our time”, despite centuries of efforts to end it. Feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft started writing on the topic of women's rights as early as 1792. Mary wrote a novel titled, “A Vindication of the Right of Woman” and through her writings advocated for the rights of women, even before the feminist movement became popularized and internationalized. The feminist movement initially called the women's movement is a series of social movements and political campaigns for radical and liberal reforms on women's challenges created by the inequality between men and women. The base of the movement, since its inception, has been grounded in the injustice of gender inequality. The term feminist movement was coined in the late nineteenth century to make clear that the feminist movement is not only for women but includes male feminists. The first wave of the feminist movement is usually tied to the first formal women's rights Convention that was held in 1848. It formally began at the Seneca Falls Convention, in New York in 1848 when three hundred men and women rallied to the cause of equality for women.

However, feminists have traced the beginning of the movement to 1832 when the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) and later the Connecticut Female Anti-Slavery Society in 1833 were formed, and with the series of Conventions organised, the basis of future movements was formed. For instance, Elizabeth Stanton's organisation of the Seneca Fall Convention was said to have been inspired by Lucretia Mott, whom she met eight years earlier (June 1840) in London at the World Anti-Slavery Convention. There at the London Convention, the two were brought to the

women's only section and were not allowed to speak at the event. This event and the outrage it inspired led to the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848. What this means is that there is no way to determine the exact date when the feminist movement was first thought up, because women and men have either been writing or voicing out on the topic of gender inequality for thousands of years.

The feminist movement has been an ongoing force for as long as anyone can remember, but became compartmentalized from the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the form of waves - first-wave feminism, second-wave feminism, third-wave feminism, and most recently fourth-wave feminism. While the first wave of feminists focused their struggles primarily on gaining legal rights such as the right to vote (women's suffrage) and property rights, the second wave which began in the early 1960s and extended through the late 1980s, focused on a broad range of issues including discrimination in workplaces, personal freedom, etc. Beginning in the early 1990s, the third wave was a reaction to the backlash of conservative media and politicians announcing the end of feminism or referring to 'post-feminism'. The term 'backlash' was popularised by Susan Faludi in her book *Backlash: The Undeclared War against Women*, published in 1991, and describes the negative reaction of the patriarchal system towards women's liberation. While feminists have made significant gains during the first, second, and third waves and the recent fourth feminism where increasing digitalization has helped to call out sexism in the social media space, equality is still a distant dream.

Indeed, the journey to gender equality has been long, and the end is not yet in sight, not only due to patriarchy, but also religion as well as cultural and traditional beliefs, and the comfort zone that comes with gender inequality is an impediment. Hence, this paper argues that gender inequality

persists because gender inequality has become a comfortable place for some, regardless of its long-term consequences. The paper has five sections. With the introduction as Section 1, the following section (Section 2) is a brief clarification of the relevant concepts used in this paper. Section 3 provides relevant examples to support the thesis on the comfort zone of gender inequality. Section 4 is a brief overview of the progress toward gender equality. Section 5 contains the conclusion and recommendations.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

Here, the concepts of gender equality/inequality, comfort zone (as applied to this paper), and authoritative power are clarified.

### **The Concept of Gender Equality/Inequality**

Gender equality simply means equal rights and opportunities for both sexes. Gender equality is based on the idea that the rights, responsibilities, and opportunities of everyone irrespective of class, age, race, etc. will not depend on whether they are male or female. Gender equality means “that women and men, girls and boys have equal conditions, treatment and opportunities for realizing their full potential, human rights and dignity, and for contributing to (and benefitting from) economic, social, cultural and political development (UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, 2017). It is the equal valuing by society of the similarities and differences between men and women, and the roles they play. Equality does not mean that women and men will become the same but that women's and men's rights, responsibilities, and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female (UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, 2017). It essentially implies equal treatment in laws, policies, programmes, and access to services and opportunities.



Though often used interchangeably, equality and equity are two very distinct concepts. The concept of gender equity refers to “fairness” in the treatment of women and men. Gender equity while needed in our societies is sometimes used in ways that perpetuate stereotypes about women's role in society, suggesting that women should be treated 'fairly' in accordance with the roles assigned to them. This kind of understanding risks perpetuating unequal gender relations and solidifying gender stereotypes that are detrimental to women. Gender equality has been the preferred terminology within the United Nations, although equity denotes an element of interpretation of social justice, and serves as a path to equality. Equity can be said to be a means and equality is the result. While gender equity can lead to actual gender equality, the end goal remains equality. Equality means that both men and women are free to develop their abilities and make choices without the limitations set by stereotypical views, rigid gender roles, and prejudices.

Gender equality is a fundamental human right and a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable world. Gender discrimination is a violation of that right. Gender discrimination means:

“Any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on the basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field” (United Nations, 1979. 'Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women,' Article 1).

Discrimination can stem from law (de jure), where women are prohibited by law from partaking in certain activities or not equally treated in

law as men. A good example is Nigeria's citizenship law which bars women from transferring citizenship to their foreign husbands, and such a law does not exist for men. Discrimination can also stem from practice (de facto), seen for instance in organisations where men and women hold the same job, and perform the same duties but are paid differently. Gender inequality is a result of discrimination, and it is the opposite of what equality means.

Gender inequality is discrimination on the basis of sex or gender causing one sex or gender to be routinely privileged or prioritized over another. Gender inequality recognizes that men and women are not equal, and they do not have equal access to rights or opportunities. Gender inequality refers to the disparities between women and men in society in terms of their access and opportunities in the social, economic, and political spheres and their share in decision-making power at all social levels. Where gender inequality exists, it is generally women who are excluded or discriminated against. Men also face the challenges of gender stereotypes and discrimination, but women are often the most disadvantaged group.

## **Comfort Zone**

A comfort zone is simply a zone where one feels safe or at ease. It is a position in which one feels comfortable, secure, or in control. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines comfort zone as the level at which one functions at ease and familiarity. Oxford Learners Dictionaries defined it as a place or situation in which one feels safe or comfortable especially when they choose to stay in that situation..... instead of trying to do better. Encyclopedia Britannica defines it “as a place, situation, or level where someone feels confident and comfortable. Comfort zone also has a psychological meaning. It is seen as a “familiar psychological state where people are at ease and

(perceive they are) in control of their environment” (Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, 2024).

The comfort zone of gender inequality as applied here means that gender inequality is a place or situation where some people or persons feel comfortable, at ease, and secure. It is familiar terrain, and since some persons enjoy a kind of comfort, and are in control of that “environment/zone, they would rather “choose” (or do everything within their power) to stay there in order not to lose that “comfort”. If gender equality means equal opportunity for both sexes to benefit from and contribute to economic, social, cultural, and political development; or equal opportunity to enjoy socially valued resources and rewards, then those currently in the comfort zone of gender inequality would likely choose to stay.

The choice to stay is often informed by its “short-term” benefits, rather than long-term consequences. Comfort zones are maintained through authoritative power. Power is known to be established with the male and masculinity. Patriarchy, a system of male dominance is entrenched in many societies of the world. While this is not in any way to lump all men together (totalizing experiences) as if all men hold the same position, belong to the same class, or have the same gender experiences, authoritative power has often been in the hands of “men”, who dominate the state, making the rules for others. In Africa, for instance, men and women have had a different relationship with the state, and the society. Women in Africa, for instance, have been underrepresented in state affairs, and where few societies award women some power, this tended to be informal rather than authoritative. Thus, the comfort zone of gender inequality is being sustained not just by power but by authoritative power in the hands of “men.”

## **The Concept of Authoritative Power**

The word “power” is related etymologically to the French word “pouvoir” and the Latin word “potere”, both of which mean “to be able.” Power is something – anything – which makes or renders somebody able to do or capable of doing something. Power is the capacity, potential, ability, or wherewithal to do something (Standford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2021). Power is considered the most fundamental force underlying human behaviour, and academic scholars have conceptualized, reconceptualized power, and debated extensively on the concept. Weber (1978) defined power as “the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance...” (cited in Standford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2021). Robert A. Dahl defined power as the ability of A to cause B to do something that B otherwise would not do.

In international relations, there are two key approaches to the definition of power - the resource approach (ability, capacity) and the relational approach. The resources approach explains the idea of power as resources. A state, for example, can be said to be powerful if it possesses huge economic resources, military strength, and population, among other elements of power. The relational concept approach explains the idea of power as a kind of causation. This causal notion in the relational approach conceives of power as a relationship (actual or potential) in which the behavior of state A causes a change in the behavior of state B. Behaviour or action of A can impact, change, alter, or stifle the progress of B. 'Behaviour' [or action] in this context can be understood broadly to include beliefs, attitudes, preferences, opinions, expectations, and/or predispositions. One common agreement among scholars is that “power is powerful” based on its ability to produce an outcome. However, power is a deeply contested

concept. The literature on power is marked by deep, widespread, and seemingly intractable disagreements over how the term should be understood (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2021). Thus, a clear contextual definition is often required, but for this paper, the focus is on authoritative power.

Authority, while related to power, is not just having power. Authority is the politically and culturally accepted belief that a person or persons have a legitimate right to wield power (Parpart, 1986). Oxford Learners Dictionaries offered two key definitions of authority. First, authority is defined as the power or right to give orders, make decisions, and enforce obedience. Authority is the rightness of a command, and others obey that command because it is thought to be legitimate. Emerson (1962) cited in Rummel (n.d) noted that authority emerges as a transformation of power in a process called "legitimation." The notion of legitimacy is important in defining authority. A person holding authority is commissioned and has the right to rule or govern. Authority can be called *de jure* power. Authority is essentially the institutional code within which the use of power as a medium is organized and legitimized (Rummel, n.d).

The second definition of authority as given by the Oxford Learners Dictionary refers to a person or organization having political or administrative power and control. Its synonyms include the people in charge, the government, officials, the system, the administration, bureaucracy, the powers that be, the (men in) suits, the Big Brother, among others. Thus, authoritative power as used here means the powers that be, the government, the people in charge, who make the rules on gender relations, or whose actions [due to being in a position of authority] can stifle the progress on gender equality. Authoritative power is simply the ability to

legitimately command, direct, or alter the preferences, opinions, or predispositions of others (the subordinates); to take measures or [institute rules] aimed at affecting unilaterally the situations of the recipients of such measures or rules. It is also called authoritative power because the holders of such power can also become “authoritative” in a repressive way. Authoritative power is asymmetrical in the sense that the powers- that be and the recipients cannot simultaneously be empowered. The empowerment of one necessarily disempowers the other, and the comfort of one, discomfort the other. Authoritative power, as I noted earlier is less available to women, which makes them automatically the subordinates.

### **Gender Inequality as a Comfort Zone: Supporting Thesis**

The argument here is that gender inequality is a comfort zone for those who wield authoritative power (“men”) and this plays out in gender relations between men and women. Some of the examples of how the comfort zone of gender inequality manifests are examined below.

During the World Anti-Slavery Convention held between 12 and 23 June 1840 in London, Mott and Stanton traveled as part of a larger group of women to London, England, to participate as delegates from the United States in the World's Anti-Slavery Convention but they were not welcomed. Some male leaders argued that mixed-sex meetings went against British custom, and others insisted that women's involvement in politics was un-Christian (Elizabeth et al, 1881 cited in DHR, n.d). What made this a perfect example in this reflection on the comfort zone of gender inequality is the fact that the organizers (“people in charge”) told these women that “they could sit quietly in a separate women-only section curtained off [making them know that are “lesser” or “unequal” to the men – my emphasis] from the main

convention hall where they could listen to, but not participate in the convention's proceedings" (Elizabeth et al, 1881).

Authoritative power is not just a comfort zone for some, it can be dictatorial and corrupt. Lord Acton, a nineteenth-century British Historian, 1834-1902 in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton about how historians should judge the abuse of power by past rulers made the statement, that "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Although, Aung San Suu Kyi in an acceptance message for the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, 1990 said that, "it is not power that corrupts, but fear". That is, it is the fear (which is psychological) of losing power that corrupts those who wield it, which resonates well with my comfort zone theory, which argues that those in the comfort zone are at ease, and secure. And, because they are also in control, they would rather choose to stay, and enjoy the "benefits", without considering the consequences for others.

According to Wisse et al (2019), fear of losing power [or comfort] could lead to the initiation of behavioural responses aimed at capitalizing on those benefits while it is still possible. It could also sway the beneficiaries to engage in self-serving behavior, and such self-serving behaviour could cause them to disregard group and subordinate interests and, prioritize their self-interests. Gender inequality is a familiar terrain that gives the powers-that-be some kind of "confidence" and "security." Thus, when reasons such as upholding traditions and customs are given as excuses for the exclusion or marginalization of women, it is often to maintain the status quo for the beneficiaries of inequality to remain in control.

In Africa, several cultural and traditional practices have been difficult to abolish because of the powers that benefit from them. In Kenya, for instance, there is a cultural practice called widow cleansing. This cleansing is

practiced in the Luo community in the Nyanza Province in Kenya. According to tradition, Luo widows are expected to engage in sexual intercourse with a “cleanser,” without the use of a condom, to remove the impurity ascribed to her after her husband's death (Perry et al, 2014). Who is the cleanser? After a woman's husband dies, she is expected to engage in sexual intercourse often with a non-male relative of the deceased husband, to remove the impurity she is believed to have acquired from the death of her husband. After a widow has been “cleansed,” she is expected to be inherited by a man, traditionally an in-law. Essentially, one man cleanses, and another inherits.

Although the Kenya Domestic Offenses Bill that came up in 2015 prohibits it, recent studies show that it persists in rural settings for fear of being ostracized. This is what I call the comfort zone. Practices like this persist because there are those (the “cleanser” for instance) that enjoy that “comfort.” Widowhood practice is one of the most degrading treatments women face in Africa.

Given the increasing campaign from civil society groups, non-governmental organisations, and advancement in digital technology where fourth-wave feminists are calling out against such practices through the Internet, many have been abolished, but are yet to disappear in totality. What is worthy of note is that “it is widows, not widowers who must endure the most humiliating rituals” (Sossou, 2002) [when their partner dies]. Far more restrictions are placed on a widow than on a widower (Sossou, 2002), simply because the “rules” are made by the powers that be, not for them to be affected negatively, but to the women's discomfort. While traditional Africans teach ubuntu principles of [humanity] communality, mutual respect, caring, and so forth, they do not walk the talk with regard to gender inequality. Equality, I argue, will take them out of their comfort zone (inequality).



The Trokosi system, a practice that originates in the Ewe and Dangme peoples in south and east Ghana, and also neighbouring Togo and Benin, is also to the disadvantage of women, and the advantage of the men. The Trokosi is a traditional belief system where young virgins are taken to a shrine to compensate for some dishonourable deed carried out by a male family relative. “Tro” means deity or fetish and “kosi” means slave in the Ewe language. Virgin girls, sometimes as young as four years are sent to shrines as slaves to atone for crimes or misdeeds committed by a male relative or friend of the virgin girl's family (Akonor, 2019). One of the women who served in a shrine told her story thus:

I wasn't even told the reason for which I was taken to the shrine, and I don't remember the age I was, but I remember I was a very young girl. My line of thought wasn't clear, but luckily for me, unlike other girls, I could occasionally visit my family and return, but I can't ever leave my husband who was the chief priest (cited in Akonor, 2019).

Although this practice was abolished by law in 1998 (the Criminal Code Amendment Act, of 1998), thanks to feminists and right-based groups, this has not completely deterred the beneficiaries of this degrading tradition. Instead, they have found a seemingly clever way to beat the law. These days, they do not keep the girls in the compound of the priest but could be in the girl's parent's house or with other people. And when they need the girls for rituals, chores or to satisfy their sexual pleasure, they call for them (Akonor, 2019). What this also means is that they do not have to feed them or bear any responsibility, but can make money from them as they “rent” them to farmers, and fishermen to work (Akonor, 2019). This is a clear case of comfort zone for the chief priests. As Saadia Zahidi, the Managing Director at the World Economic Forum argued, “gender inequality is good

economics” (Zahidi, 2013). While we know that individuals, economies, and societies would benefit from gender parity in the long term, gender inequality is often a perfectly rational choice for individuals in the short term (Zahidi, 2013).

In Nigeria, the Lawmakers have been reluctant to sign the Gender Equality Bill into law. The first time it was presented in 2016, the National Assembly argued that gender equality is against Nigeria's culture, which happens to be the “culture” made by the men who dominate the state. Men make up 96 percent of Nigeria's National Assembly, and in some administrations, only 3 percent of the seats are held by women. Culture is made man, and is dynamic, yet because of the benefits (including power) that the so-called culture has ascribed to men, it becomes difficult to talk about gender equality.

Wisse et al (2019) captured it very well when they stated that “the prospect of losing power comes with the realization that access to current and future resources will be waning, which will prompt leaders to prioritize their interest.” What Mies (1986), for instance, called “housewifization of women” is to advantage of the “men”. As cited in Kay (2012), housewifization meant the externalization, or ex-territorialization of costs which otherwise would have to be covered by the capitalist [the men] – which means women's labour is considered a natural resource, freely available like air and water. Kay (2012) also pointed out that the witch-hunt that raged through Europe from the twelfth to the seventeenth century was one of the mechanisms to control and subordinate women, who in their economic and sexual independence constituted a threat to the emerging bourgeois order, [an order viewed as advantageous to them].

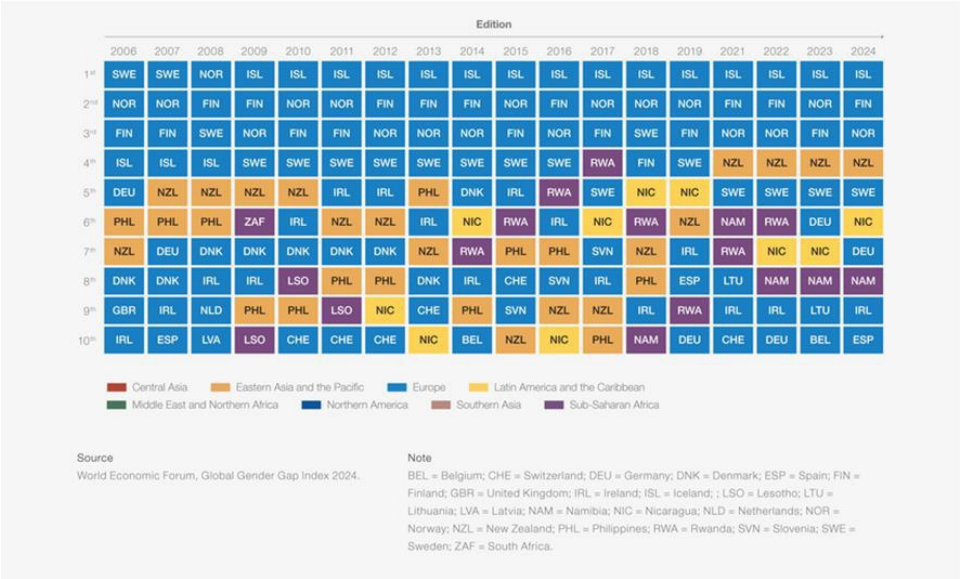
Where gender inequality is perceived as a comfort zone, and equality

is seen as a threat to that “comfort”, it is often difficult to make good progress. However, progress across the world differs. While some countries have made notable progress, others are still far behind, but what is common is that gender equality has been a struggle. What then is the progress today?

The World Progress to Gender Equality: A Brief Overview

Gender inequality remains a distant dream, although to some, a pipedream. The World Economic Forum (WEF) has been benchmarking progress towards gender parity across four dimensions: economic opportunities, education, health, and political leadership since 2006. The data for the years covered by the WEF shows that the country's progress is uneven, as European countries top the list, with one or two countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia included among the 10 top countries.

FIGURE 1.2 Evolution of Global Gender Gap Index top 10 over time



Source: World Economic Forum Global Gender Gaps Report (2024).

Generally, the progress has not been encouraging. The WEF report summarizes that the world is not on track to achieve gender equality by 2030. Gender Equality was the number 3 goal in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and was not achieved by the end of 2015. Currently, it is the number 5 goal of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and still, it would not be achieved in 2030. In 2022, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2022) and UN Women in a paper titled, “Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2022” stated that “it will take 286 years to close gender gaps in legal protection and remove discriminatory laws against women.

In 2023, WEF reported that the year of expected parity remains the same as in the 2022 edition, and that is year, 2154 and as a result, “closing the overall gender gap will require 131 years (World Economic Forum, 2023). In June 2024, WEF reported that “it will now take 134 years to reach gender parity” (World Economic Forum, 2024). That is, it has changed from 131 years to 134 years. Three steps backward. Saadia Zahidi, the Managing Director at WEF said “we may have to wait until 2158 for parity” (World Economic Forum, 2024). While the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs article titled, “Gender Equality Can't Wait – We Must Achieve it Now, for Current and Future Generations” is spirit uplifting, it is still nothing but mere rhetoric. There are still up to seven generations to parity in some regions (see the Figure below), and there is no guarantee that progress will be maintained, as we have seen changes between the 2023 and 2024 reports.

Global Gender Gap Report 2024

## Generations to parity in regions



Source: Global Gender Gap Report 2024

According to the WEF, the global gender gap in 2024 closed by only +.1 percentage point, from 68.5% to 68.6%, and when considering the 101 countries covered continuously from 2006 to 2024, the gap has only improved +.1 points [by 0.5 percent] to reach 68.6% (World Economic Forum, 2024). Essentially, the road to gender equality is still a long way, as the progress comes in trickles.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

Gender inequality is a global problem, and the battle to end it has been on for as long as anyone can remember. The reasons for gender inequality and its persistence are well-captured in the literature. However, this paper argues that gender equality persists because it is a comfort zone for some; the powers-that-be (“the men”) that dominate the society/state, and that makes the progress on gender equality go at a snail speed in many countries. While this paper is not generalizing the gender experiences and

progress across the world, the slow progress and unfavourable gender experiences of women in some regions clearly show that the benefits of gender inequality for “men” are hindering progress. The fear of losing the “comfort zone” is a factor.

Therefore, the paper recommends that the efforts by feminists, human rights activists, and organisations toward gender equality be intensified. Although gender equality has been a struggle, that struggle has to go on. This is because the comfort zone of inequality, just like any other comfort zone, and as the name implies, is a secure and comfortable place that beneficiaries are not likely to leave, except with a “push.” Knowing fully well that those in the comfort zone have the power cum authority and the fact that authoritative power can be corrupt, stronger campaigns and programs toward achieving equality have to be put in place.

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