

EMERGING ISSUES IN GENDER STUDIES

BY

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PROTOCOLS

Introduction

It is a great privilege for me to stand here to discuss emerging issues in gender studies on the occasion of the 2015 International Women's day. I thank the organizers of this seminar for giving me this opportunity. There is no better time than now for us to ruminate on these issues because women's concerns are part of the purview of gender studies. The year 2015 is also very strategic because in the arena of global development, it is a year of stock taking, to determine the performance of various nations of the world in the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and to chart a new course for the future. Similarly, the time is ripe for us to review gender scholarship in Nigeria and Africa and identify the 'matters arising' from our practice in the past few decades. This address is divided into three parts. The first recalls the rise of gender Studies in Nigeria, establishing linkages between local practice and continental attempts and also with global gender/feminist currents. Local institutions and individuals that powered them are highlighted. The second part examines gender scholarship within wider African and global contexts without losing sight of local peculiarities. Therefore, not only African scholars are discussed, several Africanists are included in the review.

The Rise of Gender Studies

Early writing on gender in Africa was largely about women and by women. Feminist scholars were initially concerned with the status and conditions of women and their neglect in previous scholarship. As women's studies began to examine the construction of gender relations in the 1980s, the attention of scholars was turned to processes and structures through which women and men's identities and relationships were defined. However, much of gender studies in

Africa was concentrated on women as subjects of scholarly enquiry than on men. Thus behind women's and gender studies is a feminist agenda that entails the subversion of oppressive gender hierarchies and the production of knowledge that would empower women in their struggle for social transformation.

The rise of women's and gender studies in Africa had local and global roots. The local roots were entrenched in the desire by feminist scholars to rescue African women's lives from academic obscurity. Commenting on the global roots, Pereira (2004, 4) notes:

Intervening in international fora from the early 1980s onwards, leading African feminists became increasingly aware of the need to voice their distinct concerns and interests within the international women's movement.....[especially in response to] misrepresentations of Africa and African women's lives and realities that prevailed in the western media and among western feminists alike.

In 1977, the Association of African Women for Research and Development was formed with headquarters in Dakar. The idea for this network grew out of the realization that in many African research institutions and universities, research priorities are defined by western countries and shaped by their interests. Moreover, research on women and on issues of great concern to women was framed from a male perspective and mainly conducted by men, while women scholars played marginal roles if any (AAWORD 1999:5)

Some of the workshops convened by the Association covered themes such as methodology (1983), the crisis in Africa (1985), development assistance (1989), reproduction (1992), and gender theories and social development (2001). AAWORD has continued to promote gender-based research up to date even though its influence is waning. Its recent focus include: economic justice and democratic governance, violence against women, impact of climate change on the health of women, and gender and migration.

In Nigeria, there was already a pool of publications on women before women studies became institutionalised. These include: Adetoun Ogunseye (1960), "The Role and Status of Women in Nigeria", Bolanle Awe (1977), "The Iyalode in the Traditional Yoruba Political System", and Nina Mba (1982), *Nigerian Women Mobilised: Women's Political Activity in Southern Nigeria, 1900-1965*. The United Nations Decade for Women (1975-1985) also contributed to the evolution of women's studies. In 1975, the University of Ibadan held its first seminar on Women and National Development to mark the beginning of the United Nations

Decade for Women. A similar conference was hosted at the University of Benin in 1980 (Ezumah 2010). Again in 1985, the Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan organized a National Seminar on Nigerian Women and National Development to assess the impact of the UN Decade for Women. The communiqué issued after the seminar urged the Nigerian government to “set up Women Studies Programmes in institutions of higher learning as a way of ensuring that women’s issues were incorporated in school curricula” (ibid.)

In 1987, the Women’s Research and Documentation Centre (WORDOC) was established in the University of Ibadan following a conference hosted by its Institute of African Studies on the theme: “Women Studies: The State of the Art in Nigeria”. A principal objective of WORDOC was to “provide a focus on Women’s Studies and to promote new methodologies for this purpose through coordination of research projects in Nigeria”. (ibid) This goal has been faithfully pursued despite the various challenges encountered by the Centre. In addition, WORDOC has remained a platform for the dissemination of research information by serving as a repository for scarce intellectual resources on gender/women’s studies. The pioneer/coordinator of WORDOC was Prof. Bolanle Awe with Nkoli Ezumah as the secretary.

Since the 1990s similar centres have emerged in other parts of Nigeria. These include:

- Women’s Studies Unit, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.
- Centre for Gender and Policy Studies, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife.
- Documentation and Analysis of Women’s and Gender Studies Unit, Nnamdi Azikwe University, Awka.
- Ahmadu Bello University. Gender and Women Studies Group, Zaria.

In addition to all these was the Network for Women Studies in Nigeria (NWSN) formed in 1996 under the leadership of Amina Mama and later Charmaine Pereira. Its membership was drawn from various Universities in the country while it established firm networks with Centres for Women’s studies. Its main concern was to promote the institutionalization of gender and women’s studies in universities. It organized regular workshops in its early years and disseminated its research reports widely among Nigerian feminists and their various institutions. The reports included:

Setting an Agenda for Gender and Women’s Studies in Nigeria (1996)

Concepts and Methods for Gender and Women’s Studies in Nigeria (1997)

Gender and Policy (1998)

Curriculum Workshop for Gender and Women's Studies (1999)

Gender Politics of Violence (2002)

According to Pereira (2010:92):

The cumulative impact of these workshops has been to facilitate participants' access to new and ongoing research, as well as to published work on gender and women's studies in Nigeria and elsewhere. The workshops have also provided a forum for debate and discussion with peers across Nigeria, the exchange of ideas and experience and possibilities for future collaboration.

Feminists from these centres and the various Nigerian Universities have also maintained valuable links with other regional bodies such as the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) based in Dakar. In 1991, CODESRIA organized a gender workshop/conference from which it published a book edited by Ayesha Imam, Amina Mama and Fatou Sow (1997) titled *Engendering African Social Science*. In 1998, the CODESRIA Gender Institute was introduced as an annual platform for training junior scholars in gender methodologies. In 2002, CODESRIA organized a gender symposium in Cairo and from its proceedings launched the CODESRIA Gender Series in 2004.

The various centres and network for gender and women's studies within Nigeria have had to battle with daunting odds especially in the area of institutionalizing women's studies. University administrators have not been enthusiastic to accept women's studies as a viable academic discipline. There have also been funding problems. The Centres have had to scout for autonomous funding, especially from foreign donors who often have a different research agenda. Most times, other feminist scholars within the same research network did not have the opportunity of benefitting from donor-driven research as such were usually not widely circulated. But despite all these challenges, the Centres successfully incubated gender and women's studies in Nigeria and nurtured it to its present level of productivity and acceptability. In all these the role of WORDOC in pioneering and promoting gender and women's studies has been unmistakable.

Gender Scholarship in Nigeria and Africa

Gender scholarship in Africa is largely multidisciplinary. The key disciplines include anthropology, sociology history, philosophy, law, literature, economics, agriculture and education. The focus is no longer on women alone but on other issues such as the position of gender within translocal and transnational cultural currents, history and ethnography of masculinities, gendered colonialisms, and reconfiguration of gender in Africa (Cornwall 2005) There is now a vast array of literature on gender, which makes the task of identifying new issues very daunting. Moreover, the focus in this address is only on Anglophone literature because of linguistic challenges. The brief review of literature presented below is organized around the following themes, namely, conceptual and theoretical debates; economic issues; social themes; gender and religion, gender and politics; and life histories.

Conceptual and Theoretical Debates:- These debates have emerged on the definition and deployment of terms such as ‘gender’, ‘woman’ and ‘feminism’ Many scholars have tended to avoid the feminist label and its overtly political thrust even when they pursue apparently feminist causes because of the hostility of certain patriarchal forces. Again the use of the label ‘woman’ has been questioned for its monolithic logic. Scholars believe the ‘woman’ category should be differentiated to reveal multiple identities of women in various local contexts. However, it is the concept of ‘gender’ that has generated the most vociferous debate in academic circles.

‘Gender’ emerged in the 1970s in western feminist discourse as a ‘political category, representing hierarchical relations of power between men and women, with men having the upper hand and women having to battle against oppression and opposition. This concept of gender has been faulted on various grounds. First, it is seen to have privileged ‘sexual politics’ of heterosexual relationships over other types of gender relationships such as women/women interactions, and relations of consanguinity between siblings irrespective of sex. It has also obscured ‘maternal politics’, which is manifested in women’s collective action as mothers and women’s activities within the micro politics of intra-household relations (Cornwall,2005).

Perhaps, the most celebrated challenges to this western notion of gender has been from Ifi Amadiume (1987) and Oyeronke Oyewunmi (1997). Amadiume in her *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* shows that women can possess masculine attributes which have nothing to do with biological sex. Through wealth and seniority, women

can build up power and authority. Her work thus destabilized previous conceptualizations of sex and gender by showing that gender is not shaped by sex in a unilinear fashion.

Oyewunmi, in her *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* exposes the Eurocentric foundations of western feminist, and by extension, gender concepts. These concepts, according to her, did not exist before colonial rule. Moreover, the western gender analysis obscures other parameters of difference at work in Africa, e.g. wealth and seniority. When these other dimensions are privileged, the myth of female solidarity is undermined. This is because within economic contexts, women sometimes exploit other women and occupy hierarchical structures. This also has the tendency to deflate the assumption of universal male domination.

Thus the general idea of the oppressed woman sometimes misrepresents women's agency. Other scholars [Steady 2004, Kisiang'ani 2004] have equally questioned the dichotomous-model / binary analysis introduced by the male / female perspective of gender power relations which has tended to obscure other multiple lines such as race, class, ethnicity, age and nationality.

This challenge of the concept of gender is significant in that it has generated a new understanding of gender that recognizes multiple identities of women in varying domains of discourse and their relations to other subjects. Gender identities need not be presented as fixed while the changing contours of power relations should also be highlighted. According to Cornwall (2005: 13).

In challenging the equation of 'gender' with a monolithic relation of inequality between men and women, African women's Scholarship poses more fundamental questions about the extent to which western feminist models in themselves create and obscure differences rather than offering the prospect of making a difference.

Closely related to this is the search by African feminists for Afrocentric alternative to western gender theories and concepts. Dismissing feminism as inappropriate within the African context, alternatives such as the acronym 'STIWANISM' (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) (Ogundipe – Leslie 1994), 'motherism' (Acholomu 1995) and 'womanism' (Kolawole 1997) have been suggested by a few scholars. Others, on the other hand have cautioned against the adoption of such Concepts. Such terms, rendered in English are still "alien and inappropriate as feminism in an African village whom English is not spoken" (Nnaemeka

2005:39) Instead as suggested some, rendering feminism in the plural as ‘feminisms’ will capture the variations in women’s experiences whether in Africa or beyond. Moreover, over the years, western feminists have listened to the critiques of African and Third World feminists and “have reconsidered their earlier simplistic paradigms to come up with more complex theories. Postcolonial feminism [thus] owes much to African, Asian and Latin-American thinkers” (Amina Mama in Salo 2001: 61)

Gender Scholars on Economic Issues: In the study of rural women, much has been written on the gender division of labour in the pursuit of livelihoods (Guyer 1980, Afonja 1981, Oluwasola 1998, Ani 2003, Akankpo and Asa 2006). From focusing on division of productive activities by sex, some of the scholars shifted their emphasis to the larger environment within which the pursuit of livelihoods took place. This allowed the scholars to explore gender dynamics in analyses of production (Guyer 1991, 1995) and socio - cultural issues affecting agricultural concerns such as land tenure (Afonja 1986, Gray and Kerane 1999, Abdullah and Hamza 2003) Ekenta et al. 2012) Other segments of the women’s activities in productive economy have also enjoyed scholarly attention. There were conceptual re-orientations like Ekejiuba’s (1995) distinction between the household and the hearth hold and other studies of intra-household relations and contests over resources. Many more research efforts have been devoted to farming and food processing in various parts of Nigeria (Walts 1984) Oluwasola 1998, Ojo 2002a, 2002b, Sabo 2006) Female crafts in the textile industry have also been studied by scholars such as Renne(1992) and Byfield (2002).

Urban women have also been studied in terms of their work and social connections (McIntosh 2009) these include women traders and others in the informal economy. Women’s response to structural Adjustment Programmes of the 1980’s and the 1990’s has equally attracted Scholars attention (Akanji 1997). Women’s wealth, its public perception and rich women’s involvement in politics have not always been void of tension as demonstrated first by Eanes (1988) and later by Denzer (2004). It is within the Urban setting that studies on masculinities have been situated (Lindsay 2003a, 2003b, Cornwall 2003, Adeboye 2008)

Social Themes: The social themes explored by Nigerian gender specialists include but are not limited to: renegotiation and preservation of the past by Yoruba women (Barber 1991), domestic

work and domestic science training (Denzer 1992), Marriage and divorce (Mann 1983,1983; Byfield 2001), hometown associations (Denzer and Mbanefo (1998) and fashion (Byfield 2004). Other themes include education, especially higher education (Salami and Ojo 2006, Perira 2007, Odejide 2007, and Okonkwo et al and Ezeh 2008) and health (Okonofua et al 1997, Odebiyi and Aina 1998, Imogie et al 2002 and Ezumah 2003). The theme of violence against women has also attracted researchers' attention (Adjekophori 2000).

Sexuality research recently came to the fore of gender research in Nigeria though not much has been done compared with the high level of sexuality research in other parts of Africa. However, the few publications of Nigerian sexuality have been very poignant in their analysis. Three works stand out in this regard. First is Misty Bastian's (2005) study of the cultural meanings of nudity in Southeastern Nigeria which interrogated indigenous ideas about nakedness among the Igbo, highlighting its gendered nuances. Second is Charmaine Pereira's (2005) work on "*Zina* and Transgressive Heterosexuality in Northern Nigerian", which was published in the wake of the imposition of the Sharia legal system in parts of Northern Nigeria and the conviction of Amina Lawal in 2002. The study contextualized the sexual terrain in which *Zina* is located and highlights examples of transgressive heterosexuality by men that are rendered invisible by the selective implementation of the Sharia. The last and most recent is Saheed Aderinto's (2015) *When Sex Threatened the State: Illicit Sexuality, Nationalism and Politics in Colonial Nigeria 1900-1958*, which is a systematic analysis of prostitution in colonial Nigeria. It engages with the intersections of sex, class, race and gender, and explores the various contours of sexual politics within a colonial context.

Gender and Religion: Studies of gender in religion have emphasis the role of women in traditional religious rituals (Drewal 1987, Matory 1994, Olupona 1997, Olajubu 2003) and in spirit possession cults (Masquelier 2005). Studies on Islam show women as religious agents (Boyd and Last 1985), emphasisig their intellectual contributions in the past two centuries (Dubar 2000, Mack 2008). Hutson's (1999) study of women's political and spiritual activity in the Kano Tijannya punctured the myth of a general female subordination in Islam. Ogungbile's (2004) study reveals new expressions of Islam under charismatic female leadership while Adeboye (2009) discusses the politicization of Muslim womens groups and their attempts at transnationalism (2013).

Of the various expressions of Christianity in Nigeria, Africans instituted churches and Pentecostal organizations have attracted the most attention from gender Scholars. From providing critical analyses of their gender practices of various groups (Crumbley 2008), Scholars have moved on to examine the public life of Pentecostal women (Olademo 2009) and the overall impact of Christian women's organisations on the Nigerian society (Akintunde 2010). The idea is to explore how women have been able to change the faith rather just being forced into its mould, their various organizational strategies and public role.

Highlighting identities forged and performed in different cultural spaces, contemporary studies of gender and religion go beyond an earlier focus on women's leadership in 'marginal' religious domains to the intersections between religion and everyday life. The ambiguities of gender and power are clearest within the heterogenous terrain of religious practice (Cornwall 2005)

Gender and Politics: Some of the earliest works on women's gendered experiences in politics and governance include Awe's (1997) study of the Iyalode in Yorubaland and Okonjo's (1976) publication titled "The Dual sex Political System. Igbo women and Community Politics in mid – western Nigeria, "which discussed the role of women in governance in the traditional political system and the impact of the colonial encounter on women's status. Several studies also examined women's militancy, collective action and rebellion against the colonial regime while highlighting their significance in shaping nationalist consciousness (Ifeka- Moller 1975, Johnson 1982, Mba 1982, Bastian 2002, 2003). Women's involvement in trade Union activism has also been studied (Osiruewu 2004). An Anthology edited by Jean Allman et al (2002) examines different experiences of African women from several nations under colonial rule. The Themes explored in the various essays in the collection include contestation of power, colonial representations of African women, and the various issues on which they engaged with local women. The emphasis of the authors is on the way African women negotiated the complex forces of colonization in their daily lives. By categories of African women, the collection challenges the ideas of a monolithic African women's encounter with colonial rule.

Nina Mba's (1982) study remains a classic on women's political mobilization in Nigeria. Later works on women's participation in modern politics include Ayoade et al (1992), and Osinnulu and Mba (1996). LaRay Denzer's (1994) study of three West African women

nationalist leaders discusses female engagement with nationalist politics and their various strategies. The history of the National Council of women societies in Nigeria has also been presented by Ojewusi (1996). Many of these studies of gender and governance within the post-colonial context have highlighted continuities between the colonial disregard for women and the later entrenchment of male bras in state bureaucracies and policy formulation

Life Histories: There is a rich body of biographical writing in Nigerian women studies. These life histories, among other things have helped to illustrate social history and processes. The biographies include those of baba of Karo (Sruitn 1980), Kuforiji Olubi (Odebiyi 1985) Lady Oyinkan Abayomi (Johnson-Odim 1992, Coker 1987), Gambo Sawaba (Shawulu 1990) Olufunmilayo Ransome Kuti (Johnson-Odim and Mba 1997), Margaret Ekpo (Effah – Attoe and Jaja 1993), Hafsatu Ahmadu Bello (Adamu 1995), Lady Kofoworola Ademola (Rosoji 1996) and Folayegbe Akintunde Ighodalo (2001). Autobiographies include those of Irene Ighodalo (1994) and Sulia Adedeji (1995). The collection edited by Bolanle Awe (1992) also contains several short biographies of Nigerian women.

The political role of these biographies has been identified through their emphasis on the content of women's lives and how these could constitute a source of inspiration for women in the present.

Emerging Issues in Gender Studies

In spite of the vast literature on gender themes, there are still issues that need to be revisited, emphasized, broadened and accommodated given recent local and global currents not only in the realm of scholarship but also in the day to day realities in the lives of women. These issues have been classified under various headings and summarized as presented below.

- *Revisiting Gender Concepts and Theories:* Within the last decade several scholars have lamented the fate that befell the term 'gender' when it was transplanted into and domesticated within the development discourse (Gender and Development GAD). From being an activist analytical category, 'gender' was transformed into a descriptive, simplified, ambiguous and depoliticized term. Within the world of aid, it lost its analytical bite. Terms like 'gender equality', 'gender mainstreaming' and 'empowerment'

are no longer what they used to be in gender scholarship. There is therefore a need for scholars to re-politicize and reinvigorate a gender agenda concerned with transforming inequitable power relations, not just focusing on palliatives schemes promoted by the development discourse. Various gender concepts would have to be revisited and redefined (cleaned up and recuperated) while wrong use of gender analysis should be rejected. An example of what is being proposed here is the recent anthology edited by Cornwall and Edwards (2014) titled *Feminisms, Empowerment and Development: Changing Women's Lives*, which revisited and redefined the concept of 'empowerment' within the context of development and illustrated this with several case studies, about half of which are African.

Closely related to this is the unrelenting demand by feminist scholars for Afrocentric alternatives to western gender ideologies and that intellectual emphasis should not only be on theory building, but on using the theories to solve practical problems of women in Africa. While this is laudable, we should recall that several of such attempts made in the past have not enjoyed popular acceptance even within African feminist intellectual circles. Rather, I would suggest that before discarding western gender ideologies, we should consider the latest revisions inspired by African critique and see how those could be woven into our own 'home grown' attempts.

- *Need for Broader Analyses*: There is a need for us to establish clear linkages between various levels of analysis. Local, national and transnational perspectives should be made complementary. It is necessary for us to present larger frameworks for our analysis instead of presenting stand-alone case studies. Micro studies are so numerous that attempts now should be made to explore broad linkages and macro concerns. This would encourage pan-African research and strengthen continental research networks, where such exist. Comparative studies could be used to start this off. The African diaspora should also be incorporated into studies of gender in Africa with necessary attention paid to the context in which they operated.
- *Impact Assessment Research*: Having engaged in gender research for about three decades, there is a need for us to assess the impact of our research efforts on women lives and interests. After all, we all know there is an inherent political agenda in gender or feminist

scholarship, which is to challenge and subvert oppressive gender hierarchies. The questions we should be asking now are: how has the knowledge produced so far strengthened the agency of local women? What are the limits of gender study in Nigeria? How do we define women's interests when women are so differentiated? The required assessment could start as intensive micro-level studies which could later be merged or synthesized into macro analyses.

- *Need to Re-politicize Gender Studies*: The political agenda of gender research should be constantly articulated and pursued within the changing socio-cultural milieu. This is necessary because researchers are becoming too 'uninvolved'. (This, again, creates a dilemma for historians, for instance, who have to battle with issues of objectivity and denial of advocacy). Nevertheless, the strategies required to realize the political agenda of gender studies should be clearly defined by scholars. As the agenda changes, so must the strategies for actualizing them.

- *New Emphases in Research*: As vast as the existing literature is on gender themes, there are still areas that require more research attention. Some of them are outlined as follows:
 - ✓ Study of masculinities: More research is required in the area of men's identities. There has been too much emphasis on women. Several questions are begging for answers. Emerging issues in this regard include: the implications of religious expectations for men's identities; need to carefully explore men's gendered experiences in politics and the economy; need to problematize the concept of patriarchy and interrogate multiple masculinities. Although most men (especially in Africa) are not excited about gender research, there is the need for them to address the issue of embedded male privilege evident in virtually all spheres of life.
 - ✓ Sexuality studies: More focus required on men and women's sexuality, the political power of pleasure, issues of sexual rights, religion and sexuality, cultural representations of sexuality etc. (cf. Jolly et al 2013, *Women, Sexuality and the Political Power of Pleasure*). Even though many African governments have clamped down on its LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) community,

there is still the need for us to engage in queer studies to enable us generate knowledge on their origins, growth/spread and contemporary manifestations in Africa.

- ✓ *Women's History*: More attention is to be paid to women's history. Research focus should not only be on prominent women, ordinary women should also be studied. Diachronic approaches are to be encouraged even in non-historical studies to enable scholars explore linkages between present conditions and past processes.
- ✓ *Women Crossing Boundaries*: We need more research on the role of women as bridge builders, crossing ethnic, national, cultural and even religious boundaries. On the other hand, we need more understanding of the ways in which the personal relationships of African women were shaped by the dynamics of nation, ethnicity and cultural groupings. More studies required on women's migration and on the broader field of gender and transnationalism.
- ✓ *Other themes*: Disability among Women, Women's Participation in Science and Technology, Women and the Environment, etc.
- ✓ *More Insight from New Disciplines on Gender Issues*: Film Studies, Media Studies, Tourism Studies, Environmental Studies, etc.

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, it is clear that while much has been done in the field of gender studies, much still remains to be accomplished. Whilst the global impetus that precipitated gender/women's studies in the 70s and 80s seems to have settled, we should not relent in our efforts or wait for another global awakening to spur us on. Gender/women's studies in Nigeria and Africa have won intellectual recognition through the sheer volume of their scholarship. The quality and scope of the literature have been enhanced through its multidisciplinary. This should be continued and reinforced. The success story of gender studies has also been partially due to fact that practitioners networked among themselves and also with activists outside the academy. This should be continued. While we appreciate and celebrate the contributions of our 'foremothers' in gender and women studies, the challenge before this present generation of gender scholars is to revive and strengthen dying networks within and

outside Nigeria, look for lasting solutions to the issue of funding for the various Centres of gender research in our institutions and cultivate the support of male scholars and male authority figures within and outside the academy. The foundations for gender studies have already been laid it is the duty of this generation to build on it a lasting intellectual edifice.

The UN theme for this International Women's Day is "Make it Happen". In the light of this presentation, the task before us is to 'make happen' revisions in our gender scholarship and explore new areas in order to sharpen our analytical tools, make our practice more efficient and produce lasting changes in the lives of women around us.

I thank you for your attention.

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