Women's Movement of Nigeria: the Challenge of State Patriarchy

Movimiento de Mujeres de Nigeria: el desafío del Patriarcado Estatal

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of state power in limiting the Women's Movement of Nigeria (WMN) during the 1950s, focusing on the challenges faced by women activists in their pursuit of empowerment and gender equality. The study explores the historical context of women's marginalization in Nigeria, shaped by cultural practices and British colonialism, which restricted women's roles in society and politics. Despite these barriers, the WMN emerged as a significant force advocating for women's rights, aiming to challenge societal norms and secure political participation for women. Using a qualitative historical research methodology, the study employs thematic and chronological analysis of archival materials, documentary data, and historical contextualization to explore the WMN's goals, strategies, and its interaction with state patriarchy. The findings reveal that while the WMN made important strides in mobilizing women and advocating for gender equality, its efforts were hindered by state control and political party dominance, particularly from the Action Group (AG). The movement's dependence on government

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support and political affiliation ultimately led to its decline, demonstrating the challenges faced by women's organizations in maintaining independence within a patriarchal political system. This research offers critical insights into the intersection of gender, power, and state control in postcolonial Africa and emphasizes the importance of organizational autonomy and sustainable, independent support for women's activism.

Keywords: Women's Movement of Nigeria (WMN), State patriarchy, Gender equality, Women's activism, Colonialism, Political participation, Feminism, Empowerment, Postcolonial Africa and Political struggle

Resumen

Este artículo examina el papel del poder estatal en la limitación del Movimiento de Mujeres Nigerianas (MMN) durante la década de 1950, centrándose en los desafíos que enfrentaron las activistas en su búsqueda del empoderamiento y la igualdad de género. El estudio explora el contexto histórico de la marginación de las mujeres en Nigeria, marcado por las prácticas culturales y el colonialismo británico, que restringieron su rol en la sociedad y la política. A pesar de estas barreras, el MMN emergió como una fuerza significativa en la defensa de los derechos de las mujeres, con el objetivo de desafiar las normas sociales y asegurar su participación política. Utilizando una metodología de investigación histórica cualitativa, el estudio emplea el análisis temático y cronológico de materiales de archivo, datos documentales y la contextualización histórica para explorar los objetivos, las estrategias y la interacción del MMN con el patriarcado estatal. Los hallazgos revelan que, si bien el MMN logró avances importantes en la movilización de las mujeres y la defensa de la igualdad de género, sus esfuerzos se vieron obstaculizados por el control estatal y el dominio de los partidos políticos, en particular del Grupo de Acción (GA). La dependencia del movimiento del apoyo gubernamental y la afiliación política finalmente condujo a su declive, lo que demuestra los desafíos que enfrentan las organizaciones de mujeres para mantener su independencia dentro de un sistema político patriarcal. Esta investigación ofrece perspectivas cruciales sobre la intersección del género, el poder y el control estatal en el África poscolonial y enfatiza la importancia de la autonomía organizativa y el apoyo sostenible e independiente al activismo de las mujeres.

Palabras clave: Movimiento de Mujeres de Nigeria (WMN), patriarcado estatal, igualdad de género, activismo de mujeres, colonialismo, participación política, feminismo, empoderamiento, África postcolonial y lucha política.

Introduction

In Nigeria, the Women's Movement was established in the 1950s during the final phase of colonial rule when nationalism and women's activism played a pivotal role in challenging colonial rule and combating gender inequality (Panata, 2020; Ugwuja & Onyishi, 2023; Adesina et al., 2024). This marginalization of women in Nigerian society is characterized by cultural practices and traditions that historically restricted their roles and status within families and broader society. Additionally, British colonialism reinforced gender inequality by limiting women's roles in political affairs and the bureaucracy. Women in Southern Nigeria gained empowerment in the 1950s, while those in Northern states recei-

ved their political rights in 1979. However, Nigerian politics only tolerated women in subordinate roles within the structure of each party. As illustrated, the political parties were not ready to allow free and independent women's movements.

This paper focuses on the instrumental role of state power in restricting the Nigerian Women's Movement's ability to direct its efforts toward the empowerment of Nigerian women during the 1950s. It is significant both for the insights it offers into the challenges faced by women in activist movements and for its exposure of how persistent gender power dynamics continue to undermine the strength of women's organizations as a social force in Nigeria and potentially across the African continent. This marginalization of Nigerian women, especially in the public sphere, led to the formation of the Women's Movement of Nigeria (WMN) as an organization.

This study situates the Women's Movement of Nigeria (WMN) within the theoretical framework of liberal feminism—a perspective that emphasizes women's equal participation in political and social institutions through legal reform, education, and advocacy. However, the state and its legal system have historically been tools for patriarchal control, restricting the transformative potential of women's activism. Grounded in the liberal school of women's empowerment, as explored by Hay (2020), Vintges (2019), and McClain & Hacker (2021), the WMN's reform efforts proved to be both essential and unstable. The Nigerian government carefully defined the limits of acceptable activity, supporting women's organizations when convenient, but marginalizing them when their demands challenged the status quo. State patriarchy influenced the WMN's course by forcing women's organizations to operate within state-approved models, filtering the feminist movement through a patriarchal lens, and compelling them to rely on official funding. These limitations constrained activism, forcing women leaders to negotiate a political terrain where negotiation superseded confrontation, producing concessions that inadvertently bolstered the patriarchal systems the movement aspired to dismantle. The WMN's history is one of resistance, adaptation, and strategic persistence, highlighting the need for a critical re-evaluation of institutional inclusion as a path to emancipation.

Literature Review

Women's activism in modern Africa raises diverse questions and controversies regarding gender, feminism, and gender equality (Mkhize & Mgcotyelwa-Ntoni, 2019; Ford, 2018). While the significance of women's collective action in Africa's male-dominated societies is often dismissed, scholarly discourse provides irrefutable evidence of its existence (Gouws & Coetzee, 2019; Chiluwa, 2025; Molyneux et al., 2020). Some of these discourses have focused on the African feminism concept, addressing different contexts, movements, and historical moments (Mianda, 2022).

Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, a prominent Nigerian women's activist, advocated for suffrage and equal rights for women, preceding the second wave of the women's movement in the United States. She also participated in Nigeria's struggle for independence as an activist in the anti-colonial movement. For Women and the Nation: Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti of Nigeria is the story of this brave woman, one of the few complete biographies of African women activists (Johnson-Odim & Mba, 1997). More recently, questions have been raised about the meaning and theoretical re-conceptualization of the feminist movement in sub-Saharan Africa, which has emerged in debates about rights, sexuality, roles, and identity in the region. This article offers a historical perspective on the converging structures that influenced movements in the Global South, examining the colonial dimensions of these movements and their consequences for women's rights, identities, and roles (Aniekwu, 2006).

The existing literature on women's activism predominantly emphasizes on the marginalization of Nigerian women within the public domain. Oni (2014) argued that political movements, activism, and various affirmative actions aimed at eliminating all forms of discrimination against women

helped free Nigerian women from political isolation. The author concluded that only institutionalized and accountable policies could guarantee women's right to political participation. A major concern in some literature is the root of African women's powerlessness (Bawafaa, 2024).

It is widely believed that Western influence has weakened African women (Bordo, 2023; Lesthaeghe, 2023). The experiences of Igbo women in British colonialism show that Western influence can sometimes undermine or destroy women's traditional autonomy and power without providing modern alternatives (Allen, 1972; Narayan, 2018; Falola, 2021). Similarly, the effects of Islamization and colonialism on Hausa women led to their exclusion from public life, relegating them to domestic spaces. When French and British forces invaded the region inhabited by the Hausa, the partition they created roughly corresponded to the Hausa people inside and outside the Caliphate (Bergstrom, 2002).

Violence against women remains a core focus of the international women's movement (Mama, 2013). According to Chadya's analysis (2003), a gender bias was evident in the very formation of nationalist movements. This scenario was replicated in independent Africa, where men held most of the senior government posts, relegating women to the margins of political and economic decisions at the party and government level. Using examples from sub-Saharan Africa, the author examined the role African women played in the formation and building of African nationalisms and how these historical origins affected their position in the postcolonial state. It is contended that African nationalism achieved its objectives at the expense of women (Johnson-Odim, 2009).

Women's efforts to overcome socio-economic and political underdevelopment and marginalization are increasingly on the rise (Brock-Utne, 2019; Anunobi, 2002). The goal is to eliminate gender stereotypes and address institutional gender bias related to marginalization. Achieving this goal requires collaborative efforts among women at all levels—grassroots, national, and international (Omotola, 2007).

On a positive note, authors use the contrasting cases of Chile and Nigeria to show factors encouraging women to take advantage of opportunities presented by the transition to democracy. This requires a broad-based women's movement that provides feminists with access to political institutions (Okeke-Ihejirika & Franeschet, 2002).

While the reviewed literature provides valuable insights into the historical paths, ideological frameworks, and mobilization techniques of women's movements in Africa—including Nigeria—critical interaction with the function of the state as a patriarchal structure still lags behind. One area still underexplored is how the Nigerian government itself acts as a deliberate and institutionalized agent of patriarchy. Little research has been done on how state institutions—through law, bureaucracy, security apparatus, and political culture—reproduce gendered power imbalances, methodically impeding the progress of women's rights. The experience of the Women's Movement of Nigeria, with its fate determined by institutionalized state patriarchy, provides a basis for understanding government influence on women's activism.

Methodology

This research uses a qualitative historical research methodology to examine the Women's Movement of Nigeria within the context of state patriarchy and the structural constraints of women's activism in Africa. It employs thematic and chronological approaches to analyse the WMN's goals, trajectory, and interaction with state patriarchy. Archival materials, documentary data, and historical contextualization are used to examine both internal movement dynamics and external government pressures. A dual methodological approach, focusing on topic analysis and analytic chronology, was adopted to explore fundamental themes such as gender advocacy, organizational autonomy, state control, and the limitations of national women's actions in postcolonial Nigeria.

This study also contextualizes the Movement's

history within a larger national and global framework, examining its ideological antecedents, the influence of global feminist currents, and the postcolonial state of Nigeria. It aims to question the structural elements influencing the Women's Movement of Nigeria while highlighting historical agency and advancing knowledge of the ongoing difficulties faced by national women's movements in Nigeria. Also, it examines the intersections of gender, power, and state control in African history.

To select the relevant documents for this study, a purposeful sampling approach was employed, focusing on archival materials, documents, and records that provide insight into the Women's Movement of Nigeria (WMN) during the 1950s. The documents were chosen based on their historical significance, relevance to the movement's key events, and their connection to state patriarchy and gender advocacy. Archival materials were sourced from the personal papers of key figures, including Mrs. Elizabeth Adekogbe, founder of the WMN, and other publicly available records from the period. In selecting the documents, emphasis was placed on primary sources such as meeting minutes, official correspondence, and records of the movement's interactions with political parties. The analysis was conducted using a combination of thematic and chronological methods. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and themes related to gender, power dynamics, and the state's influence on women's activism, while chronological analysis helped to trace the movement's evolution over time.

Background of the Women's Movement

The historian's task of reconstructing the history of an organization, especially one that embodied the life and character of its charismatic founder and leader, can best be approached through the lived experiences of its leadership. This is exemplified by Johnson-Odim and Mba's (1997) biographical study of Olufunmilayo Ransome-Kuti, which highlights her parallels in terms of courage and dedication to women's emancipation with Chief (Mrs.) Elizabeth Adekogbe. Both invested their energies into the societies they established, and their decline led to the eclipse of those organizations. Before delving into the rise and fall of the Women's Movement of Nigeria, it is important to understand the historical background of its founder, as this provides insight into the fragility of women's organizations in a patriarchal state. Mrs. Adekogbe was born into a chieftaincy family in Ijebu Ife in 1916 (F. Olumide, personal communication, August 2018). Elizabeth, the seventh of eight siblings, was well-educated in Lagos at the Saint Agnes Catholic Training College and at Yaba Higher College. These experiences enabled her to pursue a career in public service. Adekogbe also worked as a journalist, contributing regularly to the Southern Nigeria Defender and the Tribune, and became involved in politics within the NCNC camp.

During this period, polygamy was common even among educated individuals, whether Muslim or Christian. Elizabeth Adekogbe's marriage into a royal polygamous family presented numerous challenges. She became a single parent to her daughters, Fola (11) and Priscila (13+), ensuring their education amidst considerable hardship and discrimination. This discrimination stemmed from family succession laws, which mandated male heirs for chieftaincy positions.

The Women's Movement of Nigeria

The Women's Movement of Nigeria (WMN) was founded at Agbeni Methodist School on Saturday, December 13, 1952, at 5:45 p.m. (Adekogbe, 1953a). The initial objectives of the society were to "fight for universal adult suffrage, create equal educational opportunities for both sexes, abolish the *Aso-ebi* (uniform traditional woven dresses) practice, establish cooperative societies to improve women's economic conditions, advocate for legislation to address dowry and divorce issues, and formulate market bylaws to improve women's rights in the marketplace" (Adekogbe, 1953a). Membership was open to all women, regardless of tribe, religion, class, education, or occupation, with a membership fee of 1 shilling. The Movement held regular meetings, and its first annual general assembly and anniversary were held

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in Ibadan on December 12-13, 1952, at the Youth Social Club, Agbokojo. Over 300 delegates from the ten branches then established attended the event. The WMN organized lectures, debates, seminars, and workshops. In June 1953, they initiated the first all-women cooperative society in Ibadan, which subsequently expanded to other towns in the Western Region where they had established branches.

The Movement pursued affiliation with the International Council of Women (ICW) on June 14, 1954, during the Triennial Conference of the ICW held in Helsinki, Finland. The ICW, founded in 1888, was one of the first international women's organizations (International Council of Women Records, n.d.), and it was initially restricted to capitalist countries. According to Article II of the Nigerian Women's Movement Constitution, the Movement was established as a national women's organization, with its headquarters in Ibadan, though the constitution allowed for the possibility of relocating the headquarters to another town in Nigeria if necessary. The motto of the ICW, "Do unto others as ye would that they should do unto you," was adopted (Women's Movement Constitution, 1952a).

The Movement's commitment to pursuing gender equality was ingrained in its constitution. The opening statement of Article IV espoused the belief in "the justice of women's complete emancipation." Specifically, the Movement aimed to bring together women and women's organizations from all parts of the country to consult on actions to be taken to: promote women's and community welfare; eliminate women's economic, educational, and social disadvantages; facilitate women's national participation; foster inter-women cooperation; disseminate community information; coordinate related societies; provide citizenship training for women; and affiliate with the International Council of Women to establish international connections (Women's Movement Constitution, 1952b).

Fourteen women from the major Western-educated elite enrolled as members on the day of inauguration. Among them were the wives of notable political figures of the region, such as Mesdames F. Oguntola, H.I.D. Awolowo, M.A. Oni, Comfort Solarin, and Mrs. Elizabeth Adekogbe (Women's Movement Minutes, 1952c). On January 22, 1953, at Kudeti Grammar School, a committee of six members, including Elizabeth Adekogbe, H.I.D. Awolowo, E. Alayande, V. Akinyemi, and Bolarinwa, conducted a review of the movement's draft constitution (Women's Movement Minutes, 1953a). Two days later, decisions were made for traditional rulers from the three major regions of the West, East, and North to serve as patrons of the movement (Women's Movement Minutes, 1953a).

The Women's Movement decided to depart from the idea of having eight traditional rulers as patrons. The leadership felt that older and respectable men were needed to shield the Movement. Therefore, they sent letters to lawyers, doctors, legislators, and other influential men. Work on the constitution and the Movement's publicity continued throughout the year.

Inaugural Movement Officers were elected on February 26, 1953, with Elizabeth Adekogbe serving as General-President, Beatrice Bassey as Secretary, and B.A. Banjo as Treasurer. The executive body consisted of fifteen members, encompassing both national and local positions (Women's Movement Minutes, 1953b). To achieve its objectives, the Movement formed diverse groups focused on economic, political, educational, and social propaganda initiatives. The Women's Movement of Nigeria was established with the express purpose of serving the broader community, eschewing partisan political or religious affiliations. Following the establishment of the initial branch in Ikoyi, additional branches were inaugurated in Ijebu Ode, Apomu, Owu-Ikija, and Lagos (Adekogbe, 1953).

A significant lecture on cooperative societies, held on February 7, 1953, at Boys High School, aimed to benefit Nigerian women. Delivered by the Registrar of Cooperative Societies, the event drew over 200 attendees and highlighted key advancements, including 23 scholarships for women, a designated seat for women in the Legislative Assembly, and the successful passage of a resolu-

tion. Mrs. Adekogbe herself generated a concerted consciousness of nationhood among both the male and female population. According to her, "taxation without representation is no democracy," since women were not represented on the Native Administration (NA) Council. At this time, only working-class women and businesswomen could vote by producing their tax receipts. She advocated for a clear interpretation of democracy, questioning why a white woman, Miss Gladys Plummer, was included in the legislative council while Nigerian women were excluded. She challenged the NA Council to create 20% of its seats for women (Adekogbe, 1951).

By January 1953, when the AG won the majority of seats in the Western Region House of Assembly, Mrs. Adekogbe rigorously pursued the inclusion of a Movement member into the House during the nomination process. This was prompted by a motion passed by the House requesting the Lieutenant Governor to nominate at least, one woman legislator. According to Anthony Enahoro, an Action Group party member in the Western Regional House of Assembly, "...this House regrets that there are no woman members in the House..." (Mba, 1982). The Governor appointed a woman, Mrs. Remi Aiyedun, who took her seat in the House on May 4, 1953. Mrs. Adekogbe described this appointment as "undemocratic, grossly unfair, and very insulting to the women of this country" (Mba, 1982). Mrs. Adekogbe used her column in the dailies to advocate for equal treatment of both sexes (Adekogbe, 1952).

Political Pressure and Decline

The Women's Movement faced significant resistance from the Action Group government, led by Premier Obafemi Awolowo. Although the government initially expressed support for the Movement, it later sought to suppress it due to political exigencies. The government's resistance was largely driven by concerns that the Movement's leadership was aligned with the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC), the Region's main opposition. The government deployed various strategies to curb the Women's Movement.

A major stumbling block for women's activism was twofold. The first was the power and resources required for the Movement to function effectively as an organization controlled by political parties dominated by men. The lifeblood of the Movement depended on major donations and the moral support of the male-dominated political elite. Moreover, the General-President of the Movement was a party member of the NCNC, the main opposition party to the Action Group in the Western Region, as mentioned earlier. Pressure from the ruling party in the Western Region began on February 7, 1953. At his invitation, Mrs. Adekogbe met with Obafemi Awolowo, leader of the Action Group and Premier of the Western Region. He discussed the Movement's relationship with the Action Group, suggesting that the "Movementers" become "Women Groupers." This suggestion meant that the Women's Movement would be dissolved and replaced by the Women Action Group. Mrs. Adekogbe, in vain, tried to convince Awolowo that this would result in the failure of women to organize independently. He enumerated obstacles related to transport, finance, publicity, and moral support, stating that the Action Group would not support the Movement if it remained independent, nor would his political party (Adekogbe, 1953a).

The Movement's members ultimately agreed only to an affiliation, not a merger. Subsequently, the Action Group leader requested a copy of the Movement's manifesto and draft constitution. Eventually, the decision was made that the Women's Movement would only tolerate an alliance with the Action Group. This led to the withdrawal of the wives of Action Group members, among other measures of suppression (Adekogbe, 1953b). The Action Group's leaders launched a campaign to discredit the Women's Movement, suppressing news about the Organization and using media to criticize its activities. For instance, the Daily Service published harshly critical articles, describing the Movement as "stillborn" and Mrs. Adekogbe as "overambitious" (Mba, 1982). The government also denied financial aid to the Women's Movement's cooperatives, which further hindered its efforts.

Despite these challenges, the Women's Movement continued to meet, and its members re-

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sisted through alternative means, such as using newspapers like The Pilot and The Defender to counter government propaganda (Adekogbe, 1953c). Eventually, the government succeeded in suppressing the Women's Movement, leading to the formation of the Women Action Group, or "Groupers Wives," on February 26, 1953. The following day, officers were elected, with Mrs. Elizabeth Adekogbe serving as President-General (Adekogbe, 1953d). Despite the political pressures, the Women's Movement continued its advocacy. Reverend A.S. Solarin sent a note to inform the Movement that a scheduled meeting could no longer be held at the Methodist school room at Agbeni, Ibadan. This was on a meeting day, just a few hours before the scheduled gathering. Therefore, the venue was changed to Dugbe Market, where the Movement had strong support. Many members of the Action Group party, particularly from the Remo ethnic group, shared tribal affinity with Mr. Awolowo, the leader of the party, and were Methodist Christians (Adekogbe, 1953e).

In the meantime, the National Broadcasting Service (NBS) suspended the Women's Movement's radio programme. However, the Director of NBS later intervened and ordered that the programme be returned to the airwaves. These incidents exemplified the ongoing tension between the Movement's autonomy and government control. By June 1954, Mrs. Adekogbe attended a meeting of the International Council of Women (ICW) in Helsinki, Finland. Upon her return, she switched her membership from the NCNC to the Action Group. This shift marked a turning point for the Movement. From that moment, the majority of the Women's Movement's members became affiliated with the Action Group, including six vice-presidents and two secretaries. The Movement's name was changed to the National Council of Women (NCW), though it continued to claim an apolitical stance. However, it ceased criticizing or commenting on government actions. Mrs. Adekogbe (1953f) explained:

While the NCNC, NPC, or AG Women's Wings are political, ours is not. We are demanding the rights of women through a united women's effort. The problems of women are above political parties. That is why we do not propagandize for any particular political party, although we may have our private leanings.

The Movement continued to function under the new political affiliation until 1958. Meanwhile, Mrs. Adekogbe's appointment as the full-time organizing secretary of the Action Group Women's Wing severely undermined the leadership of the NCW, as all her energy was diverted to the party. This shift in priorities contributed to the eventual dissolution of the Movement.

Conclusion

The Women's Movement of Nigeria was founded by one of the foremost women activists in the country. Despite the challenges, the organization succeeded in mobilizing women for empowerment, forming one of the strongest grassroots-based women's organizations in Nigeria. Chief Mrs. Elizabeth Adekogbe, the founder, demonstrated immense commitment, courage, and self-sacrifice in sustaining the Movement until its eventual decline. Like Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, who similarly established her charismatic leadership in the Movement, Adekogbe provided the drive and vision for the Organization's activities. Furthermore, the Movement adhered closely to global standards, as outlined by the International Council of Women in Helsinki.

Despite the commendable efforts of the Movement, its dissolution revealed that while women's inherent qualities and mobilization prowess were substantial, they were inadequate in an African nation where patriarchal traditions and cultural norms precluded women from robustly engaging in the public domain. The lack of financial resources, compounded by the Movement's dependence on government support, made its collapse inevitable. The situation was exacerbated by the intense political rivalry between the NCNC and the Action Group, both of which vied for political dominance in the Western Region during the period. This political struggle made it increasingly difficult for the Movement to survive, especially as the government's power grew over women's organizations.

The subsequent dependence of women's organizations in Nigeria on government support underscores the critical role state power plays in shaping the existence and control of these organizations and their ability to further women's aspirations. This study highlights the need for women's Movements in Nigeria and other postcolonial African nations to find sustainable sources of support that do not rely on state power, which often seeks to suppress and co-opt their efforts.

While this study provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by the Women's Movement of Nigeria, it is limited by its reliance on archival sources that may not fully capture the experiences and voices of all participants in the Movement. Future research could focus on oral histories from surviving members or their descendants to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the Movement's grassroots dynamics. Additionally, this study primarily examines the Movement's decline within the context of political rivalry and state control. Future research could explore other factors contributing to the Movement's limitations, such as regional variations in women's activism across Nigeria or the impact of specific socio-economic conditions on the Movement's strategies. Finally, comparative studies with other postcolonial women's movements in Africa could provide further insight into the common challenges faced by women's organizations in the context of state patriarchy and political fragmentation.

Authors contributions

Dauda Ishola Jimoh: Conceptualization, Visualization, Validation, Formal Analysis, Writing the Original Draft, Investigation.

Ridwan Olabisi Yusuff: Methodology, Supervision, Resources, Data Curation

Muhammad-Bashir Owolabi Yusuf: Writing Review, Editing, Project Administration.

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