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Gender Apartheid: How Child Marriage Affects the Girl-Child Education in Nigeria

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Sociology of Women (Section A)

“You educate a man; you educate a man. You educate a woman; you educate a generation.”
— Brigham Young

Thesis Paragraph:

Most people in the world still believe that ‘slavery’ is a thing of the past; that racism is publicly frowned upon so no man can own and brand his name on another man and force him to work on plantations or cotton fields. When asked about their opinions on ‘slavery’, people automatically answer retrospectively. This is a complete misconception and such people cannot be blamed because they are either wrapped in collective false consciousness or are not directly affected by supposed ‘slavery’. Contemporary slavery exists in many forms, some of which include racism, classism, sexism and especially gender apartheid –the extreme exclusion and seclusion of women from society, amongst others. Gender apartheid is discernible in extremely patriarchal societies, which can be found in developing countries in Asia, the Middle East and Africa. My home, Nigeria, the largest African country in terms of population, is culturally diverse and naturally endowed but also highly patriarchal. One of the recurrent cultural practices in Nigeria, which persists in rural areas is Child marriage – where one or both of the spouses are under 18 years of age (Al-Jawadi & Al-Ridhwany, 2014). It is biologically and psychologically hazardous to force a girl into marriage, but this act is justified under the umbrella of cultural preservation. However, one must avoid ethnocentrism when analyzing the factors (i.e. patriarchy, capitalism, religion etc.) that fuel such practices.

A news article was recently published about two teenage girls in Nigeria who are currently on death row for murdering their husbands. The article reveals that the girls were

victims of child marriage and this phenomenon is the ne plus ultra of contemporary slavery. Growing up in Nigeria exposed me to a lot of stories/experiences of girls forcefully getting married before the age of 15 and writing about it is not as abstract or shocking to me as it would be for people in most western nations. I am very curious about the effect it has on the country. Culture explains why men choose to ignore the idea that this phenomenon is an abuse of human rights. Child marriage ultimately affects the level of education of a girl and where it is common, statistics have shown that the level of female educational attainment is low. The number of girls who lack access to basic educational facilities or who have been forced to drop out of school at a young age has declined in urban areas but an experiment carried out in 2014 in a small village in Nigeria showed that marriage arrangements are the cultural determinants of girl-child education for 92.7% of the community (Ehiemua, 2014). Education helps to combat poverty and inequality; if girls are educated, they understand their rights as human beings and they work to overcome gender barriers. If, however, they are not educated, females are more likely to succumb to discrimination from men. My research question then, is “**How has child marriage affected the girl-child education in Nigeria?**”

I am very patriotic and would much rather write about the emerging technological and innovative advancements in Lagos or the female lawyer who went to court in Nigeria to challenge a ridiculous law that required women to get their husband’s consent before renewing their visas, but raising awareness about child marriage requires me to step out of my comfort zone to write this paper.

Gender segregation in Nigeria starts when a child is born and continues throughout its lifetime. Sometimes the segregation is very pronounced and unapologetic, as when the law sees

no wrong in a man dictating what his wife can and cannot do, and other times, it is very subtle. Durojaye et. al argued that gender inequality will flourish in places where women's fundamental rights are not acknowledged and respected. It is aggravated by existing patriarchal institutions such as disparities in the enrollment of girls and boys in schools (as cited in Norris and Inglehart, 2001). For example, my third grade teacher had given the class a quiz and had said the person with the highest quiz score would automatically become the class prefect. I remember being shocked and slightly upset when she realized I had the highest grade, but immediately declared the boy with the second highest grade the class prefect and I was his assistant. I did not stay upset for longer than a day; my teacher certainly did not see anything wrong with her decision and neither did the class. In retrospect, I realize that we all bought into the false consciousness of the patriarchal structure of Nigeria, where boys are seen as more powerful and overall better than girls and as such, should hold the highest position of power and, if necessary, be assisted by girls. As used by Marx, false consciousness is when a subgroup buys into the belief of the dominant group (Pines, as cited in Jost et al., 2009). False consciousness as an ideology elucidates philosophical opinions, supports the status quo and provides a false image of reality. Marx and Engles regarded ideology as a "potentially dangerous form of illusion and mystification that typically serves to conceal and maintain exploitative social relations" (Jost et. al., 2009).

Many (if not all) Nigerian cultures support patriarchy, so gender inequality still hangs over the country. Ebenezer Durojaye, Britget Okeke and Adetoun Adebajo's article titled "Harmful Cultural Practices and Gender Equality in Nigeria" focus on cultural practices and their major effect on the agency of women in Nigeria. They emphasize three common aspects of culture, which include son preference, burial rites and primogeniture system. The authors discuss

how cultural practices affect the fundamental rights of women to education and equality. The authors talk about the disparities that exist in the educational system, where girls, particularly in the North, are usually withdrawn from school at an early age and married off. The authors' discussion of common law system of Nigeria, which is based on legislation, customary laws and Shari'ah is intriguing. Despite being a federation, some Nigerian states strictly follow customary and Shari'ah laws, which "perpetuate discriminatory practices against women" (Interights, 2004 as cited in Durojaye at. Al). Nigeria de jure operates on the common law legal system, whereby judicial precedence is the order of the day, but legislative, customary and Shari'ah laws are the de facto legal system. In the federation, each state in Nigeria has the power to make its own legal decisions and while the constitution has a provision for women's right, customary and Shari'ah laws do not. In fact, they do the exact opposite.

Among the Igbo people of Nigeria, widows are subjected to several inhumane treatments upon the death of their husbands. Most of these practices are considered proof of innocence in his death and they include ostracism, shaving of hair with a razor blade, isolation, change of diet and drinking the water used to wash the corpse of the deceased. A woman who refuses to undergo these requirements is usually subjected to worse treatments and what stands out in such cultures is that men are never subjected to any of these practices, but instead, are consoled and encouraged to remarry. Does this mean that men are incapable of murdering their wives? These practices negatively affect the social and economic advancements of such communities (Ewelukwa, 2012). Such practices are hard to abandon because they are supported by customary laws and have been incorporated into several institutions like the community council. When questioned, elders in these communities give reasons, sometimes biblical, that support their cultural beliefs. They say that a woman is only a helper to a man and thus must spend her life

trying to complement his; she must make sure he is never hungry, his house is always tidy, he has male children to take over his legacy. A man is responsible for doing the job that brings money for the household and a woman must always respect and depend on him financially or else there would be a power conflict and chaos in the community. From a functionalist perspective, such division of labor is necessary to keep the social order because if everyone in society has equal power and resources, there would be no difference between a leader and a follower; rules that are in place would not be followed and there would be no incentive for development. However, it is also important to consider the conflict theory perspective, which places emphasis on power struggle and coercion. When women are marginalized, they become the proletariat in Marx's classification and men, the bourgeoisie. From a symbolic interaction theory perspective, subjective meaning is given primacy because people behave solely on what they believe. Gender apartheid is an injustice, but men in such rural communities trivialize women to enhance their own status. Therefore, the symbolic interpretation of gender inequality becomes the norm.

Culture in turn affects women's educational agency. It is a culture that determines whether or not a family sends both their sons and daughters to school or not. In Goodluck Ifijeh and Osayande Odaro's article titled 'Issues In Girl-Child Education In Nigeria: Implications For Library and Information Support', the authors state that gender apartheid represses female and put them in a disadvantaged position where self-actualization cannot be met and statistics have shown that only 20% of women in the North West and North East of the country are literates (UNICEF, 2007 as cited by Ifijeh et. Al, 2011). Ifijeh and Odaro listed factors that inhibit girls' education in the Northern part of Nigeria and these include child labor, truancy, lack of sponsorship, quest for wealth, bereavement, broken homes and poverty (as cited in Nzekwi and

Njoku, 2008). Most families believe educated girls are either promiscuous or intimidating since they have higher chances of marrying people outside their culture. The belief is that foreigners encourage girls to abandon their cultures and early marriage is used to curtail this. These misconceptions lead to stereotype threat since the girls in such villages avoid the risk of confirming negative stereotypes (Offorma, 2009). According to the article, an Action Aid International (AAIN) cited by KIKI (2010) reports that hitherto, a school in Northern Nigeria would have 150 students enrolled out of which about 2-3 would be females. As soon as a man shows an interest in marrying a girl in such communities, her family immediately stops her education and gives her hand in marriage to her suitor, provided he possesses admirable qualities.

Cultural support of gender apartheid is not only visible in Northern Nigeria. Ehiemua Solomon conducted a research in 2014 analyzing the effects of marriage arrangements on girl-child education in Urohi, a rural community in the central region of Edo state. Ehiemua draws our attention to statistics which show that although there are more women in the world today than men, more men are enrolled in school. He asserts that the data is not a coincidence, as women are seen as subordinates and properties of men. He also uses regression analysis to determine the relationship between child marriage and female education and he collects the data through questionnaires and verifies his hypothesis through t-test. His conclusion shows that marriages are in fact, the cultural determinants of female education in Urohi.

Another researcher, Nnadi Ine, published an article about the gender based violence and violation of women's rights in Nigeria. She states that most girls are given away in marriage at an early age for economic gains (the family would not have to pay for her education) or to

establish a kind of beneficial link between both families. Young girls are married off to men old enough to be their grandfathers and are forced to remain in such marriages. It is believed that if a man marries a girl, he would postpone any sexual activity with her until she reaches puberty, but unfortunately, majority of these men forcefully have sex with these young girls, resulting in severe complications during early pregnancy such as obstructed labor and fistulas (Childs Right Information Network, 2011). Nnadi narrates the story of a nine year old Hauwa Abubakar that is married off to a forty year old man who her father is indebted to. Hauwa attempts to escape on several occasions and after the third attempt, her husband chops off her legs with a poisoned cutlass, triggering the state government to pass a law that prosecutes parents who engaged their children in early marriages. Nnadi also states that early marriage deprives a girl of proper education since she is expected to start having children immediately. It is very unfortunate that because such practices are inculcated and supported by public institutions, members of these communities protect rather than expose wrongdoers (Dhital, 2011 as cited in Nnadi, 2014).

Two Nigerian female public figures, Julie Okoh and Stella Oyedepo, wrote two books (Brain Has No Gender and Edewede, respectively) which are based on the violations of women's right in Nigeria. Okolocha Oby and Sophia Akhukumokhan wrote an article about these two books and explicitly discussed various aspects Nigerian culture, such as circumcision of female children, child marriages, lack of provision of female education and preference for male children. The writers emphasize the idea that gender discrimination in Nigeria is often denied and referred to as "culture" and they seek to use literature as a medium to draw attention to such attitude. Okolocha and Akhukumokhan support the message of both writers and they analyze the case of a man- Alani, who had sixteen female children, but only sent one, Osomo, to school because he

believes female children are useless and we are told that Alani eventually arranges a marriage for Osomo and forces her to drop out of school.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, gender apartheid is a practice that still exists in several parts of Nigeria and men and women are anything but equal. When the six general characteristics that determine women's equality are analyzed and compared to the situation in most rural part of Nigeria, the result is poor i.e.

- Women's work is not central to the economy
- Women do not have access to education
- Religion supports gender inequality
- Men do not make direct contributions to household responsibilities
- Work is highly segregated by sex
- Women do not have access to formal power and authority

Girls are not sent to school or are withdrawn at an early age and married off for several factors which range from economic gain to the maintenance of family integrity. As soon as a girl is married off, she has little to no chance of going back to school to further her education. This cycle goes from generation to generation, thus reducing the level of educational attainment for girls. Many cultures support the mistreatment of women and child marriage is not frowned upon because patriarchy entitles a man to marry whoever he wants. When girls get married at an early age, they do not have access to education because they become housewives, mothers and homemakers who are solely dependent on their husbands. The economy of the country could

improve greatly if women become educated, but despite these prospective benefits, traditions that support child marriage are still in place. This is because women in patriarchal communities have bought into the false consciousness of men, such that they train their daughters to become housewives and encourage them to get married as soon as suitors begin to show up, not minding their education. The federal Ministry of Education and United Nations Children's Fund has and is still organizing campaigns for girl-child education in Nigeria but grass root measures need to also be taken; the locals need to be educated and enlightened about the repercussions of child marriages. They need to know that cultural practices are a reflection of the patriarchy system and culture does not make people but rather, people make culture. Also, the government should enforce rules that require parents to educate both male and female children and legal penalties should be stipulated for men who engage in child marriage. In addition, girls should be taught about the values of a good education and the importance of egalitarianism in a society. Social and economic programs should be developed for girls who are victims of child marriage because this will increase the level of literacy in the community and improve the standard of living in such places.

In conclusion, child marriage robs girls of their innocence and turns them into untimely adults. It exposes them to domestic violence, diseases and psychological trauma. It is a barrier that hinders the education of women in the society and it negatively affects the level of economic growth of a country. Statistics have shown that countries with low gender inequality index have better economies and this proves that women's contribution to the economy cannot be overemphasized. Gender apartheid is an injustice and it is important for awareness to be raised so that such practices be eradicated because "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" (King, 1963 as quoted in Osborn, 2004).

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