

Are Women Today's Slaves?

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Slavery was made illegal a long time ago but it has never been abolished. It is still here today in various forms and women are among its victims. It may sound exaggerated to label the violence that women suffer as slavery. Nonetheless, the situation of gender relations shows sufficient traits that are typical of slavery. That is why we must be aware of this violence which goes often unnoticed.

Firstly, let us refresh our understanding of slavery. Slavery is a system under which people are treated as property, traded and subjected to forced work. It is also a relationship whereby one person has absolute power over another, controlling his/her life and liberty. We speak of *chattel slavery* when people are treated as property that can change hands like commodities. In *bonded labour* a person is in some kind of debt which he/she has to pay by fulfilling certain roles. And we have *forced labour* when one is obliged to work or do something against his/her will.

In the manner women and girls are treated in families, marriages, work places and in their social interaction, elements of these types of slavery are evident. Women are treated like objects and instruments with no regard for their dignity and autonomy. Let us examine this in detail.

It begins with the kind of education they are given which arrests and limits their horizon for self-realisation. In her *Introduction to Gender and Development* Julia Cleves Mosse writes: "*The social institutions that we enter as individuals, from our arrival in our families at birth, through our education, youth culture, and into the worlds of work and leisure, marriage(...)give us clear messages about how normal people behave, according to their gender. We learn the option open to us.*" Thus, a girl who throughout her development has only one song sung to her about her role as being a wife and a mother, grows up to think marriage is the only option in life for her. She may not be aware of how enslaving this indoctrination is but she really suffers its consequences right from the start.

For instance, who is favoured when it comes to sending children to school? A girl may be intelligent and keen but in many cases the boy enjoys the priority, even when he is not interested in school. Why? Because it is taken for granted that a girl will be taken care of by her husband. Within such context, early marriages are no longer a surprise, they are only the logical, though sad, outcome. Recently, in Mazabuka, three girls of ages ranging between 13 and 15, were taken out of school to marry them off, robbing them of their liberty for self-determination. Is that not slavery?

One may wonder, why would parents shove children into marriage when they are physically and psychologically not mature yet? The following case is quite revealing. Ruth is 12 years old and is already working as a maid in a household on the Copperbelt –an obvious abuse in itself. Her father calls her to return urgently to Luapula. He wants her to get married soon for he is afraid he may die and leave someone else to enjoy the bride price. In the eyes of her father Ruth is an object for monetary gain. She is dehumanised.

Similarly, in forced marriages, even for adult girls, parents drag their daughters into marriage for their own convenience and profit: a blatant case of forced labour! And if the daughter revolts she is intimidated. But who dares give this violence the name it really deserves?

At times the problem is compounded by the girls themselves who are in a hurry to get married, especially when they see that they are advancing in age. In his *Anthills of the Savannah*, the late Chinua Achebe ably expresses the desperation of an unmarried woman: "*... Better to marry a rascal than grow a moustache in your father's compound; better an unhappy marriage than an unhappy spinsterhood; better marry Mr. Wrong in this world than wait for Mr Right in heaven*". Let us be frank though: this comes from the mentality that pretends to respect a woman only when she is married.

However one should have no illusion. Just being married is not enough; a woman has to prove herself, as a servant and a worker, for the satisfaction of the husband who behaves like her employer.

A childless woman has a hard time to secure her marriage. She is scorned, especially by her in-laws who will do everything possible to have her divorced. With such an utilitarian attitude, a woman is identified solely with her capacity to bear children. One is a woman not for who she is but for what she is –her function and not her person is what counts!

Besides, a wife is very often treated like a servant. Of course, there is nothing wrong with her doing chores in her home. However, it is certainly wrong to view marriage as employing a servant. And some men have the nerve to tell the wife in the face: *"That's why I married you—it is to execute those duties"*! Indeed, are courts and the media not full of cases of violence related to such duties?

A man in Lundazi killed his 19-year old wife, Jane Banda, allegedly for preparing dinner late; Brenda Nawale in Mbala was killed by her husband because she did not cook kapenta; in Mongu a man battered to death his wife Namakau Konga, 25; a 42 year old woman was axed by husband in Siavonga; in Choma a man stabbed to death his wife, Chalina Lonely, with a screw driver allegedly over money dispute; Eli Chabale, 38, who could not prepare *nshima* because her husband did not give her money to buy relish, was battered to death after he returned home drunk.

I do not claim to exhaust all the reported violence neither can the media cover it all but this is sufficient to portray the degree of slavery that women suffer. How many slaves died at the hands of their master? Still today they continue to die but we lack the courage, the honesty and the seriousness to call it slavery; rather we hide behind generic descriptions like "domestic disputes".

Such violence is also encouraged by the exaggerated bride price by which a man feels he owns a woman. Why! After all he bought her! It is the catalyst in the torment of women in marriage for it accords somehow ownership rights as expressed by the Chinese proverb: *"A wife married, is like a pony bought, I'll ride her and whip her as I like"*. Regrettably, this is not just an Asian proverb but the daily lot of many Zambian wives. It is a clear case of *bonded labour* where a woman has to fulfil the roles for which she was paid.

Indeed, it is encouraging that women are growingly reporting to the police cases of abuse in the home or work place. However, there are still many unreported cases because of constraints.

How will the husband react when his wife reports her boss who is flirting with her? Probably he will yell at her, blaming her for acting like a loose woman. She risks also losing her job or sending her breadwinner to prison in case of reporting her abusive husband. Besides, a woman is lauded as someone well instructed if she keeps secret the "bedroom issues", including abuses. Owing to such shackles it is hard for women to break free. In the end, it is only their violent death that allows us a glimpse on the misery some of them might have endured in their marriage.

The slavery women still suffer today is just too much for one article. So this is only an alarm to awaken society: here is something grave demanding our attention!

In his recent visit to *Varginha favela*, a Brazilian slum, Pope Francis said: *"Everybody, according to his or her particular opportunities and responsibilities, should be able to make a personal contribution to putting an end to so many social injustices"*. Indeed, the violence women suffer today needs our concerted attention and response.