Because I am a Woman

By Ramata Diallo
Indiana University of Pennsylvania

"I cannot let you go to a foreign country because you are a girl."
"Stop your studies because you are a girl."

"I want to further my studies."

"What, are you a man?"
"Please stop studying and find a husband. There is a time for women to get married."

I heard these expressions throughout my life from my family, friends, and society because I am an African woman. "Woman" has been and still is a synonym of motherhood and wifehood, sweetness and obedience, but it has never been a synonym of power, strength, and success. I am a woman. Because I am a woman, I am told that I should be patient, docile, and obedient to my husband, family, and society. Because I am a woman, I can neither be smart nor be financially independent nor professionally successful. Because I am a woman, I do not have the right to an education and a career. Because I am a woman, I cannot be treated with respect without being married. Because I am a woman, if I cheat, I am a prostitute. Because I am a woman, if I slap my husband, I am a bad wife. My only role is to cook, do household chores, take care of my family, and be obedient to all the rules set by my family and society. I am writing this article to share my experience as a *woman*, an *African woman* in our modern society, showcasing the difficulty of social and cultural burdens as well as affirming that education is one of the solutions to gender equality in today's world. It is also to show that we (*all women* no matter our *race, skin color, nationality, ethnicity, social class, religion, or education*) should always strive and show sheer determination to achieve all of our dreams despite social pressures, patriarchy, sexism, gender roles, racism, and xenophobia.

Social Norms: The Gender Trap

Caught between modernity and tradition, Séguéla, the City of Diamonds, is a town on the western Ivory Coast. The compound known as Fuladu is located in and area called Quartier Residential. Fuladu is a big, modern villa with three large rooms. Behind, there is a one story shelter, the garage, and a small courtyard where women do laundry on Sundays. Once you enter the compound, the first thing you see is the veranda, three big mango trees, and a well. In this Fuladu lives a Muslim family. The father is polygamous and has three wives. He studied the *Quran* and did not go to school. Being a trader, he is the breadwinner of the family and the only decision-maker. His second wife dropped out of school in the second grade. She has loving parents, but they do not believe that girls' education is vital. She is a housewife; she is happy doing the cooking, laundry, and other household chores, and she never challenges her husband's decisions.

I was born in Séguéla into this Fulani family, and I started school at the age of four. I do not remember everything that happened during primary school. The only images that come to my memory now are ones of me standing in the schoolyard, seeing girls with short hair, and being surprised to see that girls were obliged to cut their hair like boys. I had long, beautiful hair like most Fulani women, and I loved my hair. But I did

Diallo, R. (2021). Because I am a woman. *Currere Exchange Journal*, *5*(2), 17–23.

not care about cutting my hair as long as I could go to school. I was pleased to go to school, like my brothers. The further I progressed in school, the fewer girls there were in the classroom. When I was in third grade, there were just three girls in a classroom of 20 boys. I continued to go to school until the fourth grade. Due to the civil war in Ivory Coast, we went to my parents' home country of Mali. My parents enrolled me in a public school. Again, in my classroom, I noticed that there were few girls. My female classmates were always quiet in classrooms, and the teacher rarely heard their voices. In this large classroom, the teacher knew the names of only the pupils who were active and had excellent grades. Most of the time, those best pupils were boys. Noticing that, I decided to speak up and not remain silent, to assert myself, because I wanted to have the same opportunities as boys in my class, and I did not want to be invisible.

At home, I was a silent girl who complied with all the roles, rules, and norms in my family. I grew up seeing my mom cooking without any complaint. I have never seen my father even close to a kitchen, let alone cooking. It was normal for me. I thought that being a good woman meant being someone who knew how to cook and aspired to marriage. As a young girl, when my mom was going to the market, I was eager to accompany her. I always went to my father and said, "Dad, give me money to buy some food to cook." My dad happily gave me money. I even had some small kitchen tools that I used, and I was happy about that because, in my mind, that was what a good woman was supposed to do.

At 13 years old, unlike my brothers, I already knew how to cook and did all the household chores in my family. Every morning around 5:30 am, I got up, still sleepy, and I started cleaning the floor. As soon as I finished, I took a bath. Then, I went to school. During lunch or dinner time, I served food to my brothers. On Saturdays, I did laundry with my other sisters. On weekends, I learned how to cook, because it is seen as one of the virtues of a good woman. On the other hand, my brothers got up at 6:30 am to take a bath and go to school. When they came back home, they had their lunch. On Saturdays, they hung out with their friends or did other things they enjoyed. I never considered this to be an issue when I was young, mostly because I didn't realize it was unfair.

At school, it was the same story. Leadership was for boys; cleaning and cooking was for girls. From fifth to 12th grade, I cleaned the classroom, either by force or simply because I felt it was my role. I guess school staff considered that was what I was best at, but they never wondered if I wanted to ring the bell or be a class leader. So, I ended up never doing those things during my primary and secondary school tenure.

Moreover, I grew up hearing comments like, "men are more athletic than women," and "men are great at math, and women are great at art and languages." Indeed, studies have proven that children as young as age 10 have internalized these beliefs (Blum et al., 2017). Eslen-Ziya and Koc (2016) found that children "internalize this myth that girls are vulnerable and boys are strong and independent" and "associate men with hard work, toughness, endurance, determinedness, success, and power" (p. 802). On the other hand, they associate "women with passivity, weakness, cowardice, and inadequacy" (Bayar et al., 2017, p. 2). I grew up into these norms, always striving to become a more ladylike girl, a proper and ideal woman. I can even confess that, as a child, I was convinced that no matter how intelligent, talented, and independent I was as a woman, I needed a husband to be fulfilled in life and to be a complete and perfect woman. This little girl who grew up with all those gender norms, perceptions, and roles in her family is still inside me, even though I am aware that women are just as capable as men.

Those beliefs and questionings have always been on my mind in this patriarchal society where obedience, silence, and respect are paramount. Thus, during my childhood and until now, I showed respect to my parents by being obedient. This obedience meant turning down internships or trainings that I won through hard work because my dad thought it was inappropriate for a girl to come home at 6pm.

In 10th grade, I decided to choose language and literature as a field of study because I was passionate about languages. Moreover, I believe I had internalized all the beliefs of my brothers who said language and literature are fields for girls and science is for boys, and they laughed at me. I felt I was in a field where I belonged. In the society where I live, almost everybody thinks that men are more successful in math and chemistry, whereas girls are more successful in the humanities. Plante et al. (2019) noted that the belief that languages are a feminine domain is widespread among students and teachers. People in my culture also think that "boys need careers and girls need husbands." Thus, when you are top of your class as a girl, your male classmates start doubting your abilities and insinuating that you are having an affair with the teacher. Even in business, a successful woman is seen as a person who sleeps her way to the top. I have personally experienced and have witnessed a lot of cases where the woman's effort and value have not been recognized simply because she is a woman.

Back in 12th grade, I succeeded in getting a baccalaureate with a distinction. I could have had a scholarship to study in Morocco or Algeria, but dad shut me down with his common dogmatic response, "*No, you are a girl*. You need to stay close to your family." So, I never said a word and abandoned this thought. So, I went to a public university and studied English for four years. After four years, I decided to participate in a contest for ENsup, a teacher training school. It was very competitive, and I was the only woman accepted in the English department. When I came back home, I announced the news to my dad. I was so happy, but he was skeptical and offered not a single word of congratulation or encouragement. I felt sad and disappointed by his attitude. He just wanted me to get a job after college and get married. He was stunned by this news because it would mean two more years before these events would happen. As a result, I would be less marriageable by being more highly educated than most men in my country.

These two years in ENsup were challenging. It had its ups and downs. I had many health issues, and my relationship with my father was not ideal. It was tough sometimes, as I gave up many opportunities that could have been very useful and opened new doors for me for the sole reason that I was a woman and I needed to abide by my father's rules and social norms. Surprisingly, when I told my dad that I had been named valedictorian of my program, which meant that I would participate in "Camp d'Excellence," a camp for the best students in Mali, and I would meet Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, the President of the Republic at that time before the coup of August 2020, he was thrilled. His fears and doubts about my life vanished as he realized that I could be as successful as men. He enlarged the picture of me with the President and put it in the living room. Whenever his friends or other people came, he showed the picture and said proudly, "This is my daughter Ramata; she is with the President of the Republic." This accomplishment gave me social and economic capital in my family, at school, and in society. I went from being an invisible girl to an empowered woman who is a role model for many young women.

When I decided to further my studies, my family and many friends were dubious and looked at me strangely. Their eyes were saying, "It is time to get married. Are you a

man?" I have not been disheartened by those comments. I decided to further my studies because it was the door of freedom, the door of hope, the door of independence, and the door that would help me achieve all my dreams in this world. I did not want to be the girls I saw in my classrooms, silent and not active. I want my voice to be heard, so I always say what I think, and I don't beat around the bush. At home, I zipped my mouth, controlled my emotions, and conformed to the traditional roles and norms of a good woman for the sake of respect and obedience, but also as a way to challenge patriarchy. It must seem contradictory to use silence, a tool of patriarchal oppression, as a tool for resistance against patriarchy. As Parpart (2019) said, "silence can provide room for agency in the face of threats as it enables 'victims' to choose between acceptable speech and the unsayable" (p. 320). I chose silence at home and in society as a strategic choice to protect myself from the patriarchal script and social pressure.

Still, I continued to assert myself and speak up at school and in my classrooms. For instance, I became a class monitor, and I was the only woman who became a class monitor in my school. Men were not happy about that in my classroom because "I am *just* a woman, and a woman cannot *lead*." After a few months, they started to call me an iron lady. Even some of my teachers called me that. I'm not too fond of this nickname. I do not know why it is that if a woman is successful, people start to call her that. It indeed means strong woman, but it also means ruthless and mannish because leadership is associated with manliness. As an educated woman, I have been subject to this stereotype and many more, such as tomboy, less marriageable, and the like. I am a highly educated and financially independent woman, but I am still not respected on the sole basis of my gender. I am considered westernized and not "African enough" because I am considered as someone who has forgotten the values of an African woman. That's being an educated woman: a double burden, a continuous dilemma between marriage and education, marriage and work, independence and obedience, and between silence and speaking up.

Trapped by their Gender: The Story of Three Sisters

These continuous gender dilemmas and questions are unresolved in Mali, and they continue to be at the heart of Malian women's lives. From the moment I was born, gender norms were part of my life. What I can do or cannot do, what I can aspire to and not aspire to, what I can say or not to say, what roles and duties I should perform or should not perform, what I should wear or not wear, what job I should do or not do, what kind of games I should like and play or not like and play, what color I should like or not like, how I should behave and not behave, how I should walk and not walk, who I should marry or not marry, have all been prescribed since my birth. But, as I witnessed my brothers' privileges compared to those of my sisters and myself, I wondered how free a girl could ever be if she had no say in her life. Almost all my sisters in my family have been forced to stop their studies and marry a man they did not love.

My elder sister was brilliant at school and, unlike many girls, was studying a scientific field in high school. All the life she envisioned for herself, like finishing her studies, having a fulfilling career, and, perhaps, marriage later on vanished overnight. "Bebe, come here," my father said one day. I thought my sister did something wrong because when my father asked you to come, you had done something bad. My sister came, and my father said, "Sit down here next to me. I decided to marry you." Dumbfounded, she did not say anything and started to cry. She knew she had no choice, so she accepted her fate. However, that's not the saddest part. Her husband's friends started to say, "Do not let her continue her studies; otherwise, she will betray you. She will no longer be

obedient because educated women are not good women." A few months later, my father and her future husband also told her, "You will no longer go to school." She became a "*proper* woman"—respectful and obedient to her husband and parents, not highly educated or just enough to please her husband, a woman who gives birth, accepts her fate, and complies with all the roles ascribed to her gender. Now, she has four children—three boys and one girl. She seems happy; however, she struggles, as she does not want her daughter to fall into the same trap as hers.

Deep inside, I was asking myself who was next. Then came the turn of my younger sister. One morning, she came to greet my father, "*Djanwali, ba*," meaning "Good morning, dad." My father replied to her nicely in Fulani and said, "I found you a husband. It is your cousin." At that time, she was just 15 years old. She walked out of the living room and began to cry. Unlike my elder sister, she continued her studies. She got married to our cousin, and she acted as if everything was fine. Her husband was in Congo, working there as a tradesman. So, after the marriage, he went back there without her. She remained in our home and continued her studies. One day, she left the house at night when we were sleeping and never came back home. She sent us a message saying that she did not love our cousin and would never love him. She did not have any choice except this one. This decision created a lot of tension between my sister and my parents. It took years of silence, quarrels, and pressures to finally come to a more reasonable end. My cousin married another woman, and after some time, my sister was able to divorce without the consent of my parents and her husband. Now, she has a bachelor's degree in marketing and communication.

My heart ached. I wondered why I was a girl, why girls endured so many hurdles, why girls always had to give up their dreams, why girls could not have higher diplomas, and why girls did not even have a say on the man they should marry. I felt trapped by my gender. I wanted to be a man so that I could enjoy the same privileges my brothers have. I yearned for it at certain times. From a young age, I knew I had to work hard, be resilient, and do well at school if I did not want to be trapped and be subject to this gender fate. I was full of anger about being a woman, and to ease that anger, I created big dreams for myself and my future through hard work. I was silent and respected all the norms at home. At school, I was brilliant. I did household chores before and after school. I balanced my school life and my life at home. Then, my turn came.

Unlike my sisters, my father asked me if I would be willing to marry, and I said yes, under the condition that I would further my studies and work after. My future husband and his family accepted this condition. I was happy to continue my studies. After two months of engagement, the relationship broke up because my fiancé did not want me to study or even work after my studies. Surprisingly, it was my father who broke up the engagement because no matter how strict he was, he was fair, and it was what we had agreed. I was happy and full of relief. My sisters and I experienced patriarchy and all its shackles at home, in classrooms, and all over society. However, it will be unfair to blame my family, especially my father, as if they are wrong, as it is the social order or even the world order that is inherently patriarchal. I deeply love my father and my family because they taught me to help people in need anytime I can, to be resilient and honest, to never lie, and to always live up to my responsibilities. If I did not go through all of those challenges, I would not be who I am today, and I would not achieve what I have done today.

My resilience and my achievements have been possible through silence, negotiation, and compromise. With all the gender norms and patriarchal shackles, women are falling behind in education, as exemplified by my sisters. On most occasions, silence has

worked for me. Silence is golden and helped me to tame patriarchy and all the gender norms. In this sense, Motsemme (2004) argues that "silence within a violent every day can also become a site for reconstituting 'new' meanings and can become a tool of enablement for those oppressed" (p. 917). I also used negotiation to overcome the impediments placed on my life and worked slowly to deal with the norm in this tough patriarchal society. It is all about knowing "when, where, and how to detonate and go around patriarchal land mines" (Nnaemeka, 2004, p. 378).

The Way Forward for a Better World

Because I am a woman, I am deeply convinced that good quality and equitable education is an equalizer to tackle gender disparities in wages, poverty, health, and political power. The more educated women are, the more power and control they have over their lives, the healthier their children are, and the more financially independent they will be (UNESCO, 2013). Driven by this strong belief, my goal is to become a qualified and inspiring role model to help other young girls enjoy their right to education. Therefore, I am planning to earn a PhD in educational policy or in curriculum instruction and design to bring changes in my country's educational policies and enact educational practices that will help parents, teachers, and stakeholders learn about the value of women and girls' education.

Because I am a woman, I believe that teachers play an essential role in shaping gendered bodies; they must question their own biases and how that permeates their teaching methods and everyday instructional practices. I believe that teachers can dismantle all those beliefs in classrooms and textbooks. It is no secret that women are underrepresented and portrayed in stereotypical roles in textbooks. Therefore, it is imperative to promote gender equity in classrooms in terms of interaction, materials, and activities.

Because I am a woman, I also believe that more female teachers must be hired in high schools and universities. This will have greater ripple effects by creating a virtuous circle for more girls to be educated and advance their profession. By the same token, it will contribute to the economy, close the gender gap in education, as well as advance gender equality in Mali. Based on Makama's (2013) recommendations and my own suggestions, to promote gender equality in Mali, the country must:

- remove any sexist and patriarchal practices in schools and promote and invest in non-discriminatory teaching materials,
- challenge cultural and discriminatory gender norms and practices that subordinate girls, such as son preference,
- provide role models to girls and raise their awareness about their rights,
- encourage and foster girls' schooling by bringing together religious and traditional leaders to champion that cause,
- sensitize parents, especially parents of girls, to let their girls learn their lessons when they come home instead of forcing them to do the household chores,
- ensure that schools develop feminist critical pedagogies that critically examine the social and cultural sides of gender inequality and empower girls via policies, curricula, and teaching practices,
- address the particular barriers that keep girls out of school or learning, such as long walking distances and social and cultural practices, and
- ensure relevant and fair curricula and promote positive gender roles in teacher training programs.

Because I am a woman, this article may seem idealistic, but it is not. It is true that it seeks to inspire all the women who are in the grip of patriarchy and gender norms to strive and give them hope—critical hope to take action because:

> Without a minimum of hope, we cannot so much as start the struggle. But without struggle, hope, as an ontological need, dissipates, loses its bearings, and turns into hopelessness. I am hopeful, not out of mere stubbornness, but out of an existential, concrete imperative. I do not mean that, because I am hopeful, I attribute to this hope of mine the power to transform reality all by itself, so that I set out for the fray without taking account of concrete, material data, declaring, 'My hope is enough!' No, my hope is necessary, but it is not enough. Alone, it does not win. But without it, my struggle will be weak and wobbly. We need critical hope the way a fish needs unpolluted water. (Freire, 1992, p. 8)

References

Bayar, O., Avcı, H.O., & Koç, M. (2017). What's expected of men in Turkish culture: Perceptions of male university students. *International Journal Advances in Social Science and Humanities*, *5*(9), 1e9.

Blum, R., Mmari, K., & Moreau, C. (2017). It begins at 10: How gender expectations shape early adolescence around the world. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *61*(4), S3–S4. DOI: 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2017.07.009

Eslen-Ziya, H., & Koc, Y. (2016). Being a gay man in Turkey: Internalized sexual prejudice as a function of prevalent hegemonic masculinity perceptions. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, *18*(7), 799–811. DOI: 10.1080/13691058.2015.1133846

Freire, P. (1992). *Pedagogy of hope: Reliving pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.

Makama, G. A. (2013). Patriarchy and gender inequality in Nigeria: The way forward. *European Scientific Journal*, *9*(17), 115–144.

Motsemme, N. (2004). The mute always speak: On women's silences at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Current Sociology*, *52*(2), 909–932.

Nnaemeka, O. (2004). Nego-feminism: Theorising, practicing, and pruning Africa's way. *Signs*, *29*(2), 357–386.

Parpart, J. L. (2019). Rethinking silence, gender, and power in insecure sites: Implications for feminist security studies in a postcolonial world. *Review of International Studies*, *46*(3), 315–324.

Plante, I., O'Keefe, P. A., Aronson, J., Fréchette-Simard, C., & Goulet, M. (2019). The interest gap: How gender stereotype endorsement about abilities predicts differences in academic interests. *Social Psychology of Education*, *22*, 227–245. doi: 10.1007/s11218-018-9472-8

UNESCO. (2013, October). *Education for all global monitoring report: Girls' education – the facts*. https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/sites/default/files/Girls_fact_sheet.pdf