

Charles K. Konadu

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A 35 years old wife in conflict with her husband and her family

The case of Mrs. Afua Nimo, Ghana

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The setting is the office of the presenter which is situated at Osu a busy suburb of Accra. It is the official residence of the Christian Council of Ghana where both individual and group counselling is provided by professional staff. There is a Unit especially designed for dealing with Family and Marriage concerns. Afua Nimo got to know about the counselling facilities through one of the qualified workers of the Council whom she met while executing a national assignment.

Afua arrived for the first interview one afternoon and provided the counsellor with this information:

“At age 35 I work as a bilingual secretary, my dream-come-true job. I have wanted to be a career girl all my life thus I studied hard in school in order to become professional I met my present husband about eight years ago when I was in my final year at the University. We got married while I was serving the nation at Nsia, where he worked. After National Service, I was allocated a two bedroom house in Accra and found my new job and position a dream one: very fulfilling and challenging, one that makes an educated person proud and respected.

My widowed mother found my new position to be God’s smile on her grieving after the death of the husband and her struggle to educate me and my sisters. Probably, the reason why I feel excited about my current professional status is that our father died early and his relatives took little or no notice of us, making our future seem gloomy during our school years. Watching mum struggle to pay our school fees and provide other needs was quite overwhelming. When I look at my mates, they seemed to have everything they needed. Next to them, I felt very poor and neglected.

After my National Service, I got a job in Accra about 250 km away from my husband, with one of the prestigious governmental institutions as a Bilingual Secretary. I started negotiating with my husband to seek for a transfer from his employers and join me in Accra, since his employers had their head office in Accra. The decision to join me in Accra took my husband years to make. During this period, I invited my mother and two sisters to live with me in my two bedroom house. I was lonely and considering the poor conditions under which my family lived in

the village, I thought city life would bring some relief to my ageing mother. Another major reason I invited my mother was the care she would give to my two small children while I was away to work.

Most evenings, I shared with my mother, the days experiences and on occasion, marital problems I had with my husband. Mum, mostly during my absence (I spent the weekends with my husband at Domiabra where he lives) discussed these problems with my sisters. I realized later that all of them spoke ill of my husband and quickly jumped to conclusions.”

Subsequent interviews revealed that Afua was able to convince her husband Yao to move into the city only to be abused and tortured emotionally and subsequently, physically abused by his sisters-in-law in full support by the mother-in-law. The family split and Afua’s depression and guilt feelings worsened.

“Yao finally agreed to my proposal to come and live with me in the city, to my utmost excitement. So he moved into my two bedroom house, already occupied by me the children, my mother and sisters. My difficulties started then. At age thirty-five I feel I have wasted most of my life. I have always dreamt of a degree and good job and a happy family. But here I was with my husband on one side, quarrelling and fighting with my mother and sisters on the other. Several incidents of misunderstanding occurred within the period of two years. One day, while I was gone to work, my sisters with the approval of my mother abused Yao physically over a trivial incidence. (she sobs).

I was very hurt when I get to know of the abuse, especially since I was trying hard to keep my marriage, a job and family going, I reported the case to the police who arrested and jailed my mother and sisters over night. The case was however settled at home. The elders who were present at the arbitration ordered mum and sisters out of the house.

Mum lived with friends she had made in the neighbourhood. The sisters joined other relatives in the city. The biggest shock came within two weeks when Yao arranged with his employers for a transfer to Domiabra. He left with our two children. On occasion when this topic was discussed Yao was very adamant on his stand. He insists that he married me and so he decides where we will live.

One of my problems is that I am lonely, now that I live alone. I also get tired on Mondays when I travel to Accra very early at dawn in order to get to work early before my boss gets in. (He is very understanding though). I am scared of loosing my husband since my Absence for the whole week is telling on the family. I have seen some signs of other women in the house. Thus when I come back to Accra, I feel terrible anxiety much of the time, particularly at night. Sometimes, I get so confused, I feel like running but I just can not move. It is awful because I often feel as if I am loosing all that I have worked for - good job, husband and relatives. Much of the times, I feel guilty that I have not worked up to my potential, that I have been a failure to my mother and sisters who have not visited me for two years now. My mother consented to receive support from me after family elders mediated.

I am tired at feeling like a looser and I know that nobody is going to change my life for me, I must make a decision, a choice which is going to change my life for the better. My friends tell me I am dumb, because if they were in my shoes, they would have stopped the weekend visits if my husband who earns less than I do cannot swallow his pride and join me in Accra. I cry myself to sleep many nights,

feeling so terribly alone and filled with anger and hatred. I don't know what to do with my life. Please help me. ”

Issues

After several sessions which have been merged into the above case, four major issues have become evident:

1. The extended family wields an enormous power on this marriage even in an era of technology advancement and changing role of women in families.
2. The Ghanaian culture expects the man to accommodate his wife and family, thus it was odd for Afua, the professional worker, to want to accommodate her husband.
3. Afua migrated to the city for economic, social and other reasons.
4. There is pressure on the professional woman/wife (Afua) in the developing world as a setting.

Explanation

1. Even though the nuclear family is gradually replacing the extended family in Ghana, there are still traces of the enormous power that it has over marriages that fall within it. Even though Afua may be educated and professional, she crumbled under that power when she allowed mother and sisters to live in with her. There were difficult times when she was torn between backing her husband and family. The family knew that Afua contributed far more to the housekeeping expenses than her husband. To them, he became a powerless, toothless husband who should be instructed and directed always.

Education, urbanization, industrialization, religious dogma and Western way of life and marriage are some of the factors that are contributing to shift the Ghanaian extended family and the relationships to the nuclear family systems.

In Ghana and elsewhere in Africa, marriage transaction and relationship are regarded primarily as an alliance between two kinship groups. Thus, traditionally, kinship ties are superior to marital ties. In contemporary time this dilemma creates conflict and stress for many people as they attempt to resolve the issue: The subordination of marital ties to those of kinships or vice versa.

Again in Ghanaian culture this caring of one's parents in their old age is an enshrined responsibility. Hence the education of children is to afford children to look well after their parents in their old age. Afua's therefore torn between her responsibility to the mother and husband.

Some years back, regarding conflicts among in-laws, the norm has been conflicts between a wife and her husband's mother and sisters. It was assumed that these sons were the sole providers in the home (husbands were literate with high education and lucrative employments). Son's education and employment were supposed to raise the status and conditions of the extended family. Conflicts usually ensued when the wife was seen to be enjoying what the extended family considered to be theirs. The reverse is now true with many married professional women, and especially with the case of Afua.

2. Gone are the days when women's work was confined to the home. In Ghana now, women are found in many professions even at the helm of leadership. Women are given accommodation just as their male counterparts as part of their benefits. If these accommodations are better, more comfortable, easily accessible, the best logic is to move in with the professional wife. Very few professional women are enjoying this privilege. There are many others who have to be content with the homes of their husbands. This is because some cultural practices are still strictly adhered to by even educated and some elite in the society. Yao felt intimidated, weak, useless and unsure even at his manhood. What worsens his position is the fact that he has two daughters, a sign of the woman being stronger than the man. The neighbours would usually show their dissatisfaction of female house owner. His colleagues at work may question, discourage and at times mock at him for succumbing to a dominant wife.

3. The third issue deals with migration of married people both internally and externally. Because of the economic situation in the country, many marriages have been affected by this separation. Most husbands (and at times wives) left their spouses to look for greener pastures. A lot of them ended up in other relationships which were referred to as temporary. Ghanaians went to Nigeria, Liberia, Cuba, Saudi Arabia, now Germany and Europe.

Families left behind deteriorated, children became wayward, pregnant and social misfits because the task of raising these children became the sole responsibility of only one parent - the single parent. Internally spouses leave rural areas to find better paid jobs in the cities despite government's efforts at decentralization. Some leave with hope of later inviting the other members of the family as soon as they got employed and found suitable accommodation. However, these dreams, often never come true when the migrators are hit in the face by realities of city life.

However, an unidentified factor, the migration of most educated or brilliant females in the rural areas who struggle on to become professionals is another area of concern. This group of women are increasing in numbers and have to struggle for the few men, jobs, accommodation and other facilities and social amenities in the city. Afua cannot get the type of job she holds in Accra in Domiabra, where her husband lives. And so are many other Afuas who have left the village to semi-educated or uneducated female lot.

4. The fourth issue deals with the pressure on the professional woman/wife and in this case pressure on Afua as a woman, wife, mother and professional. She has to fulfil her household duties of cleaning and cooking. So she spends most of the week-end making sure that she stuffs the freezer with soups and stews. She washes clothes for the family and tidies up the home. She has to do the children's hair and mend clothes. After all these, she must make time to be with her husband and fulfil a wife's role. Back in the city, she has another home to take care of and has to make sure that her work is not affected by any of these other pressures. What happens when her children are sick? when husband has to travel out to work? who imparts the motherly virtues as example for the children to emulate?

To help Afua, she has to reassess her values, needs, goods, aspirations and priorities. She must be helped to make a decision as to which of the priorities is most important right now.