

invaluable to me as a student of feminism and women's mobilization efforts. They have also shaped my personal development, helping me understand where the theoretical falls short of solving for the practical. In Lawrence, I maintain my participation in local feminist projects. Working in three different contexts has highlighted the amazing and unique ways in which feminism develops in various cultural settings yet still maintains certain commonalities.

There are few guidebooks for women like me who are trying to negotiate the paradigm of feminism in two different worlds. There is a delicate dance here that I must master—a dance of negotiating identity within interlinking cultural spheres. When faced with the movement's expectations of my commitment to local issues, it becomes important for me to emphasize that differences in culture and religion are also "local issues." This has forced me to change my frame of reference, developing from a rebellious tomboy who resisted parental imposition to a budding social critic, learning how to be a committed feminist and still keep my cultural, religious and community ties. As for family, we still negotiate despite the fact that Dad's two-year marriage plan has yet to come to fruition in this, my twenty-second year.

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"Because You're a Girl"

Ijeoma A.

It was a Sunday night in Lagos during the African Cup series. In these parts, we lived by soccer. Often, you'd hear the tale of the lover who threatened his sweetheart because she walked past the television, obstructing his vision for a precious second while the Nigerian Eagles were playing. Indeed, soccer was serious business.

This year, Nigeria had made it to the finals, and tonight's game was going to be watched by *everybody* who was *anybody* that knew *somebody*. I couldn't miss this game for the world. We had an earlier-than-recommended dinner, and before long, all of us—two brothers, five cousins and myself—littered ourselves around the miniature TV screen to witness this lifetime event. It was then that the unmistakable voice of my mother burst through the bustle, with a distinctly familiar hint of irritation: "Ijeoma, when exactly did you intend to clean up?"

"Only me?" I responded. "Could one of the boys help this time? I don't want to miss the game. Please!"

"Ije! You're a girl and we're raising you to become a woman some day. Now, stop being stubborn and go clean that kitchen up!"

My heart ached. Ten people were a lot to clean up after, especially on a finals night. As I dug through a bottomless sink of dirty dishes, the boys and my parents were in the living room, screaming, yelling and cheering. I felt so small. I was alone, with filthy mountains of blackened pots and kettles surrounding me in that small, somber kitchen. Once in a while, one of the boys would stop by and ask me where he might place an empty glass he had just used so that I wouldn't forget to wash it. I would use such opportunities to ask "Who's winning?!" Then I was alone again, sulking at soccer ball-shaped saucers that constantly reminded me I would be spending the core of the Eagles' game cleaning up in the kitchen; because I was a girl.

Although I was raised in Nigeria's capital city of Lagos, most of my guardians (my parents, uncles, aunts and older cousins) were raised in the rural villages of Eastern Nigeria. As a result, my upbringing was not as diluted of traditional customs as is typical in the big and populated cities of Nigeria. My parents, uncles and aunts had Four Commandments incorporating what a woman's responsibilities were to her family:

1. Her office is the kitchen.
2. She is responsible for all the chores in the home.
3. She is accountable for the children and their actions.
4. And, of course, she must pledge complete and total allegiance to the man in charge first, before herself.

I know my guardians believed that they were looking out for my

best interests by molding me in accordance with these ideas. Frankly, I can understand why. In our society, it is considered every woman's destiny to be married one day and have children. Deviations from that fate usually ended up in an unhappy everafter of spite and loneliness. Being a woman in her late twenties with no suitors to pop the question seemed the greatest shame a woman could endure. Thus, by raising me in accordance with these Four Commandments, my guardians hoped to ensure that I would not have to endure the mockery or the pain of being an old unmarried woman. However, despite their good intentions, I was never able to appreciate this way of life wholeheartedly.

Everything in my childhood substantiated the need for women to submit. The stability of our society depended heavily on it. Fairytales were laden with morals of submission, as well as forewarnings against the girl who talked back, or the wife who tried to be the second captain on a ship that demanded just one. Before long, like other girls I was convinced that something bad would happen to me if I rocked the boat. I decided that I would dutifully execute anything my family demanded, since I didn't want the same fate as the girls in those tales who dared to go against our customs. My family's approval was all that I lived for, and I wanted my parents to be proud of me. But, whenever I was alone, I'd often catch myself wishing that I were born a boy.

As I observed my family's dynamics, it became evident that my brothers and cousins didn't have the same "duties to the family" as I did. Every morning, I had to get up early to dust and sweep. I would

get in trouble if breakfast weren't ready by the time the boys got hungry. It was also my responsibility to ensure that my younger brother bathed and dressed himself appropriately for the day. Of course, I had to do the dishes when everyone was done and *then* get myself ready in time for school or church, depending on what day it was.

I really wanted to be a good daughter, but at night I would dream that I could wake up a little later the next morning, and like a boy find my breakfast already waiting for me. I would take off my slippers and tease my toes with the fresh feel of a dustless floor that had already been swept and mopped . . . just like the boys did each morning. At times I would gather the courage to inquire about the discrepancies in the division of labor, but would be silenced with an abrupt: "It's a woman's job to do those things." Whenever I persisted, I became the subject of corrosive criticism that was sometimes accompanied by some form of punishment. Thus, I learned to conform and embrace the life that had been carved out for me.

On the surface I was the good girl that my family wanted me to be. I grew content with my predicament as I got older and even impressed my parents with my devotion to serve. Deep down, however, I despised my submission. I hated taking orders and cleaning after people. I usually had to consciously press my lips firmly together, so I wouldn't say "inappropriate" things whenever I was assigned a chore, or if one of the boys complained about his meal. One night, I was doing the dishes while the rest of the family enjoyed a sitcom in the living room. A cousin then came into the kitchen, slightly irritated that there were no clean glasses available for him to take a drink. He then instructed

me to hurry up with the dishes when I suddenly snapped at him, "Well maybe if you learned to wash your own dirty dishes I wouldn't ever have to listen to you whine like that over a glass!" Neither of us could believe what I had just said. As expected, I was reported, and then punished for my impudence.

On another occasion, I had just baked some chicken to accompany the Sunday lunch my mother had prepared. According to our customs, the heart was a part of the chicken that could only be eaten by the oldest man at the table. As I placed the poultry pieces neatly in a serving dish, something made me swiftly snatch the heart from the dish and toss it into my mouth. It tasted really, really good, but suddenly I became afraid. How would I account for the missing heart? What was going to happen to me? I promptly decided that I would blame the merchant who sold us the chicken. At the table, I swore that he must have taken the heart out before selling the bird to us, because I didn't recall seeing it with the rest of the chicken. Fortunately, everyone believed me.

In my day-to-day experiences school became my refuge, an oasis in the midst of all the mindless house cleaning and cooking. In the classroom I didn't feel so passive. Despite my gender, my teachers often sought my insight in resolving problems that they used to test the students. I was encouraged to develop my own ideas, since productive class discussions depended highly on the individuality and diversity of the students. Something about school made me feel "great" about myself. I would suddenly become more talkative and would volunteer my

opinions in various situations without the fear of reproach. It seemed my teachers were not as focused on gender as my family, and I often wondered about that irregularity. They were more interested in a student's ability to absorb their teachings and then use them in productive ways, irrespective of gender. They made me believe that being a girl wasn't really a factor in my ability to answer a test question, and I found this new way of thinking rather refreshing. In the classroom, gender didn't rank the boys higher than the girls. Instead, it was your academic excellence that earned you your respect and the teacher's favor. If you had an interest in student leadership, or if you wanted membership in exclusive school organizations, your grades were inspected, and it was those grades that earned you your rank.

For me, this was ample incentive to excel. Although I had little power over my predicament at home, I had a magnitude of control over my school performance, and fortunately my efforts didn't go unnoticed. Before too long, I was appointed Class Captain in primary-3 (equivalent to the third grade in American schools). As a Class Captain, I was in charge of the classroom's cleanliness, but in very different capacity than at home. In the classroom, I supervised the cleaning, and I assigned the different chores to my fellow classmates. In school, I had the ability to enforce the change that I was powerless at creating in my own home. I made sure that the boys worked just as hard as the girls, and I ensured that their hands got just as dirty from sweeping and scrubbing the floors. Thereafter, I would take my shoes off and indulge my feet in that nice feeling you get from walking on a really clean floor.

As Class Captain, it was also my responsibility to enforce the School Rules on my peers. Since I was in charge, I would momentarily forget about my family's ideals of Woman's submission to Man. Whenever I spoke, my words had to be obeyed since I embodied the school authorities in the classroom. As a result of my position, I was always the first in line for school assemblies and field trips, the first to be seated at important school functions, and even the first to receive my report card at the end of each trimester. At home my place had always been after the boys. But in the classroom, I was Number One; ahead of the other girls, and of course before the boys. I valued my relationship with the other girls, however, given my background, male respect had a closer resemblance to the "forbidden fruit" and so I tended to focus more of my efforts on obtaining it. This taste of power made me feel that I could potentially transcend my fate of becoming a family Cook and Maid in my future husband's house. I suddenly felt like I could achieve more with my life: do great things, make a lasting difference.

As I became an adolescent, the demands on my time seemed to increase exponentially, especially in conjunction with my academic obligations. Since I received little help, I often found myself grumbling about all the "because-you're-a-girl" rhetoric. Whenever I lamented openly, my mother and aunts would try to comfort me: "You're a big girl now and you may marry soon. These are the things your husband and his family will expect of you, and we're only preparing you to handle them." I really hated to hear that. If my forty-eight-hour days were indicative of my life with a husband, then I

didn't ever want to get married. Of course, the family hated to hear that. Still, as a minor I had to fulfill the demands of my family.

By my senior year of high school, my resources were stretched as thin as they could get. I pressured myself to do well in school because I was very addicted to the prominence my previous grades had earned me in the student government. My father also pressured me to score only the highest grades. He had gotten so accustomed to my excellent performance in earlier years that he was unwilling to accept anything less during my senior year. Nonetheless, I was still expected to fulfill all my "duties to the family." No one seemed to understand that in order to keep stellar grades, it would be helpful to have fewer chores at home. "If you don't do them, who will?" was their response. I believe my situation was exacerbated simply because I was the "only" girl in a large family of men. Perhaps if I had a sister or two, one of them could have covered for me while I studied for exams. Maybe then, my sessions slaving in the kitchen while the boys watched the TV would not have been so lonely and harrowing.

During this year my father revealed his plans to educate me abroad. To gain admission to an American college, I had to satisfy several other academic requirements in addition to my schoolwork. No one seemed to empathize with me, and so I began to see my father's intention to send me to the United States as my ticket out of these stressful conditions and an escape from my future as a "good wife." This thought motivated me to excel academically despite the odds and to earn admission and a scholarship to attend Oberlin College in Ohio.

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After arriving in America, I was not quite sure how to proceed with my life. For the past seventeen years I had become accustomed to someone else telling me how and when to live. Now, I was suddenly answerable to only myself—a role I had never learned to play. I found myself waiting for someone to tell me my chores. After living in a cage all my life, I guess I found this new environment a little too big to live in. Despite the liberating utopia that America represented, it took me a long time to let go of my previous life. How could the world suddenly expect me to take initiative when it had always trained me to receive my opinions from others? Sometimes I felt the sudden urge to do something really outrageous, like sleeping in for a couple of extra hours in the morning. "Would someone come to scold me and yank me out from under my blanket?" I would wait and see. If nothing happened, I would get up and leave my bed unmade indefinitely. Then I would wait again. Would my roommate report me? Perhaps my parents would be notified of my misbehavior and then force me to return to Nigeria. I would then become afraid and return to my room to make the bed.

I was taken aback as I learned that my roommate was messier than I was; she claimed she had always been that way. How could her parents tolerate that? Didn't they worry that she would never find a good husband? As I opened up to her, I was stunned by everything she shared about herself. She had never had to clean her brother's room. "He does that his damned self," she said, a bit surprised that I had thought that she had ever waited on him. Also, she had never cooked

in her life. She probably couldn't even tell you how to boil water, yet she wasn't ashamed.

Slowly I fell in love with America. Sometimes I would hang out with the boys, just so I could say "No" to them. Whenever I felt really bold, I'd say, "Do it your damned self," just like my roommate. Once, I cooked an African meal for some of my American friends. I didn't make anything complicated, simply because I didn't want to generate too many dirty dishes. I wasn't sure I could handle the same loads as I used to in Nigeria. To my surprise, however, one of the boys offered to do the dishes when we were done eating. I paused and then said, with my accent, "Yeah, do it your damned self!" He thought that was funny and so we laughed about it.

Gradually I found myself saying and doing things I wouldn't have dared to in the past, in West Africa. I finally felt light and free. I was able to focus on my studies without needing to rush home and cook lunch. I now had "leisure" time to sit around and chat with people from all over the world. I could sleep in longer, and I could experience "idle" moments when I simply did nothing. I could make boys clean after themselves, and I could do it with authority. And sometimes, just to be cheeky, I would even make them clean up after me. I really loved this new life that I was allowed to live.

Whenever I returned home for the holidays, I always underwent psychological conflicts within myself. My family had missed my cooking. They missed me too, however they had also missed my services. After two semesters of being my own master, I had to readjust to being the passive daughter they had been used to in previous years.

Once, I told a cousin to do something "his damned self." I was very frustrated. It wasn't easy reassuming my domestic role, especially after a whole year of retirement. He was livid. Before long, the rest of the family clamored around me, inquiring about what possessed me to say something like that. I remained quiet and listened to them answer the question for themselves: "She's gone to America, and now she has forgotten about her heritage." "Why did they send her there? Now look at what she is becoming." "She thinks she is American." My father returned home from work and, of course, I was spoken to sternly. I was never to repeat that behavior again.

But had America really changed me? I vehemently oppose that theory. It is true that as I progressed through college, my relationship with my family clearly experienced a metamorphosis. Although I was still respectful of my elders, I gradually became less restrained in expressing my true sentiments in various situations. I no longer followed orders passively as I had in the past, and little by little, I acquired the audacity to question them. Of course, I didn't always have my way, but at least I made it known that I was not always happy with the kind of life that *they* felt was right for me. This perceived impudence was not always welcomed, and I was repeatedly accused of disregarding my homeland's traditions and thinking that I was now an American.

But my theory is that America introduced me to Me. Growing up, I had numbed myself to the dissatisfactions I felt in a society that favored boys. My only option was to conform, so I brainwashed myself into thinking that I was happy. That was the only way I knew

to keep a level head. I lived an emotionally uncomfortable life plagued with internal conflicts. It was always my reflex to suppress my true opinions on the gender inequalities for the fear of reproach from a conservative society that I loved more than myself. Each time I felt violated because one of the boys was being treated like a first-class citizen at my expense, a voice inside me affirmed that I was being treated unjustly, but I would dismiss it as the voice of a wayward extremist. America helped me realize that all that time, I had been dismissing myself, choosing instead to embrace the beliefs of a society that taught me that I was inferior to my male counterparts. American society was conducive to nurturing that part of me that didn't believe that I was weaker by virtue of my gender. America didn't change me, but rather it simply allowed me to discover myself.

As I continued to enjoy this growing sense of empowerment, I became acquainted with American feminism. Quite frankly, I didn't know what to make of it. It surprised me that any American woman could be discontent with the gender conditions of the same country I credited for liberating me. America felt like the Promised Land, and I wondered what else an American feminist could want. In my patriarchal background, women were considered the property of the male breadwinner. My aunt's husband, for instance, would use her as a punching bag without compunction after say, a stressful day at work. As a young woman I choked on these realities; my hands were tied when it came to protesting how my uncle handled my aunt, whom he considered his "property." At least in the United States my aunt could

have been shielded from battery since her husband might have feared the threat of arrest. Thus, from my first perspective, America was surely the feminist's paradise.

It was interesting to learn later that many years ago, America's situation was quite similar to the current one in my natal country. I find this encouraging since it indicates that my people may one day embrace some of the values I now enjoy in America. Therefore, I do support the feminist and womanist movements in the United States, simply because these were forces that drove the change in America. I may eventually participate in the U.S. feminist struggles; perhaps I will gain some insight into what it would take to effect change in my country. For now, however, I am still living my American dream. I am so addicted to the freedoms I have enjoyed here, and I hope I can keep them, irrespective of the country in which I finally decide to settle down.

Today I am an independent woman working in the United States. I am very happy with my life, and I feel more fulfilled than I ever have. Occasionally, however, I find myself missing home. There are many aspects of the Nigerian society, besides the gender inequalities, that I failed to appreciate until I came to America. I miss the Nigerian sense of community; the security of knowing that I can depend on my next-door neighbor to worry if she doesn't see me for several days. Here in the United States, my neighbor of two years still isn't sure whether or not I have children. Come to think of it,

we don't even know each other's names. I also miss Nigerian food, the obstinate devotion to family, and the festive celebrations. I miss home. However, irrespective of how nostalgic I get, I know deep inside that America is the best option for me right now. I have deviated so much from my childhood's domestic and subservient lifestyle that I don't think it will ever be possible for me to adopt it again. The only way I could return to that life would be to erase the past six years I spent in America. Without those years I would never have tasted the sweet wine of independence that has gotten me drunk and addicted today.

I think that my family is gradually coming to terms with the person that I have become. I wouldn't say that my relatives are thrilled, but they recognize the futility of compelling me to marry a man from my community who is attached to its "good wife" values. They know that I will probably tell him to do his cooking and laundry his damned self, just like I have already told some members of my family to date. However, I wouldn't necessarily conclude that an American would make the perfect companion for me either, since he may not embody the Nigerian values that I love and miss.

It is difficult to predict what the future holds for me, since I am very much in the middle of the two worlds that have molded me into who I am today. I have decided that I will go anywhere destiny takes me, provided that I have primary control over my life and that my opinions count, despite my gender. Anything less would not be a life for me. I have worked and struggled very hard to become the intelligent, independent and strong woman that I am today. I absolutely

cannot ignore all that I have endured and achieved by settling for a passive life as Adam's Rib. Some may choose to call me a rebel, but I am simply a woman searching for a happier life. One in which I am allowed to love myself, and not sacrifice that love in favor of a society's values.