My friend Kalekye (not her real name) is a teacher at one of Nairobi’s government schools. She is married to a principal of a different government school and is a mother of two boys. She earns less than her husband. His monies pay for rent and to build a home in shags that they are unlikely to inhabit anytime soon. Hers buys groceries and helps out the extended family when required. Because of the stretch on their monies, Kalekye cannot afford domestic help and so she wakes up earlier than everyone in her household to prepare the twelve and nine-year-old for school and to make breakfast for her family. And to prepare food boxes for everyone: leftovers for her and her husband, sandwiches and a fruit for each of her boys.

Kalekye ensures that everyone in her household of four, including her husband, is ready before she gets herself ready. She irons clothes, matches socks and so forth because if she does not, what would people say about her skills as a mother and a wife? Failure would mean she does not deserve to be married to a whole headmaster.

At number 76 globally on gender parity, Kenya is one of the sub-Saharan African nations that has failed women; at the current rate of progress, it will take another 102 years before the country achieves gender parity.
On her return home after school, Kalekye marks any assignments that she has received from her students. Then she cooks dinner, makes sure her children have washed before bed and only after cleaning up can she relax a little bit before going to bed. Her husband, who does not have assignments to mark based on his position, on the other hand, comes home and reads the paper or watches television as he awaits for supper. He is not completely insensitive; often he helps the children with their homework in their two-bedroom apartment in South B when Kalekye is cooking.

This is the story of Kalekye. But it is also the story of many working wives. Towards the end of 2017, when male rights activists in Kenya spoke on different social media platforms on how men were being disadvantaged in favour of women, a report that was largely unnoticed was released. The Global Gender Gap Report, in its 11th year, showed a surprising trend. It revealed that in 2017, gender parity globally shifted in reverse for the first time since 2006 when they started tracking it. It showed that many industries are failing to hire, retain and promote women, thus losing out on a wealth of capacity. At number 76 globally on gender parity, Kenya is one of the sub-Saharan African nations that has failed women; at the current rate of progress, it will take another 102 years before the country achieves gender parity. My friend Kalekye, a teacher, is one of the women who has been failed.

Traditionally, patriarchy has couched the work that women do as unimportant – if considered work at all – despite the fact that it is generally emotionally and physically taxing. Indeed in many societies – and Kenya is no exception – stay-at-home mums are considered as non-working women, although they cook, clean and take care of their families’ emotional and physical needs. Conversely, unemployed men whose wives bring home the sukuma are often referred to in kinder terms, like ‘businessmen’ or ‘entrepreneurs’, while the same wives who bring the same sukuma are expected to wash, chop and fry it for the family so as not to emasculate the ‘head of the household’.

One would think that because the majority of teachers who are members of Kenya National Union of Teachers Union (KNUT) are women, there would be more women in leadership, but this is not the case.

In spite of this and the fact that in a very practical sense, Kenyan households, like many on the continent, are increasingly woman-headed, women still earn less than men in most professions. While women make up 52 percent of the population and tend to be the larger group that is employed in the vital field of education, the promotions still largely favour men. According to the study “Principals’ Gender and Management Effectiveness in Secondary Schools” by Matheri, Cheloti and Mulwa (2015), only 15 percent of secondary school principals are women. Principals are the highest paid staff members in schools, with salaries of above KSh155,000. On the other end of the scale, teachers in Early Childhood Development, who do the primary work of teaching reading and writing and generally being emotionally available to young children, are paid the least. This despite the study finding that women who are principals have more or less the same approval rating as their male counterparts.

It is thus worrying that the Teachers Services’ Commission perpetuates stereotypes on which gender can lead and which cannot. Equally worrying is the leadership of the leading teachers’ union. One would think that because the majority of teachers who are members of Kenya National Union of
Teachers Union (KNUT) are women, there would be more women in leadership, but this is not the case.

If we are serious about this becoming an African century, it is well worth ensuring that women are not only paid as much as their male counterparts, but that they are retained and promoted as much as their male colleagues.

One would also reckon that because unions are civil society organisations, they would work more towards promoting gender parity, but again this is not the case. The current leadership comprises eleven members and only two of them are women. Their role? Women’s representatives. Indeed since KNUT was formed in 1957, the union has never had a woman in the top three of its leadership echelons. An argument could be made that since the leadership is voted in, perhaps women should be blamed for not having any woman in leadership. This argument, though, ignores the fact that many women are raised in spaces where they are more accepted as agents of patriarchy than as individuals who speak up against injustice and who take up leadership roles.

If this was a situation only in the teaching profession, it could be excused. Unfortunately, it is replicated in healthcare, in the civil service and even in the corporate world where there seem to be very few women on company boards. This being the case, it then becomes very difficult to understand what men’s rights activists mean exactly when they say how empowerment of women and girls has disadvantaged men. Because in a lot of ways, women are not yet empowered enough to demand equal pay for equal work. And when 52 percent of the population is disadvantaged by virtue of its gender, many more developmental milestones for a nation become difficult to achieve in Kenya and in other sub-Saharan African countries.

If we are serious about this becoming an African century, it is well worth ensuring that women are not only paid as much as their male counterparts, but that they are retained and promoted as much as their male colleagues. This International Women’s Day, let us reflect on that. Let us, as men and women, say enough is enough on the wage gap in the civil service. It is still not too late for Kalekye’s children to see that we can do things differently and that their mother is as important and is as valued by her nation as their father.

Published by the good folks at The Elephant.

The Elephant is a platform for engaging citizens to reflect, re-member and re-envision their society by interrogating the past, the present, to fashion a future.

Follow us on Twitter.