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# MILLENNIALS AND MARRIAGE: A Status Report

By Silas Nyanchwani



If a doctor were to diagnose millennial marriages, he would find them diseased, plagued by forces of nature beyond their control. These three anecdotes illustrate the three biggest challenges that millennials are grappling with in marriage.

In December 2014, I accompanied a friend to Embu, in Eastern Kenya for a *ruracio* (A traditional *Agikuyu and Aembu wedding ceremony*). It was a well-attended ceremony that brought together two traditions (Luo and Aembu) with a dash of modernity, given my friend had defied his family rejection of the woman's position (due to her ethnicity) - reveling in love and idealism of the youth and urbanization, to marry across ethnic lines.

The two had been living together since graduation, two years before, and the *ruracio* had been accelerated by an inevitable pregnancy, so the man had to 'make things right.' But they were married in every sense of the word upon the blessing of her parents after the Christmas Eve *ruracio*.

They were meant to live happily forever. However, forever did not last six months.

In a dramatic, if not disturbing discovery, it turned out the child was not his. The DNA results devastated my friend. They 'divorced', with no chance of remarrying.

At 27, life had served him one of the most brutal blows. My friend went into depression, taking to alcoholism, sleeping around, seeking solace in church before he could sober up a year later.

Not sure what became of the woman, except that she was 26, and was to be a part of growing number of single mothers under 30 in the country.

Is that the end for the two? We can assume that they may attempt to get married in the future.

A few years back, one of my closest friends fell out with a woman he was cohabiting with (more like kicked out of the house).

They were about the same age; however, the girlfriend joined the university earlier by going through the 'parallel program'. My friend waited for two years and a government stipend before joining the public university. She graduated way ahead of him, and by the time my friend was finishing his undergraduate, she was through with her masters. A parallel program averaged two and half years compared to a regular program that took four or five years and could be imperiled by a strike by students or lecturers.

She got into gainful employment, rose through the ranks in her organisation, and continued to support her man for two years before she got tired of the man's jobless status and dumped him. My friend is not the first man to be dumped or left because of his dim economic prospects.

Lastly is the case of Jeff Nyongesa\*. When his wife requested his indulgence and permission for a night out with the girls, he grudgingly consented. They have a six-month-old baby, and the agreement was that she would be home by 11 pm. She was not home by midnight, and on calling her she didn't answer her phone, and worse she switched it off (or it ran out of charge). Seething, he called her mother and all her authoritative relatives and raised a storm, spelling it out in black and white that he was not happy with 'their daughter's' conduct. He says gleefully, this 'tamed' her.

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In the first instance, the problem is adultery gone wrong. The second instance is an increasingly common problem, as we are hit with economic recession; many young men are jobless, underemployed—stuck in jobs that can hardly sustain them, let alone a marriage. It has aptly been called a mancession—where more male-dominated jobs are lost compared to female-dominated ones during a period of economic difficulty.

Understandably, men can provide for their unemployed wives, but for women, the support often comes tethered to an expiration date. And there is enough anecdotal evidence to support this. Undeniably, there are exceptions, but largely found among the ranks of older women with cultivated patience and not so much among the younger peers.

Women world over, while empowered and economically secure, are socialized to still desire a man who can provide, and the male status is linked to the role of a breadwinner. So dire, that in America, Trump's election was largely attributed to the scores of unemployed men in America's Rust Belt, who have lost their jobs to technology, or factories having been shipped to China or Mexico.

In a poll conducted in the US and published by the [Harvard Business Review](#), ahead of the 2016 American elections, it emerged that even the thought of earning less than their spouses made men vote for Trump. Intuitively, men know what it means when a woman earns more.

A study done more than a decade ago and published in the journal of Biology Letters confirmed as much:

Men prefer younger women due to their higher fertility, while women prefer older men due to their wealth and high status, which makes them good providers for the offspring.

Nyongesa's case is a barometer of shifting cultural mores. As millennials, we are in a contradicting transition. As an Anthropologist, Paul Omondi (of the University of Nairobi) pithily puts it...

*"A modern, educated woman can go to her job during the week, attend a chama meeting on Saturday, go drinking and dancing on Saturday night, go to Church on Sunday, and still make time for the family."*

All her aspirations are antithetical to traditional African socially prescribed expectation of a woman's place in marriage.

We are stuck with an outdated ideological construction of gender. Men have resisted conformity to conventional feminism ideals that preach: what is sauce for the goose, is sauce for the gander, hence the false sense of emasculation.

For all the progressive nuances and liberalism millennial men may have cultivated and displayed, if a poll is run on what men expect in women they want to marry, their expectations will correspond to the traditional expectations their fathers' generation. Women want a better version of their fathers for husbands: sensitive, available, liberal and preferably financially well off.

Both sexes are disappointed that neither is living in the traditional paradigm.

### **A brief history of Women Empowerment**

Nobody should fault women for wanting it all. It was a necessary moral choice to empower women so that they can be active participants in the economic development.

The journey to gender equality started in 1975 at the UN Conference on Women. National governments acknowledged women as the missing link in national development and economic success. The authors of this [paper](#), argue the intentions to empower women were good, the opportunity cost of not empowering women without involving men had socio-economic and political risks. The plight of the boy child in Kenya was not part of public discourse for nearly three decades until about a decade ago when Maendeleo ya Wanaume led by a dubious Nderitu Njoka surfaced and tried to articulate the problems of men in the wake of the gains accrued from women empowerment.

The Eurocentric education we inherited after colonialism altered our indigenous worldview in favour of the Western way of life. African women long suppressed by patriarchy would benefit from this education, and 40-odd years later since we started involving women in economic development, our country's GDP grew from \$3.25 in 1975 to \$ 75 billion in 2017, but not without socio-cultural consequences.

In education the gender gap reduced over the years to 59 percent for men and 41 for women by 2015, according to the Nation Media's Newsplex investigation. The gap is still shrinking, and career leveraging courses such as nursing, medicine, dental surgery, environmental studies, biochemistry and pharmacy are attracting 57 percent women compared to 43 percent men. And the Constitution of Kenya 2010 empowered women even more, with the two-thirds gender rule, giving them access to more opportunities both in the private and public sector.

Education has had multiple benefits, shaping societal attitudes to an extent vices such as gender-based-violence, female genital mutilation, deadbeat dads are actively discussed in society and the law, while slow, is now responsive, bolstered by the civil society mainstreaming of human rights

issues.

Our mothers and their predecessors were forced to endure abusive marriages, some getting infected with HIV by promiscuous husbands, forced to stay by societal expectations, their choices limited by poverty, since men were the privileged breadwinner wielding all the social clout.

Education helped the society to stop frowning on single mothers and divorcees as it happens to the forerunners like Wangari Maathai and Martha Karua.

It has created an environment where women can thrive and have a bright future where their choices are not dictated by marriage.

## **Enter Kibaki**

In 2002, Mwai Kibaki took over as Kenya's third president and the following decade witnessed an unprecedented growth, and expansion of the Kenyan economy, opening doors of educational and career opportunities to a wider previously ignored female demographic.

Following the adoption of self-sponsorship in higher education, in the 2000s, the expansion and the proliferation of several universities, more students previously cut off from university admission pegged on bed-capacity (notoriously at 10,000 for more than a decade.) This has churned out nearly 50,000 graduates each year in the last decade according to the Ministry of Education. Nearly 40 per cent of these graduates are female.

The jobs markets that exploded after Kibaki took over, were mainly in academia, marketing, banking and real estate (and the expansion of the Civil Society which addressed some of the most pressing issues affecting women and children) creating a friendly job environment for female career progression.

Coincidentally, throughout the 1990s, the Structural Adjustment Programs killed the manufacturing sectors as many industries were privatized, often subsequently run down. Examples are abound such as Kenya Railways, several textile industries grounded by the importation of second-hand clothes that sabotaged the whole chain of production. The postal service, Telkom, Public Works, farming lost out to privatization and once vibrant towns such as Kitale and Kilgoris in Transmara all but died.

Women may have joined the workforce, but they still lag in formal employment. According to the Kenya Bureau of Statistics, efforts to bridge the gap have been paying off. As of 2016, men still hold 65.5 % (1.68 million) of the workforce compared to women, 34.5% about 880,000. The gap is being closed considering more women than men are taking up Masters and PhDs, according to the Ministry of Education. One MoE official said the affirmative action had helped women access education and this presently reflects in the workplace in the corporate sector as more women take up managerial jobs.

## **The Impact**

As millennials, we witnessed our fathers losing their jobs and their breadwinning roles and the logic of two-income families sunk in properly during the SAPs years. Indeed women aspiring for education was with the hope of bringing something to the table and among millennials a job (or the prospect of getting one) is usually a key consideration in marriage.

And we have education to thank for opening doors to more women, making them eligible for marriage in the present tough economic times.

But education had other effects.

Education in its socialization effect also exposes women to limitless choices their mothers never had. Urbanization creates an environment for a woman who was under a tight leash of patriarchy to excel in cities. And with the liberalization of the media in 2002, access to the internet, pornography and Hollywood, it meant millennial women were no longer chained to the constricting and narrowly defined roles of their mothers' generation.

With procreation no longer a pressing priority of marriage, women are free to chase academic and career dreams, or even their passion, until they are ready. Technology has enabled In-Vitro-Fertilization that has saved couples who can't conceive, or those who are too busy. Further options of adopting, surrogacy, freezing of eggs, are all sipping into our society and those who can afford are already embracing these new approaches to parenting.

Men, maybe out of moral consciousness or fear of being exposed as deadbeats on social media or legal coercion have become more responsive to the children of their estranged wives or exes. And many modern men are open to the idea of co-parenting. This makes single parenting less of a stigma.

For those averse to marriage, getting a child 'out of wedlock' is not the social crime it was two or three decades ago. Older women who find it hard to find a spouse can go to a sperm bank or can get into an arrangement with a man to supply the sperm and support, if needed.

Nowadays it is no longer what the children need, but what the parents want.

When women do not have to be economically dependent on men, and they have options of conceiving a child, not necessarily in the confines of marriage and this choice can change relationship dynamics completely.

Traditionally around the world marriage was a logical arrangement for procreation, economic and social cohesion.

The present economic, social and cultural environment for the first time since Industrial Revolution means we must alter that definition. Women want an equal footing in marriage and men have to readjust accordingly. Marriage now, according to Belgian psychotherapist Esther Perel in an Atlantic article, is based not on duty and obligation but on love and affection.

And millennials prefer life in the cities and towns to the villages. This too has western implications on our societal mores. Life in the city affords one anonymity and access to sex, food, security in their terms.

In cities, women have a bigger pool of sexual and sensual talent to pick and choose. Sexual liberalism is evident.

In the bygone era, where most women were destined to be housewives, there were binding social conventions and women were expected to practice uncompromising fidelity. But at the workplace, with frequent traveling to conferences, business-related excursions sex has become casual and transactional. Now, everywhere women look, there are available men, who can offer everything they want, but not necessarily in one package.

We live in a time and in a society that has embraced the romance idealism defined through the Western cinematic universe. The relational power men held is no longer absolute and these societal changes are redefining gender relationships at a rapid speed. The ground has moved, the old ways have fallen apart and we know not where to turn.

From sex to money, men no longer have the monopoly to the things that they used to 'control' women. This means in the future marriage will become a contest for equality, with no spouse hoarding the power to control the other.

### **Choices Millennials have to make**

Millennials marry on need basis. Women have choices; they can go to school, pursue career without the encumbrances of marriages. When they marry young, they still have a choice to navigate, despite the obligations of motherhood. With the leverage of personal income, most women now have the capacity to own property, changing the dynamics of matrimonial property ownership that are often the subject of ugly succession woes. As this [Nation](#) article and many others have shown more and more women are players in Nairobi's real estate market.

Me, on the other hand, will take longer to marry as long as their economic prospects are dim. Presently, the age of marriage has risen considerably to 28, tittering towards 30.

Most men still pine for the good old days of control and women can no longer conform to old gender order. Women want freedom, are ready to break the rules (if only to revenge on their adulterous husband) even as societal rules are kinder to a cheating man, as opposed to a woman. In fact, in my opinion, even women are finding monogamy to be too constricting. Millennial women have a higher likelihood of abandoning a marriage that does not serve their interests, as they tend to make more individualistic decisions that alienate them from obligations to the extended society.

What does the future look like for the millennials adulting?

Serial monogamy might make sense. Polygamy is not economically viable anymore and proselytizing Christians have made monogamy the only moral choice. More marriages will be undone by infidelity and the dwindling economic fortunes of men. Women no longer have to stay in an abusive relationship or one that is in emotionally or sexually unfulfilling relationships. Men will find themselves being thrown out and will have to learn to either shape up or pack up.

Single-motherhood will cease to bear the social stigma previously attached to it. And the rising age of marriage means individuals will be looking for companionship as opposed to the material or procreational aspirations of the youth.

But serial monogamy is predicated on experimentation. Once the first marriage is broken, people are afraid of the second trial, but will nonetheless experiment until the idea of a right person shows up.

"These days, many of us are going to have two or three significant long-term relationships or marriages," predicts psychotherapist Esther Perel.

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