

\$9Trillion: This is How Much we Have Underpaid Poor Women

The other day, I borrowed the title of Professor Anne Marie Slaughter's phenomenal article in *The Atlantic*, the most popular online newspaper in the USA, to attempt some examination of the real economic situation of women in the world. The title had been well-thought by the Princeton academic, who also doubled as a senior White House political Executive. In 'Women can't have it all', Professor Slaughter masterfully and dispassionately assessed the career and personal development opportunities that women are not able to access because of natural and social factors. In the end, men shoot ahead of women not because they are so smart, but because women are sometimes disadvantaged by the realities of modern living.

I admire Prof Slaughter's honesty and I will always revere her intellectual aptitude. However, I was intrigued and challenged by the views of a young university lady in Ghana who wrote to ask me an important question: "Sir, did women ever had anything before?" She gave a tall list of impediments that stand in the way of the Ghanaian woman. A university graduate with an upper second class degree, she had remained unemployed after she lost her job in a private company because she refused her boss's flirtatious advances. "I don't know why every man wants to have me before they even consider your application. This is why we women can never compete with you guys", she opined, warning that if the world did not consciously alter the present order of things, "women will lose the little they ever had to these greedy men."

What did women ever have? On last week's Super Morning Show on Joy FM, panelists discussed whether men are intimidated by accomplished women. The panelists threw some brilliant flashes of thoughtful insight on the subject, advancing various shades of opinions on why men sometimes feel "emasculated" in the company of women achievers. Men wear their ego on their sleeves, and feel accomplished when they are able to provide for their women. How about when a woman has it all and does not need to depend on a man for her livelihood, the witty host asked?

While trying to make some sense out of the intellectual exchanges between the celebrity panelists, I thought about my colleague in London who divorced the husband when she got a political appointment in her home country. Well, perhaps the real truth is that the husband remained in the UK when she lived alone in a huge government-sponsored mansion. Even then, we asked

whether she would have issued the decree absolute if she depended on remittances from the husband to live another day in Africa.

These are some of the issues that undergird the economic inequalities that have often disadvantaged women in poor countries, thereby perpetuating the cycle of poverty in the world. Last week, an international development agency, ActionAid, put out some disturbing statistics on the amount of money the world loses because of economic inequalities between men and women. The organization put the figure at 9\$Trillion. The research report issued ahead of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland this week, cited low pay for women, unstable jobs and low participation of women in the global workforce as reasons that have accounted for the losses. Quoting a 2014 World Bank statistics, the report also pointed that women earn 10% to 30% less than men when doing the same jobs, but make up 60% of the working poor. "If women in developing countries were paid as much as men and had equal access to the labor market", the report estimates that they would make an extra \$9Trillion every year.

How did this ever happen? Most of the low-paying occupations are reserved for women. Ironically, these are also the most difficult jobs. We used to call her Mama Big because of her size, a hardworking woman who sold yams around my neighbourhood when I was a young man. Her sons were my age mates, so we got along quite well. Without a car of her own, she would jump on passenger buses and travel to remote villages to buy her goods. After gathering a sizeable quantity, she would arrange to transport the products to town, often sitting on top of the yams in the wooden carrier compartments of very old lorries. Her troubles had only about started when she got the goods to the city, where she faced lots of problems with storage and retail distribution. A daily life of struggle, she could only feed her children but not educate them to the university level.

In Bangladesh, the poor garment factories are filled with women employees who are paid very small wages for more than 8 hours of work a day. Like Mama Big, they would need to come home to cook for their families, care and breastfeed their little tots and also wash the dirty clothing before the next day when they reinvent the tedious rhythm all over again. If Mama Big ever had plans of upgrading her education or taking a professional course in yam management, she would never have found the time. If she stopped working for one day, her children would starve. Did she ever have savings? Well, yams do not sell like bonds at the stock exchange; she usually broke

even or made losses because the yams went bad or her many creditors simply didn't pay up.

The last time I accompanied my wife to Agbogbloshie (I am such a dashing, caring husband), I encountered a very sorry sight-of girls of school going age plying all sorts of trade that did not easily lend their modus operandi to easy description in the English language. What do you call a lady who has a baby strapped to her back, selling onions and iced water, and occasionally carrying people's shopping to their cars when the onions were not selling fast enough? I asked where the father of the baby was, and she produced a sad answer through a searching grin: "Sir, he is dead." Before I would offer my condolences, she followed up with a poetic injustice: "Not dead as in dead, but he is as good as dead." And that is just how global economics has played dead to women.

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