

BREAKING THE SHACKLES

Oluwatobiloba Grace Lawalson (Nigeria)



I have to hurry to go back home. I am getting impatient waiting for my fellow Chief Executive Officers to make their comments. We are discussing the current realities of the continent. Our continent has gone through a lot of changes and by sheer determination, grit, hard work and courage we have managed to beat all odds. In fact, our exchange rate is currently one of the best in the world – 1 Fikan is exchanging at 70 Dollars, 75 Euro and 70 Yuan. And this is the story I am burning to tell my grandchildren. The last time they all visited, we had a great time together. I can still remember their faces as I shared with them some of the lessons that I have learnt in life. This is why I cannot wait to get home and truthfully, this conference is wasting my time!

Today I will share with them something that is very personal to me. I do not know how they will take it. I hope that they will still consider me as their grandmother and not judge me so harshly.

I am at home now. We have just had our supper and are seated on the verandah! It is a warm night. My grandchildren are all gathered around me. They are looking up to me ready to hear my story. I have to take the risk. I am transported to a far away time.

“My grandchildren, today I will tell you about me. I was born with the joy that heralded every birth of a child to a middle class family after several miscarriages and attempts at conception. However, my family still appeared disappointed just because I was a female. My Papa never failed to mention that he would have preferred a male child. He was a devout Catholic, and probably as a result dedicated and baptised me as was expected. I grew up knowing that my brother got whatever he wanted despite my superior grades in school. I was always trying to get better so that I would also have access to some of the things that he enjoyed. I always ensured that my uniforms were neat and clean and was always among the top ten of my class. My Papa would always say, ‘Do well in school to justify this huge expense and investment that I am making so that you can pay me back for not marrying you off despite the fact that you would not bear my surname for long.’ I always replied, ‘Papa I would do well and you would be proud.’

“I knew I was privileged to be sent to school because I had too many friends who were not allowed to go to school and were forced to marry so that they could provide for their families and protect the family name. While I resented the fact that I did many of the house chores along with Mother sometimes till midnight ‘to prepare me for my husband’s house’, I was grateful that such an experience was still far better compared to being married off. Father taught me that I should be submissive to all the men around us, claiming that was an injunction of the Holy Bible. He would remind me that the suffering and pain in the world was a result of the disobedience of Eve who cunningly lured her husband to eat the forbidden fruit, making him to disobey God. A woman could try to appease for her sins by being submissive. This would reduce her pain during childbirth, otherwise all her children would die at the birthing stool and in the afterlife, she

would endure a long purgatory if at all she made it to heaven. From an early age, I learnt submission.

“I had always been submissive until the day my father met Sango. Sango was a merchant who promised lots of money if only he was allowed to take me with him overseas. Father had often been lured by the promise of a good life overseas. He was determined that I should go overseas despite Mother’s and my protests. I even promised to stop school to start working if he allowed me to stay but his mind was made up. I attempted to run away from home but Papa found me and brought me back. He then resorted to blackmail. Papa said, ‘Remember you promised to make me proud?’ What could I say? Indeed, I had and so I just nodded. Papa said sternly, ‘Do this act of selflessness and bring honour and respect to the family name. You will start earning money that will provide for us all and repay all the expenses I have incurred on your education.’ According to Papa, that was the end of the discussion and I had to prepare for my day of departure.

“The day arrived and although I knew that things were not quite right I had no choice. Mother sobbed loudly as we said our goodbyes. I was going overseas to study to protect the family name and bring back money to repay Papa. ‘Be the strong woman that I have raised you to be and the Lord will preserve you for your obedience,’ Mother said as I left. Papa on the other hand was smiling from ear to ear as he knew that within a short time I would start sending him some money.

“I braved the future. I did not want to bring shame to the family name. We were driven outside the city to a forest for purification. I wondered why this was necessary before we travelled. Little did I know that this was a trick. We were a group of twelve girls and before long we were surrounded by men. I was so scared

but remembered Mother's words and feigned courage. We were taken into a secluded hut and the men surrounded the hut. There was no escape!

"They would escort us every day to a nearby stream where we would bathe using different soaps and herbs while swearing an oath of allegiance to the deity, never to run away. I wondered where this was leading to as no one ever explained anything to us. I often wondered what was going on at home. The final rites of initiation came. It was horrific as I had learnt about Female Genital Mutilation at school. This is all we were being prepared for.

"Sango believed that the girls who went to school were rude and looked down upon their culture which was not true. So he took it as his mission, together with his cronies, to ensure that we also went through the cut.

"That was the most painful experience I have ever gone through. Most of the girls succumbed to the pain and their bodies were disposed of in the forest. I wondered what Sango would tell their parents.

"My grandchildren, for several days I was in pain and I thought that I could not make it alive. I could neither eat nor sleep.

"Unknown to us, the authorities were monitoring Sango and finally the law caught up with him. Some of his cronies escaped but most were caught. We were four girls who survived. We were rushed to the hospital for care. It was too late; the damage had already been done. "After spending almost a month at the hospital, we were discharged. I was filled with self-loathing and I had no self-esteem. I wondered whether I could look Papa in the eye without hating him for his selfishness or despise Mother for her weakness in not standing up for me. The journey back home seemed like a long road, a long road to freedom, freedom I didn't feel or appreciate."

I wondered whether I should continue with the story as any time I thought about it, it brought back very sad memories. But anyway, I had to continue. My grandchildren were all looking at me and I could tell that none wanted me to stop and yet, they did not know how to ask me to continue. After a long pause, I continued.

“On reaching home, I would not even talk to my parents. Their apologies and regrets fell on deaf ears. I wondered if Papa had really thought through what Sango had promised. I knew that I could not stay under the same roof with my parents. The bitterness I felt was too much. I decided to get solace in my books as that is what I enjoyed doing the most. I had to get away from home. I was determined to get an education even if it meant that I had to self-fund. And that is exactly what I did.

“I focused on my academics and got admitted into the university to study agriculture. Although I was doing well academically, my social life was not going on well. I could not seem to hold onto any meaningful relationships and within no time, I turned to hard drugs and alcohol to fill the void.

“Academic excellence, my only sense of accomplishment, gave me fully funded scholarships for my Masters and Doctorate degrees. It was towards the end of my Master’s program that I met Sekhukhune, your grandfather. As with every great relationship, we started out as friends. His unusual opinion about gender and nationality intrigued me. He didn’t discriminate, feel superior or ever use religious tales to seek subordination. He instead insisted that he believed that we were to be submissive one to another and to love our spouse better than our own selves. As we continued to get closer, his love, care, understanding and attention made me feel better about myself and eventually, I agreed to marry him towards the end of our doctorate program after so much persuasion. As he fondly reminded me, that I was the most difficult investor

he had to persuade to believe in him. He also convinced me to forgive my parents because like he always says, ‘Unforgiveness, bitterness and resentment are like poison that ravage the soul.’ He helped me to work through my issues with alcohol and drugs. I even forgave my parents and was re-united with them upon my return. Oh how I love my husband, my grandchildren!

“On our return, armed with a strong sense of purpose, we decided to start an agricultural financing company. It wasn’t a walk in the park, but certain strategies and determination made the growth of the company a worthwhile adventure. We worked tirelessly with the small-scale farmers training them on sustainable agricultural methods. This required patience and hard work. We shared with the farmers some of our experiences in the various countries that we had visited. We also convinced the Africans in the diaspora to invest back home.

“Our governments also created the African Continental Free Trade Agreement. This agreement allowed for borderless trade and allowed our market to become the largest trading area in the world. Seeing the benefits it brought to our economies, we decided to develop one currency, the Fikans. Of course our company, like many others benefited from the agreement that culminated into the largest agricultural conglomerate in the world. We have collaborated on many landmark projects and matters ranging from climate change, renewable energy, manufacturing, just to mention a few.”

I finished my story and was enveloped by seemingly grave yard silence. I was terrified to look at their faces. Despite all the accolades the world had given, if my family did not respect me or understand their grandma based on this new revelation,

I would have been shattered. The applause startled me. I burst into tears. The warm hugs and understanding faces, however, made me realise that although I could not change the past, it turned out okay.