African Females and Adjustment to Studying Abroad

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ABSTRACT   *This article draws on existing literature and a field study conducted by the writer to explore the problems faced by African females when studying abroad. A comparative perspective is adopted and, whilst it is recognised that women are particularly disadvantaged in general, the principal thesis is that African women are particularly disadvantaged, especially when they undertake studies abroad. The article describes and analyses the disadvantages faced by women broadly throughout the world, by African women in general and in education in particular, and the difficulties they face when studying abroad. The implications for policy practice and research are considered and some short- and long-term strategies suggested whereby improvements could be effected.*

Introduction

The principal focus of this article is the experiences of African female students abroad, the problems they face when studying outside their own country and the way these are embedded in their previous experiences. The first section deals briefly with some of the general issues faced by students who study abroad. Some key concepts are identified and some working definitions offered. Attention is next given to some of the common disadvantages faced by women in general throughout the world. The discussion then concentrates on the disadvantages faced by women in Africa in general and the specific disadvantages they face in relation to education. Finally, attention is paid to the conditions of African women studying outside their own countries.

   The broad thesis put forward is that the disadvantages and problems faced by African women studying abroad are based in their own cultures, and that they are compounded when such students study abroad. They are therefore gravely disadvantaged even before they leave their own countries. Furthermore, whilst it is acknowledged that women throughout the world share a common culture of disadvantage, African women are disadvantaged to the degree that their plight renders them worse off in absolute terms, and not merely as a matter of degree.

   The final section of the article uses the preceding description and analysis to identify some of the implications that emerge. Some short-term suggestions are offered and their

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ramifications for policy, practice and further research are considered. In particular, strategies are recommended, such as developing more campus-friendly atmospheres, sensitising university communities to cultural differences, and recognising the critical role that language plays in such matters. Some long-term implications are also considered but it will be seen that remedies attempting to redress these are much more complex, and have to be based in the societies from which African females come. What also emerges is that more empirical studies are needed in this field so that policy-makers and practitioners have the data necessary to make informed decisions.

Disadvantages Faced by Foreign Students

African females are not the only students to face problems when studying outside their countries. There is general consensus that foreign students face more adjustment problems in relation to universities in host countries than do their native counterparts (Still, 1961; Singh, 1963; Pruitt, 1978; Adelegan & Parks, 1985; Furnham & Bochner, 1986). Some of the problems and concerns that affect foreign students' adjustment to universities abroad are: personal and psychological problems; academic problems; difficulties experienced in replacing a social network of family, neighbours and friends at a time when they are regarded as strangers and even intruders; concerns about political instabilities in their home countries; cultural differences; and food and climatic problems. A number of researchers including Pruitt (1978), Lee *et al.* (1981), Church (1982), Adelegan & Parks (1985), Schram & Lauver (1988), Manese *et al.* (1988) and Maundeni (1997) have also found that female students experience more difficulty in adjusting to life at universities abroad than do their male counterparts. However, little attention has been paid to determining the reasons for this.

Previous studies have focused on the experiences of ethnic minority females as a group. But ethnic minority women are not a homogeneous group. There are significant differences among them and these also influence their adjustment to study abroad. Ethnic minority women who are far from their native countries, who have left their families and familiar support networks, and who are students, are very likely to face numerous problems in adjusting to life abroad. Their situation is more difficult than that of ethnic minority women who study in their native countries, and perhaps even those who are not students. Some researchers have focused on ethnic minority females and women in this context, including Wilson (1978), Mirza (1992) and Henry (1994). However, there is a paucity of literature on African female students and the problems they face when studying abroad.

Two key factors which affect females when studying at the tertiary level at home or abroad are *adjustment* and *role strain*. Precision about key concepts is essential to provide direction and common ground for readers of this article, and the following definitions and explanations of these terms are offered. Adjustment in the context of this article refers to the process whereby individuals enter into relationships with their physical or social environments. Adjustment can be positive, negative and/or mixed. If an individual's relationship with the environment is harmonious or healthy, the individual is experiencing positive adjustment; if the relationship is not harmonious, the individual is experiencing negative adjustment. In reality, however, it is not easy to draw a line between the two types of adjustment. An individual may experience positive adjustment in some aspects of his or her life and negative adjustment in others. Such an individual can, therefore, be said to be experiencing mixed adjustment. Positive adjustment has

been found to contribute to satisfactory academic achievement (Rising & Capp, 1968; Sharma, 1971).

Because many women combine careers with household duties, they are susceptible to and likely to experience role strain. Role strain refers to 'the general stress experienced when the demands of one or more roles are unrealistic, inappropriate or unfair' (Magill & Delgado, 1995, p. 1134). For example, while women have made considerable progress in obtaining employment in the modern sector, which has been traditionally dominated by men, men still have a long way to go in sharing domestic chores and responsibilities. Women who enter this sector are therefore vulnerable: in general their male partners expect them to continue to shoulder the burden of domestic responsibilities irrespective of the demands of their career outside the home. This matter of role strain is a particularly critical one for African females.

Factors Affecting Role Strain When Studying

As already noted, role strain affects a large number of women, irrespective of whether they are students or not. Women tend to spend more time taking care of children, the elderly and the sick. A number of studies (for example, Maynard & Pearsall, 1994) have found that many mature female students express more concern about non-academic problems, such as family difficulties, than do male students. This is probably because most men give up their principal occupation when entering higher education, whereas a majority of women do not do so as they have to retain their domestic roles. A majority of women students who participated in Maynard & Pearsall's study asserted that the demands of the home continue unabated throughout their academic lives, and this was a cause of stress.

Maynard & Pearsall (1994) further found that men were able to commit themselves more wholeheartedly to their student lives, academically and socially, whereas women were unable to do so. The role strain experienced by women can result in marital tensions, women's declining interest in marriage and sometimes divorce. Feldman (quoted in Lewis, 1983) has argued that there is concern on the part of females about the potential conflict between the role of wife and full-time student. Sometimes, as a result, some women may avoid potential conflict by remaining single, while others end their marriages. The divorce rate in the USA has been found to be closely related to women's enrolment in education (Tian, 1996). Through undertaking university studies women appear to place their personal well-being and their marriages under real threat.

How Women Are Disadvantaged in General

Vulnerability to Domestic Violence and Rape

Women are more vulnerable to domestic violence than men irrespective of whether they are in their home countries or not. From a general perspective, compared with men, women are far more vulnerable to domestic violence, rape and similar incidents. It is estimated that between 90% and 97% of all domestic violence is directed towards women by men, largely because of the unequal position of women in society (Eekelaar & Katz, 1989). This has serious implications, not only for the physical and emotional well-being of women, but also for their academic performance.

Women's Unequal Social, Political and Economic Status

Women all over the world do not have equal social, economic and political status when compared with their male counterparts. In both developed and developing countries, women do not enjoy the political and constitutional representation which is commensurate with their number. Women's political power remains minimal, in spite of their right to vote in many countries. For example, in Europe and the USA, out of 16 countries, only four had a third or more women as members of parliament or senior ministers, and eight had 10% or less.

Inequalities in terms of social, political, legal and economic rights between Muslim men and women are generally comparatively greater than in other societies largely because the Muslim religion and tradition demand total obedience and conformity from women. The consequences of this are all-embracing. For instance, in Saudi Arabia social restrictions severely limit the capacity for women to undertake research into such disciplines as education (Hopkin, 1992).

Women also have a long way to go in economic terms. For example, in France, women constitute 46% of the workforce but they mostly occupy low-paid jobs, and even when they are in comparable occupations, they earn 80% of what men earn (The Economist, 1996, p. 13). Although socio-economic and political inequalities still exist for women in both developed and developing countries, it should be noted that the progress made in the field of human rights in developed countries far outweighs that which has been made in developing countries. This increasingly disadvantages females in developing countries.

Lack of Support from Male Partners

Another important issue, irrespective of ethnicity, which affects women students and which is likely to influence their adjustment to tertiary studies, is lack of support from their male partners. Leonard (1994) contends that often mature women students face hostility and a lack of support from partners mainly because their partners fear that the women's educational endeavours will affect their relationship and that household obligations will be neglected because of university obligations.

Similarly, Maynard & Pearsall (1994) conclude that higher education makes women more assertive and independent. However, their male partners do not, in general, welcome such changes. They are often unwilling or unable to make the appropriate adjustments to their relationship with their wives, or to their personal lifestyles, which are necessary during the time when their wives are students. Being a university student is a challenging role and for a woman's academic performance to be satisfactory, she needs a safe and supportive environment. In many cases what she faces is a hostile, unsupportive one.

General Disadvantages Faced by African Women

Inequalities in Socio-economic and Legal Rights

Socio-economic and legal inequalities experienced by women in the developing countries of Africa are much greater than those experienced by women in developed countries. It should be noted, however, that Africa is not a homogeneous entity; therefore progress made in terms of the rights of women varies among countries. Because most African countries are poor, they are much less able to afford to sustain infrastructures that

guarantee that the human rights of all their citizens are respected. Poverty undermines human rights, especially in the case of women.

But economic circumstances are not necessarily the principal determinants of the status of women in Africa. Tradition, ideology and laws also influence the status of women. Practices common in Africa such as female circumcision—the female 'butchering' which is to be found in countries such as Sudan and Ethiopia—are gross violations of human rights.

Women also experience inequalities regarding marriage, inheritance and divorce. In most parts of Africa, two legal systems prevail. These are the statutory or 'modern' laws (such as the Dutch-Roman or English legal systems) and the customary traditional legal systems. The general law is based on an adversarial model, and involves the use of paid counsel. The customary legal system usually has a court system based on the authority of community leaders and does not involve representation by legal counsel. Because the customary system is much less expensive and within their financial means, most women (especially those living in rural areas) are forced to use it to seek legal redress. However, under much customary law, married women do not have majority status (Hook & Ngwenya, 1996). Majority status, according to Hook & Ngwenya (1996; p. 173), 'grants individuals adult legal status and the right to bring matters to court, own and administer property, have legal custody of children and contract for marriage'. In such circumstances women are dependent on their husbands to bring lawsuits and to initiate and enter into contracts. Husbands also control all the valuable property, and wives have only rights of use. This disadvantages women as, for example, in cases of divorce, husbands frequently end up with most of any valuable property available.

Customary marriages also put women at a disadvantage because they confer inferior status on women compared with men. Such marriages are common in countries like Kenya, Botswana, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Women married under customary laws are treated as men's property, particularly if the men have paid *lobola* (bride-price). Men who have paid bride-price may assume that they have the right to treat their wives as they wish. Furthermore, some women whose parents have been given bride-price tend to stay in abusive relationships because they fear that if they leave their husbands, their families might reclaim the bride-price (Holm, 1995). This has serious implications for the welfare of the women and that of their children.

Under statutory or 'modern' law in countries such as Botswana, women can marry in community of property and out of community of property. Women who marry out of community of property retain their majority status, while those who marry in community of property (property held jointly by the couple) lose their right to majority status. Such an arrangement gives husbands sole authority to administer the property and to enter into contracts, but their wives are unable to do so. Marriage under community of property, like customary marriage, can therefore leave women gravely disadvantaged in cases of divorce.

Socialisation Patterns and the Disadvantaging of Women

Various socialisation patterns contribute to the adjustment problems of female African women in several ways, and these affect them when they later become mature students. Firstly, the culture of most Western societies encourages and values assertiveness: however, unlike their male counterparts, African women are not socialised to be assertive, but to be passive and submissive (Maundeni, 1997). This process starts in the family and continues in school and society at large. Thus, when faced with situations that

require them to be assertive, African female students are likely to face difficulties. What is more, acculturative stress increases when the gap between the students' traditional culture and the host culture is greatest (DeArmond, 1983; Graham, 1983). Because there are such differences in the socialisation practices of males and females in Africa, it is not surprising that females experience more problems in adjusting to life abroad than their male counterparts, who are already accustomed to display qualities of assertiveness and independence.

Secondly, in almost all African countries, women have been historically regarded as socially inferior to men and have usually been treated as minors. This is particularly well expressed in Wamahiu *et al.*'s (1996) study of the educational situation of the Kenyan girl-child where the Kenyan female is:

> normally born in a family and brought up in a household where patriarchal authority … remains undisputed. From birth, various cultural practices and symbolism persist in reminding her … of the lower status she occupies in society *vis à vis her brothers*. She is socialised early into a … system of norms and values, attitudes and skills that tend to emphasise gender differentiation in … adult roles and aspirations. (Wamahiu *et al.*, 1996; p. 19)

The relegation of women to being second class status/citizens is manifested in the family and society at large. Under Botswana customary law, for example, women were subject to guardianship throughout their entire life. Initially, they were placed under their fathers until they were married, when guardianship was transferred to their husbands (Macdonald, 1996). In contemporary Botswana, the situation has not changed much in the case of customary marriage. There are a number of laws (especially in the areas of marriage and divorce) that place women in an inferior position compared to men. For example, married women are still subjected to their husbands' authority in matters relating to obtaining credit and owning property, land and houses.

Furthermore, in most African families, men are still the main decision-makers and rulers. Karanja's (1983) study of conjugal decision-making in Lagos found that the position of women, with regard to the prescribed norms of decision-making, is inferior relative to that of men in practically all the areas of domestic decision-making selected as the area of study for her research. These areas included: childbearing and rearing; the use of leisure time; work outside the home and the co-residence of kin and in-laws. The above societal and cultural beliefs, practices, assumptions and laws, all of which treat women as minors and inferior to men, affect women who study abroad. Some women (especially those who leave their husbands in their native countries) may suffer. This may include feelings of insecurity as a result of the absence of their husbands' protection and guidance; experiencing difficulty in making decisions for themselves; thinking and believing that they are not as capable as men; and the belief that they cannot live on their own and therefore need a man in order to feel secure. A study conducted by Manese *et al.* (1988) in the USA, using male and female international undergraduate students, concluded that women expect to have a more difficult time in university, are more easily discouraged, do not act on their beliefs, and fail to see themselves as leaders when compared with their male counterparts.

Thirdly, traditionally polygamy was widespread in African countries such as Lesotho, Zambia, Botswana, Namibia and South Africa. Although polygamy has declined in most African countries, some married men still continue to have more than one sexual partner. One household survey conducted by the AIDS/STD Unit in Botswana in 1993 revealed that among the sexually active males, including those that are married, 40%

currently had two or more partners. My informal discussions with students from Swaziland, Malawi and Lesotho revealed that it seems acceptable for men to have more than one partner, while women are supposed to stick to one partner. Some students interviewed pointed out that since most men are financially better off than most women, they tend to believe that they can control and dominate women's lives. Male students who come from cultures where it is deemed acceptable for men to have more than one sexual partner, and where women are still considered as men's property, would possibly view women as subordinate and might even expect female students to grant them sexual favours on demand.

Fourthly, there are elements of violence in sexual relationships in Africa. Recent evidence from Botswana shows that men tend to dominate relationships and that there is generally a lack of respect for women (Macdonald, 1996). In a study of young women who are sexually active conducted by the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) in Botswana, 20% of the respondents reported that the first time they had sexual intercourse, they were physically forced to do so. This suggests that for a significant number of women in Botswana, their first experience of sexual intercourse is technically that of rape (Macdonald, 1996). Findings such as these have implications for female African students abroad. As much as women in their home countries can be forced to have sexual intercourse, this can also happen to female African students living abroad. This may add more stress to female students, lower their self-esteem, and even produce feelings of guilt and shame among them.

Violence towards females is carried over into marital relationships. The problem of domestic violence has been found to be on the increase in most parts of Africa, and most women stay in abusive relationships for a long time (Holm, 1995). It is difficult to ascertain the exact incidence of women-battering because of lack of accurate statistics. What is more, various factors compel African women to stay in abusive relationships for a long time. Firstly, women are generally reluctant to report violence in the family to extended family members, to the police or other legal authorities. This is partly because the services and support provided for battered women are minimal. Thus, women are aware that even if they report abuse, they are unlikely to get help. In addition, the cultural attitude that encourages subordination of women and condones customs permitting men to chastise their wives, results in women being reluctant to report domestic violence (Molokomme, 1990). Also, some women are reluctant to move out of violent relationships because they feel that their families will not help due to fears that the man's family might reclaim the bride-price (Holm, 1995). It is most unlikely that women who put up with such situations in their own countries will act differently when they are abroad.

Finally, African women are socialised to stay at home and to spend their leisure time in the home attending to household chores, while their male counterparts have much more time to visit friends and spend time in public places. A study conducted by Nyati-Ramahobo (1996) in one African country showed that the daily occupations for African boys in the cities differ from those of girls. The following are some of the activities which boys engage in: watching television, reading newspapers, going to movies and other public places and washing family cars. Girls, on the other hand, cook, sweep yards, do laundry and take care of young children. It is interesting to note that in the list of girls' activities, going to movies and other public places is not mentioned. Girls' activities largely centre around the home. Ramahobo found that the type of activities which boys perform to a large extent influence the activities they perform later as men.

Some Educational Experiences of African Females

Much lip-service is paid to the economic and social value of educating females, particularly at the tertiary level. In support of this, evidence from many countries points to the strong relationships between the education of girls and women and national development (King & Hill, 1991). It is argued that the education of women is closely linked to improved social well-being. For example, the educational level of a woman influences infant mortality since educated mothers are more likely to appreciate the importance of prenatal and neonatal care and are thus more likely to be users of such health care services. Increased education for women also leads to higher productivity and income, thereby improving infant survival rates, and the higher income leads to better living standards (King & Hill, 1991). In spite of these obvious advantages, African women in the formal system of education face major problems compared with their male counterparts.

Women and men in Africa do not benefit equally from the education system. This inequality is seen in lower enrolment rates for girls, lower levels of attainment, and higher wastage rates (referring to grade repetition, poor performance during examinations and dropout) (Hyde, 1991). Consequently, gender disparities are much more pronounced in higher institutions of education in all African countries (Rathgeber, 1991). These educational disparities are compounded by societal factors. Factors that affect the education of girls and women in Africa are related to family and society.

In many countries of Africa, women tend to be married at a younger age, and therefore more girls than boys are denied access to higher institutions of learning. The general age of marriage varies among countries. In Ethiopia, for example, 20% of the female primary school students surveyed in 1988 were either promised marriage, married, or divorced (Biazen & Junge, 1988). Girls rather than boys are more affected by early marriages because in most African countries girls are married to men older than them.

Girls, rather than boys, are more likely to have a large number of household tasks to complete, and these usually take precedence over schoolwork for them compared with their brothers. In their study of women's education in Upper Volta, Mcsweeney & Freedman (1982) found that girls between the ages of 7 and 11 contribute several hours of work a day to household chores, and their contribution is more than twice that of their male counterparts. They observed that from 25% to 55% of a girl's time is spent in the activities of hauling water, grinding grain and transport. Other work activities included spinning cotton, doing laundry and dishes, cooking and fishing. In such circumstances the chances of girls remaining in formal education are much less than those of boys.

Gender inequalities between men and women prevail in most parts of Africa and one result is that far fewer women attain higher education. There are other factors which contribute to this, and some of these are to be found at the higher levels of the formal system of education itself. For example, the fact that there are few African women in higher education suggests that females have less to exposure to appropriate role models and mentors of their own sex. This deficiency may result in female African students being denied access to the information, skills and opportunities which are normally associated with mentoring and the availability of role models. On the other hand, male dominance at the tertiary educational levels ensures that their male counterparts have no shortage of role models and mentors and they benefit accordingly. This is particularly critical in the sciences.

Attitudes of African Males

All the above factors have implications even for educated adult males and females. Most African men still believe that it is the woman's responsibility to attend to household chores and to do this without their help. When some African men perform household chores, they believe that they are just doing their wives a favour. My informal discussions about family life with some African male students who were studying in one midwestern university in the USA in 1995 revealed that not only does the belief that 'the woman's place is in the kitchen' exist among uneducated African men, but it also exists among those who are educated as well. Some of them mentioned how rarely they enter kitchens and that, even if they do wash dishes (once in a while), they believe that they are doing their wives a great favour. One respondent said:

> I married her, she did not marry me, so why should I share household chores with her equally? I am surprised at the extent to which some of my American male friends perform household chores! You can't be always washing dishes and bathing children like you are a woman.

Another other one said:

> Although I sometimes feel like helping my wife, I do not, because people will think that my wife has bewitched me. Once in a while, I help her, but when visitors arrive, I stop helping her.

African Females and Studying Abroad

The aforementioned determinants are a sort of legacy that African women take with them when they leave their home countries and go to study abroad. The way males and females have been socialised inevitably affects them when they leave their countries for further study. Whilst gender roles may assign much greater status to females in the host country, this will have little effect on how African females behave in relation to males from their continent. The socialisation patterns already established are very strong. This is demonstrated in the attitudes shown by males in the previous section.

Such widespread beliefs and practices can contribute to female African students experiencing many more problems in adjusting to life and study abroad. They find that they may not be able to perform academically as well as their husbands, and they may not have the opportunity to spend time with friends which could help reduce the amount of stress they experience. A majority of male African students who participated in the study of African students' adjustment to some British universities which I conducted in 1997 reported that they spent the bulk of their leisure time in bars and other public places, whereas most female students revealed that they spent their leisure time largely in their flats, though sometimes they went to the shops.

Differences in the socialisation practices in relation to how boys and girls spend time may result in female students spending their time after school in their rooms, maybe worrying, and therefore more likely to get depressed. Spending time in their rooms also means that they interact with less people compared with their male counterparts. This may mean that female students have far fewer people as members of their networks who can offer support, and therefore ease their adjustment to life abroad. In his study of the adaptation of African students to American society, Pruitt (1978) found that women reported more difficulty both during their first few months after arrival in the USA and at the time when his study was being conducted. Pruitt associated the adjustment

difficulties which female students experienced with 'the fact that African women are more confined to the home and may not be so well prepared to face the challenges of adjustment to a new culture' (p. 108).

The Issue of Racism and Discrimination

> All black people are subordinated by racial oppression, women are subordinated by sexual domination, and black women are subordinated to both, as well as class. (Foster-Clark, 1987, p. 46)

Discrimination against ethnic minority women has been documented by both British and American scholars. Henry (1994), for example, in her British study on: the experiences of black women in higher education, contended that black female students in the natural sciences are likely to experience more discrimination than their counterparts in the social sciences. This is partly because both students and staff in the natural sciences are largely white and male. Black women who enrol on courses in the natural sciences therefore feel that they have to justify their presence. Henry noted that some participants at a workshop given at the Women in Higher Education Network (WHEN) conference at the University of Central Lancashire in November 1993 were studying in the natural sciences. They pointed out that they have to be three times better than their white male and female colleagues.

One of the female African students who participated in a study on African students which I conducted in 1997 revealed how, on several occasions, one of her biology professors expressed disbelief at the high marks she scored in the tests. This kind of response from lecturers is not conducive to female African students' academic success. Instead of the professor congratulating a black student for a job well done, the professor showed disbelief with respect to her achievements.

The negative attitudes of teachers and lecturers towards black female students do not only exist in higher institutions of learning, but also in lower ones, including primary and secondary schools. In her study of young, female black students in Britain, Mirza (1992) found that it was common for teachers to express openly their misgivings about the intellectual capabilities of black girls in their schools. Some 75% of the teachers whom Mirza interviewed made at least one negative comment about the black girls they taught. One of the teachers pointed out that:

> Most of these [black] girls will never succeed ..., they are just unable to remember, the girls just can't make it at this level [O level and CSE].... There is what I call 'brain death' among them. They are unable to think for themselves. (Mirza, 1992, p. 53).

The Double Dilemma Facing African Females

Because the education systems of most Western countries encourage students to be assertive and independent, some African female students do end up by adopting such qualities in order to be accepted. The acquisition of these qualities may not only take time, but doing so may also generate internal conflicts in some students, as they wonder whether they should abandon their own identity and loyalty to their own culture. This is what they face on the one hand, and on the other they feel that they have to adapt to the values and practices of the cultures of the societies in which they are studying in order to succeed in their courses. These internal conflicts might interfere with their

academic performance, particularly when they contemplate how they are going to adjust to their families and communities on their return to Africa. Furthermore, it should be noted that the quality of assertiveness is both encouraged and valued in the working context in their own countries, but not in family and community life. Female students therefore face a double dilemma in adjusting both to life abroad and to life in their home countries.

Eide (1970) and Graham (1983) contend that if the culture of the student and that of the host country are not very similar, the student who is adjusted to one culture will be maladjusted to the other. Once students have adjusted temporarily to the new culture, they will later have to readjust themselves to life in their original country. As this paper indicates, such steps are more complex for females and this underlies the double dilemma which African female students are likely to experience. The processes of adjusting when abroad and then adjusting back to one's country are difficult and do not take place overnight. Unfortunately, few people in the networks of African students have an adequate understanding of the dynamics of adjustment. As a result female students are likely to be criticised for their slow adjustment, both to life abroad and to life in their native countries on their return. This can cause even further suffering and stress.

Other Factors Relating to Adjustment by Female African Students

A factor which can make the adjustment of female African students abroad more difficult than that of their male counterparts is the fact that some single mothers may take their children with them. This could mean that they spend some of the time when they would normally be studying with the children, as they might not be able to afford to enrol the children in nurseries on a full-time basis because of the high costs of fees. Although some fathers of children who go abroad with their mothers are capable of paying child support, which would enable the mothers to pay nursery fees for the children, most of them do not pay any maintenance at all.

This can be traced to the social patterns in the countries from which these students come. Child support systems in most African countries are generally lenient to men in terms of ordering them to pay adequate and frequent sums towards child maintenance. The fact that there are large numbers of fathers who default with such payments, as well as the general leniency shown by the system to men in such matters, have been partly attributed to the fact that men, rather than women, hold influential positions in these countries (such as policy-makers, judges and lawyers). As males, they are therefore more likely to make decisions and policies which favour men. In Botswana for example, it was not until January 1998 that a female judge was first appointed. This step is a positive move towards empowering women. It is hoped that in the long run, as more and more women enter positions which allow them to influence policies, more policies and decisions which are fair to women and children will be put in place.

Apart from the leniency shown to male defaulters with respect to child support, which enables many males to avoid paying adequate levels of support to dependents, there are other barriers which discourage African women from filing claims for maintenance and child support. These include: economic constraints (women cannot afford the costs associated with dealing with the court system); indifferent and negative attitudes towards women on the part of court employees; women's sense of feeling intimidated by the court system; the failure of court officials to enforce legal decisions; the fear of losing their children if men were required to pay maintenance; the fear of being affected by or

accused of witchcraft; and fear of violence from the children's biological fathers (Armstrong, 1992; Garey & Townsend, 1996).

Inadequate financial support from partners does not only affect women in their own country: it is also experienced by females studying abroad. When I undertook my study, females who were studying abroad also reported inadequate funds for children as a significant financial problem that they faced. In addition to their being unable to afford to pay nursery fees for children, single mothers studying abroad may experience stress as a result of looking after the children entirely on their own. This is particularly so with African females because in most African countries (especially in rural areas), children under the age of 5 or 6 are looked after by the whole family. In addition, children have frequent contact with other children and adults in the neighbourhood. Middle-class working people (living in towns) are usually able to hire maids to help them with household and childcare activities. A single parent going abroad with her children leaves behind the supportive communal family network that plays a significant role in childcare.

Although such a student may, after some time, find a way to cope with and manage the demands of childcare, the time lost in the setting this up may be too great and might have adversely affected her academic performance. Whilst female students who take children with them abroad experience difficulty in devoting enough time to their studies, those who leave their children in their home countries are not necessarily better off. A number of the female African students who participated in the study I conducted in 1997 had left their children back in their home countries. They indicated that they missed their children very much, and were generally of the opinion that their absence was adversely affecting their studies.

Issues of domestic violence and rape can adversely affect the adjustment of female African students to universities abroad. It has been noted earlier that domestic violence is increasing in Africa (Holm, 1995). African women, accustomed to staying in violent relationships and not reporting domestic violence when in their home countries, are equally likely to find it difficult to move out of a violent relationships or to report it when they are abroad. Such situations will adversely affect the academic performance of African females when studying abroad.

Lastly, education and language-related issues can also complicate the adjustment processes of African female students abroad. More African women than men tend to have difficulty in participating verbally in class discussions and presentations (Maundeni, 1997). The British and the North American education systems, especially at the graduate level, emphasise participation on the part of class members. However, African female students are not accustomed to being vocal or assertive. The education systems of most African countries do not encouraged students to be active verbally in class. Similarly, culturally, women in most African countries are socialised not to be assertive compared to their male counterparts, and this is encouraged by the education system. In much of Africa, students can progress well even if they do not participate actively in class discussions.

Female students who participated in the study I conducted in 1997 in Britain pointed out that in their home countries they had been taught to sit in class quietly, taking verbatim notes which were to be studied and later reproduced in an examination. Most male students, on the other hand, faced fewer problems concerning class participation because they are accustomed to speaking in public places, and had been socialised to be assertive. A majority of the female students who participated in the study also expressed reluctance about seeking help from lecturers and teachers when they had difficulties in

understanding what was being taught. Only a few male students expressed similar reluctance.

These responses are not surprising because the socialisation of African children (especially females) emphasises that obedience and submissiveness on the part of children, particularly females, to elders is a mark of good upbringing. This reluctance of female students to seek help from lecturers can be a source of stress to them which could, in turn, adversely affect their academic achievement. Furthermore, some female students protested that because they associated mainly with fellow countrywomen during their leisure time, they tended to use their own language more than did males. This hampered their fluency in spoken English and also had a negative effect on their general competence in English in particular and on their studies in general.

Implications for Practice, Policy and Research

It has been demonstrated in this article that women are, in general, disadvantaged. Women encounter inequality with respect to social, economic, legal and political rights, are vulnerable to domestic violence and rape, experience role strain, and also frequently meet with lack of support from their male partners. These general disadvantages faced by women are exacerbated in terms of the disadvantages faced by African women. They are particularly marked in matters such as inequality in education and the lack of socio-economic and legal rights. Furthermore, the disadvantages faced by women in general, and those faced by all African women, are compounded when African women have to adjust to the problems of studying abroad.

This article has several implications (both short-term and long-term) for policy, practice and research. One of the short-term implications is that in higher education institutions where African students study outside their country, there is a need to develop campus climates that are friendly to female African students. One way to promote such enlightened campus climates is through the establishment of adequate support networks. This suggestion has also been made by scholars and researchers (Hetherington & Barcelo, 1985; Matthews, 1992) who have written about ethnic minority women in higher education. The support networks should feature mentoring programmes, support groups, and workshops and seminars whereby women can meet to share experiences and to empower each other. In addition to such support networks, female African students who have brought their children with them should have access to affordable childcare services, so that they can have sufficient time to concentrate on their academic work. Students should also be linked with welfare officers who can provide, at an early stage of their course of studies, information on the different childcare options available to them.

The second short-term implication is that the staff and students of universities which have ethnic minority students (and not necessarily only those made up of African female students) should be sensitised to cultural differences. One way of doing this is to provide opportunities for African students to organise cultural talks and shows to enlighten non-Africans about their cultures and traditions.

A third short-term measure is the addressing of issues related to education and language. Many universities outside Africa are already providing English courses for foreign students who are not fluent in English. African female students should be encouraged to utilise such opportunities. There should also be more contact between African female students and host communities. Such contact is very important as it could reduce the amount of leisure time that African students spend with each other, thereby

helping to improve students' ability to speak and use English. Increased contact with people in the host communities could also help African female students to learn the cultures of host countries and to gain insights into those behaviours which are acceptable and those which are not. Such learning can facilitate their adjustment to studying abroad.

The long-term measures have to be within the province of the countries from which African females students come. Greater attention has to be paid to increasing the number of females who attain higher education. This measure should be the responsibility of individual female students, their parents and families and of society at large. Cultural beliefs that encourage women to value marriage, childbearing and rearing more than education partly contribute to gender inequality in education. They should, perhaps, be modified but this is a complex issue. If the increasing divorce rates, the spread of HIV/AIDS and other social problems are taken into account then more women may choose not to marry at all. In turn, placing more emphasis on women's education and less on marriage and childbearing may increase women's chances of being able to survive economically on their own. In other words, although marriage, childbearing and rearing are important, the education of women should henceforth be given priority. In addition, parents must be made more aware of ascribing roles, and should be encouraged to allocate household chores to females and males equally. By so doing, female students could devote more time to schoolwork. This might also help to increase the number of females who pursue male-dominated courses such as the natural sciences.

In the long-term greater attention has to be paid to amending the laws, practices and beliefs that are oppressive to women in Africa. Some women's liberation movements in Africa are already making efforts to address the gender inequalities that exist in most parts of Africa. Furthermore, greater financial security for women has to be provided. One way of doing that is to reform the child support systems in various African countries so that they are more responsive to children's needs and the financial burdens faced by mothers, particularly those who are in full-time study.

This article has addressed the issue of the problems faced by African females in adjusting to studying abroad. It has become clear that this is a complex matter and that their difficulties are rooted in their indigenous cultures. This article has also noted that there is a scarcity of literature dealing specifically with the experiences of African female students abroad. Both in the short term and long term more research (both qualitative and quantitative) and documentation is needed. This is essential if policy-makers and practitioners are to have access to data which will help them obtain an improved understanding of the dynamics of adjustment which face female African students when they study abroad. It is to be hoped that, in the short and long terms, there will be an improved understanding of the adjustments female African students have to make when they study abroad. This should enable their host societies at large, and the professionals who come into direct academic contact with them, to develop programmes that address the specific needs of such students.

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