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## **Born into Expectations**

By Lyndah N. Wasike<sup>1</sup>

The first time I realized wearing dresses and having long hair were not the only differences between girls and boys, I was only in primary school.

It was January 1998, and the sun blazed in my hometown of Kakamega in Western Kenya. The teacher divided us into two groups: girls on the left and boys on the right.

“Plaster cow dung on the classroom floor.” He pointed at us with a stern expression, round glasses sliding down his sweaty nose. Then he turned to the boys. “You slash the grass.”

I wanted to ask why. Why couldn't I slash the grass, too, or the boys join the girls' group? My small hand trembled, aiming to ask the question, but as the teacher's piercing gaze reached us, demanding strict obedience, I quickly lowered my hand back to my side. Even though no one yelled at me, and there was no paper of rules pinned on the wall, deep down I knew we girls would never slash the grass.

As I got to work with the rest of the students, I fell into thinking. We did not have a single female teacher at my school. Only the kindergarten students did.

My eyes glided over the group of teachers gathered in the hallway, then fell on those walking outside or sitting at their desks. All of the teachers were men, dressed in Kaunda suits and well-polished black shoes. Their foreheads were beaded with sweat, and wedding rings glistening on their fingers. There was something odd about that realization, like I had just opened my eyes and noticed the surroundings I had grown up in.

I remember how desperate I felt searching for our headteacher the next day. I wanted to see her walk in the hallway, her heels clanking, and her perfect red lipstick flashing through our sky-blue uniforms and the faces that filled our school.

Hurrying to the outhouse, I hid behind the wall and peeked out, searching for the woman. And there she was, in her slick, classic, black knee-length skirt, beige cashmere blouse, dark blue shining heels, and a short, black, perfectly styled pixie cut wig with side-swept bangs. She walked with her head high and shoulders back,

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aware of every eye fixed on her. People's gazes followed the rhythm of her steps. She screamed with confidence. Around her, the male teachers looked like the queen's soldiers. The headteacher was more powerful, self-assured, richer, and smarter. She was my first role model and one of the few educated women in my sub-county.

That lady had it all, and I wanted to be like her.

Always radiating independence and confidence, she walked through my village every evening with crimson nail polish glistening on her fingers and her pumps piercing the air with a sharp yet sweet *click-clack*. Only a glance was enough to know her outfit was expensive, and she did not hide it. A self-assured, subtle smile always curved the ends of her lips as every eye peered at her. Standing before her, I could not help but think, *A slay queen with a great education. Sign me up!* That thought always crossed my mind when I watched her walk to and from school.

That aside, both my parents played a pivotal role in my upbringing. Coming from a traditional, highly conservative era where girls in the Luhya ethnic group were married the moment they reached the verge of adolescence, my mother Pauline only attained a seventh-grade education. After discontinuing her education, which my grandparents attributed to a lack of money to pay school fees, she married my father. My grandparents arranged for her marriage and were impressed by the twelve cows Dad offered as bride price.

While my father lived and worked as an administrative assistant in a distant government office in Nairobi city, my mom lived in Eburenga village with my six siblings and me. Donning a draped black skirt and a colorful top, she would rush around the home, doing whatever she could to make our lives comfortable.

I never felt less than anyone at home. My parents shared their love and attention equally with their five daughters and two sons. I think that is why I thought I was no different from boys and that we were all just kids with different bodies but the same skills and identical worth.

But not every family was like ours. When our neighbor had a baby boy, I saw them hanging an announcement sign on the door—a triangular piece of cowskin.

“What is that for, Mom?” I asked my mother when she returned from congratulating them.

“It's a sign they have a boy,” she replied. “To show he will be a great hunter. They would hang a wreath of reeds for a girl to show her future role of fetching firewood and water.” “Why can't it be cowskin for the girls too?” I asked, curious.

My mother smiled, caressing my head. “That's just how it is, honey,” she said.

*That's just how it is.*

The older I grew, the more I realized how true those words were.

The native Luhya traditions and rituals were planted deeply in us, their roots digging far into the soil of our culture, stretching across and reaching every corner of our village. Once I peeled my eyes off my books and looked around, I saw the cruel reality, the metal gates of cultural traditions girding us. And those gates were dauntingly tall and so hard they seemed impossible to tear through. I felt trapped. I saw no way to escape through them.

As I entered my teenage years, I paid more attention to my surroundings. My country is diverse, with over forty-five ethnic groups, but the Luhya ethnic group's cultural practices negatively affected women's education in my village.

I noticed how people bestowed a woman the title of "a wife" only after she had given birth. How elderly parents prayed for boy grandchildren. How everyone blamed everything on women: childlessness, miscarriages, married men's promiscuity, divorce, and so on. How people ostracized women who got pregnant out of wedlock. It horrified me that fathers looked at their daughters in terms of the number of cows their future husbands would pay when they got married. The questions in my mind piled up like a stack of papers. Why did the children belong to the man when the woman bore the pains of pregnancy and childbirth? Why were delayed marriages frowned upon? Why was the woman blamed for a divorce? Why was a woman who ran away from an abusive marriage forced to go back to the violence and abuse? Why were divorced women and single mothers disrespected? Why were pregnant girls quickly married off at a low bride price or wedded to a polygamous man as a second, third, or fourth wife?

The more I pondered those questions, the fewer answers I had. I realized they were our cultural traditions, passed from generation to generation, kept for hundreds of years, the root digging deep into the ground of our ways. And time couldn't dismantle or weaken them. They were unbreakable, like the tall, hard gates. After ruminating on the nature of life for females in my village, I shot glances at my mother.

"Are you happy, Momma?" I asked my mother as my siblings and I sat in a circle on the floor of our hut, eating *ugali* and kale.

When she turned to face me, her eyes reflected pain and love at the same time. A tear glistened on her cheek.

"Of course I am," she replied, raising her work-worn hand to my shoulder, caressing it.

But her words didn't match the sadness in her eyes or the deep frown lines around her mouth. I wanted to question her further, yet I knew better than to begin an argument. With a heavy heart, I simply accepted her answer.

My earliest memories are of her toiling, day in and day out. The hard physical labor of tending to so many children alone had taken its toll on her. She was a shell of the pretty, laughing woman she'd once been.

I frowned as I thought to myself, for perhaps the thousandth time, *I never want to be like Momma. I never want to have her life!*

More of a free spirit, I much preferred reading books and thinking about abstract concepts over doing physical work. I admired the women I saw in magazines, women with jobs in the city. They seemed to have far better lives than my mother had. I wanted to be a successful career woman in the city, not a village wife and a mother to many children.

One time, my mother caught me admiring a photograph of a beautiful woman dressed in a smart, white suit and red high heels carrying a shiny black briefcase on a city sidewalk. Mom looking over my shoulder startled me, and I quickly tried to hide the picture.

She just smiled and said, "That could be you one day, Lyndah."

As soon as the little ones finished eating, I helped my mother put them to bed. The next day, my father would be home from his job in the city. I couldn't wait to see him.

Since it was still light out and I had finished all my chores for the day, I left the hut to take a stroll. Setting out on a narrow footpath, I hummed a tune, relishing the summer-warm scent of the evening flowers blooming on either side of me; it was my favorite time of the day.

When I reached the stream I visited whenever I needed to think things through, I settled myself on the rocky bank and gazed over the clear blue water. It looked so refreshing and cool. I almost wanted to jump in. I smiled as I watched a crowned crane drift down to alight on one of the large boulders in the middle of the stream. A backdrop of trees and the hazy purple mountaintops completed the scene. It felt like watching a living work of art.

*Will I get what I want tomorrow?* I asked myself as I watched the bird preen itself. It looked so free. All it needed to do was spread its wings, and off it would fly in any direction it chose. Could I be like that bird?

My mind flew back to the day I learned about the different treatment of boys and girls at my village school.

"Lyndah," my male teacher had shouted. "What are you doing?"

Surprised, I stammered, “I am reading a book.”

“Why are you doing that? Go to help the rest of the girls with the floor.”

I looked around. The other girls were indeed working on the floor. But, as I scanned the room, I noticed several boys sitting and reading books the same way I had been. I did not understand.

“Give your book to Wafula,” the teacher said in an irritated tone, “and get to work.”

Although only eight years old, the bitter truth that expectations were not the same for girls and boys disgusted me. Having no choice, I surrendered my precious book and stooped down to help the rest of the girls plaster the floor with cow dung.

When I got home from school, I told my mother what happened. She wrapped me in her soft arms and pulled me into her lap.

As she kissed the top of my head, she said, “That is just the way things are here.” Then she handed me a book belonging to one of my older siblings. “You can read at home all you want,” she assured me. “And tomorrow, your father will tell us if he has decided to send you to boarding school, where your teachers will encourage your education, not repress it.”

I couldn’t wait to hear my father’s decision. I knew it was solely up to him whether I could attend boarding school. I realized that both my mother and father wanted me to get the best education, but I also knew it would be costly. They preferred to send me to a boarding school, then university, rather than marry me off early, like most other parents in our village did with their daughters. But could my parents afford to do that?

Boarding school would make my dreams a possibility. So, furthering my education was what I desperately wanted and was driven to attain. I had already taken steps in that direction. Instead of playing with the village girls, which my parents did not allow me to do, I stayed at home when not at school, studying and reading.

I yearned to attend boarding school and continue to university. I could not face spending my life in the village tending to a husband and raising children. I wanted to learn, I wanted to travel, and I wanted to be a shining star of success my parents would be proud of!

I had seen my mother work herself to the bone, and other girls, not much older than myself, fall pregnant. Did I feel guilty about my father paying for my schooling? Maybe a little, but not enough to quench my desire for a proper education. I sighed and gazed at the crane again as the beautiful bird unfurled its powerful wings and flew gracefully off into the distance. Could I fly away like that?

I would learn of my father’s decision the next day. Would I end up like the wild crane? Or like the cows we bred calves from every year? Only time would tell.

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The next day dawned sunny. I busied myself with helping my mother until my father arrived home.

After hugging my mother, my father gave each of the children, including myself, a peck on the cheek. Eagerly, I sliced and served him the jackfruit, pineapple, and guavas I had gathered especially for him earlier that morning.

After conversing with my mother, he finally spoke to me.

“How are your marks?” he asked bluntly.

“G-good,” I stammered.

Since he was a singularly demanding task-master, and rather than believing me point blank, he quizzed me on my skills, firing off math questions like bullets from a gun.

“Humph,” he said when I had answered all his questions correctly. “Quicker next time!”

I nodded, looking at my feet. “Yes, Father.”

“Ali,” my mother said, addressing him. “Have you decided about Lyndah?” Her tone was quiet and calming. I knew she did not want to pressure him.

My father ignored her question and turned to me. “Are you ready to work hard if I send you to a boarding school?” he asked. I nodded several times. “Yes!”

“You know most girls in this village will not be sent there because the cost is very high. Instead, their fathers will wait impatiently to marry them off for their bride price! Pfft! Fools!”

“I know, Father. I will work hard and make you proud. You will not be sorry if you send me there!”

“Just remember, the effort you put in will only benefit you. Your hard work will lead you to a better future. I am giving you an opportunity, an opportunity I will not hesitate to snatch from you if you grow lazy, stop working hard, and do not make the most of your good fortune.”

“I understand, father,” I said. “I will work harder than I have ever worked. I will not disappoint you!”

“Humph. We will see!” he said with a scowl.

My heart leaped with joy—he was sending me to boarding school! His brusqueness toward me didn’t bother me. I knew what I wanted, and he gave me the green light to reach for it. Inside my chest, my heart flew with the cranes. I turned to

my mother and caught her happy smile and wink. She was happy her daughter could strive for a better life!

Although the other village men would ridicule my father for educating his daughters, he did not seem to care. His integrity would not allow him to bend to societal pressures. My mother, although she had no higher education than middle school, had more schooling than most women in the village. Most had attained only grade two or three. She would have loved to continue her education further, but her parents gave her to my father in marriage.

Like the proud, strong woman she was, she performed all the duties expected of her as a wife and mother. But she didn't want the same life for her daughters. She wanted more for me. She gained satisfaction from giving me the opportunity to live the life she wanted but could not have.

Later, when I transferred to boarding school, I found myself surrounded by educated, career-oriented, bright-minded women who encouraged young girls to study and build careers. There, I realized I could become one of them, that even though many women in my village were relegated to existences as wives and mothers, I could be something different, something more. I was only in grade three, but I felt an overwhelming sense of liberation washing over me—it was my life. I was free, and I could become whoever I wanted. Little did I know how much resistance I would soon face, one obstacle after another.

Later, in the prime of my adolescence, as most of my village girlfriends' chests bulged, mine was as flat as a pancake.

“Maybe boys do not like you because you have small boobs?” the girls would snicker.

Every time I looked in the mirror, I felt undeveloped. I felt like I was not enough. Looking back, I was beautiful, even without a chest. But as a young girl, it was tragic.

At first, I covered my chest with a sweater, or I'd wear baggy shirts. But one day, I remember watching TV and seeing flat-chested actresses. They were beautiful, successful, and confident. And I thought, *why can't I be like them? And why am I bullied for having a different body type? I shouldn't care what others think if I'm comfortable in my body.*

The more I watched my village friends pushing out their chests and putting whirligig beetles on their nipples to bite and swell them, I realized big chests were just another way to appeal to men, to appear beautiful, and then be offered as wives.



Our teachers at boarding school encouraged us toward a different path. They showed us how to believe in ourselves, emphasizing that we were better than boys. And they made sure we knew that.

I did not care about marriage. Watching my parents struggle to raise seven children, I was sure of what I had always wanted to achieve—a better life. I wanted to get an education and build a career to be successful and independent. That was my goal, and I was only just stepping into my teenage years when I was certain I would do anything to achieve it.

The more I surrounded myself with books, the more neighbors glared, the more my village peers tittered, and old ladies talked to me about meeting their sons. Everyone except my family tried to seize the books from my hands and convince me I had to get married.

“By the time you finish school, you will be too old. Men will not want you anymore.” And soon enough, men came to our house, asking my father for my hand in marriage.

Lounging under the shade of a guava tree with a book open in my lap, my eyes peeled away from the page when heavy footsteps echoed in my ears. When I cast an eye in the footsteps’ direction, I noticed two six-foot-tall gentlemen standing in the front yard wearing black tuxedos. As my father opened the door, the two men glanced at each other, trickles of sweat running down their foreheads. One man was bald, clean-shaven, and bulky, with extremely broad shoulders that seemed like they would burst out of the tuxedo, while the other man was slim, with short dreadlocks, and sported a thick goatee. Both men were in their late thirties and sent a jolt of intimidation down my spine when my eyes landed on them.

“Yes, what can I do for you, gentlemen?” my father asked with a subtle sharpness.

“Um, sir, we have something important to discuss with you,” the man with dreadlocks said, flashing a nervous smile.

“Okay, come on in,” my dad said in a slightly hurried tone, ushering them to the living room, but leaving the door wide open. As they seated themselves on the couch, my father sat opposite them, ogling them like a tiger ready to strike.

“Can I have a glass of water, sir?” the beefy man requested, but my dad quickly cut him off.

“What is your business in coming here?” he shot at them, increasing their uneasiness.

“Sir, um, we are here to ask for Lyndah’s hand in marriage—” the slim gentleman started. However, when the word “marriage” left his mouth, my father narrowed his eyes and leaped from the couch like a fierce lion.

“You two, get up quickly!” he yelled, and the two men jerked up briskly, petrified. My dad pointed his index finger at them and barked.

“How dare you!”

“Sir—”

“No. No. No. Get out!” shouted my dad, his finger pointing at the door. “Get out of my house before I fetch my machete. My daughter is pursuing her studies. You’re not worth her time. She’ll pick the suitor of her choice whenever she marries. So, if I ever see any of you near my house again! I swear my machete will work on you! Get out now!”

With compressed brows, the two men gave my father a hostile glare, gritted their teeth, and stormed out of the house.

When I saw the tuxedo-clad men leaving my home and walking through the open gate, my heart swelled with gratitude for my father. The cascade of realization hit me like a brick. My father supported me in getting an education and standing on my own feet, while the other fathers in the village arranged for their teenage daughters to marry older, wealthier men. I wished every girl in my village had a father like mine.

Unfortunately, most families couldn’t wait to marry off their daughters. The more time I spent studying at boarding school, the more of my village friends got married off. They dropped out at the village school one after another, emptying the classrooms. And finally, only a handful of girls were left in the school full of boys. While I wrote in my notebooks, my former schoolmates walked with their bellies round. While I flipped pages, they chased their toddlers or breast-fed their newborns. It was normal for others, but for me, it felt odd. Most girls chose to marry older men with an income instead of graduating from high school. Men old enough to be their fathers. Men with what villagers called “good jobs” and huge bank balances but not a strand of hair on their heads. Even if their parents wanted them to marry, why couldn’t they let them study and marry later?

The answer to my question was harsh. “Because fourteen to seventeen-year-old Luhya girls are more desirable to men.”

I went to a boarding high school and, since it was very far away, I could not spend more time in my village to understand my people’s culture. I only returned home for school breaks in April, August, and December. However, my matchless performance in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) examination opened the gates for new jobs. Being the only female with the highest academic records in my village, a local high school hired me to teach and mentor students. I

had just graduated high school and was only seventeen when local schools entrusted me with those responsibilities. And that is when everything unfolded before my eyes.

Although I experienced the inequities of being a girl in a local village school before leaving for boarding school, it was not until being on the other side of the desk that I truly understood how difficult it was for girls to get an education. I learned that parents failed to pay their daughters' school fees because they did not value women's education. I discovered that girls' unplanned pregnancies were often the result of transactional sex with older men to afford basic needs such as sanitary towels. Pregnant schoolgirls dropped out of school and refused to return to the classroom, fearing that if they returned, other students would ridicule them or much worse.

Cultural influence shaped girls' attitudes toward education, ultimately making them perform poorly. Most dreamed about marrying a husband who would provide everything for them as they bore children and stayed home. Hence, they made little to no effort to succeed academically. They also had low self-esteem, thinking they weren't good at academics like their male peers. My epiphany prompted me to volunteer at more schools to empower girls. That's something I still do.

After high school, I moved to Nairobi, Kenya's capital city, to pursue a bachelor's degree in teacher education at Kenyatta University. While attending university, the counseling department nominated me as a peer counselor for freshmen and sophomores. The position provided many training opportunities away from campus, where I learned about the reality of female oppression in Kenya firsthand. I remembered everything they taught me about women, all the cultural traditions instilled in girls from birth onward.

Reflecting on most village girls' fates inspired me to rally my classmates to accompany me to three high schools in my village, where we spoke to female students about pursuing education to be free of oppressive societal systems.

As I look back to my past, I feel blessed and eternally grateful to my parents for the chance they gave me to rise above the backward culture of our small Kenyan village and experience the full, exciting, and satisfying life I'm living now.

Today, my mission is to show other girls that they, too, can rise above their situation and, through hard work and perseverance, attain the life they deserve. I want the girls to see that they can break past the steel gates of traditions and stereotypes. They can be independent and successful. They can get an education and build careers, have interests, do what they love, and be good at it. I want the girls to realize that regardless of how hard society tries to shackle and imprison them in the cages of traditions, they can escape and be free to forge their own paths. And the

first tool they need is education. This is what I am working toward—to show the girls that I was just like them but achieved my every goal. And they, too, can become anyone they want to be if they work hard toward their goals.

While revising this essay, I'm cradling my three-month-old in my arms. My goal for these girls is not a pipedream or a mere hope that may or may not come true. It is so very real to me, as real as this tiny little creature in my arms. If I do it for all girls from my village, I am also doing it for her. And every time I see her, I see them.

I cannot help but recall that day I saw the cowhide hanging on the neighbor's door, and the questions I had about different expectations for girls and boys. I never forgot my mother's response, "*that's just how it is.*"

But I also learned this from my mother: no one gives a woman power; she must take it. *That* is how it is.